Defining Translingualism: Norms, Contrast with Established Linguistic Theories, Possibilities and Challenges

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Abstract

This article reviews translingualism by defining its key norms, contrasting it with established linguistic theories, and identifying its possibilities and challenges in educational and social contexts. Drawing on scholarly works from 2010 to 2025, this study employed a literature review method. This study defines translingualism as a 21st-century paradigm of linguistic hybridity, fluidity, and multimodality that transcends traditional boundaries in language use to foster effective communication. The key norms of translingualism are code-meshing, linguistic repertoire, multimodality, subconscious language use and integrated competence, meaning negotiation, and language differences. Through the contrastive lens, translingualism finds that bi/multilingualism, code-switching, and World Englishes are deeply rooted in monolingual bias, which instigates linguistic hierarchies and inequality. Hence, translingualism offers equitable alternatives such as "Holistic Multilingualism," "Translanguaging Instinct," and "Lingua Franca English" to promote linguistic hybridity and justice. In Bangladeshi English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts, translingual practices offer decolonized and inclusive pedagogy, increased student engagement, cross-cultural communication, equitable assessment, and identity affirmation. However, barriers persist in ideological and social resistance, restrictive policies, traditional assessment systems, unequal power dynamics, and limited teacher training. This study emphasizes linguistic diversity and justice by implementing translingual practices in Bangladeshi ELT contexts.

Keywords: Translingualism/Translanguaging, Linguistic Diversity, Bi/Multilingualism, Linguistic Justice, ELT

Introduction

In Bangladesh, ELT classrooms have been dynamic environments with a rich mixing of diverse languages and cultures. In today's multilingual classrooms, students come from different linguistic backgrounds and engage with and observe multiple cultures.

This is where translingualism evolves as an effective approach to address the needs of diverse learners, allowing them to draw on their full linguistic repertoires for meaningful communication and learning.

The advent of the term "translanguaging" in the late 20th century as a pedagogical practice in bilingual education. At first, Cen Williams coined the term "trawsieithu" to describe the deliberate use of multiple languages in Welsh-English classrooms in order to revitalize minority languages and enhance bilingual competence (Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012). This approach was later translated into English as "translanguaging" by Colin Baker around 2001 (García, 2009, p. 7). Afterwards, in the field of composition and writing studies, Horner et al. (2011) and Canagarajah (2013) extended the concept of translanguaging into translingualism, which emphasizes the dynamic communication across languages, varieties, and semiotic resources in writing and communicative practices. Notably, translingualism gained prominence in the early 21st century, particularly in applied linguistics, composition studies, sociolinguistics, and ELT through the work of scholars, such as Horner, Canagarajah and Pennycook.

Though often used interchangeably, translanguaging and translingualism are distinct: translanguaging is more common in bilingual education with a pedagogical focus, while translingualism is prominent in composition/rhetoric (writing-focused). This article employs translingualism broadly to encompass both traditions for sharing core ideas.

Translingualism originated in response to the myths of monoglossic ideologies of "one language at a time" practices in education (García, 2009, p. 7) and widespread assumptions of linguistic homogeneity, the belief that everyone in society speaks the same language. Two important acknowledgments set the base for translingualism. Firstly, languages are not infallible and stable structures, as "forms and functions of language are emergent and socially constructed and reconstructed in line with social mobility" (Sugiharto, 2015, p. 129). Similarly, according to Sultana (2013), languages are not space- or time-bound; "the changes are brought into it by speakers at every moment in every utterance" (p. 2). To illustrate, language is an emerging entity in concrete and social contexts rather than a set of conventional rules that is inherently structured to be followed. Secondly, society is always heterogeneous, having people of diverse linguistic backgrounds, where linguistic homogeneity cannot feed the needs of linguistically diverse people. Therefore, translingualism finds its primary theoretical grounding in sociolinguistics, a field that has long explored the fluid and hybrid nature of language practices in diverse social contexts.

This article addresses the following research questions:

1. How is translingualism critically defined, and what are its key norms in language use and practice?
2. How does translingualism critically differ from established language theories such as bilingualism/multilingualism, code-switching, and World Englishes?

3. What opportunities and challenges do translingualism present for language education and social contexts?

A Critical Evaluation of Translingualism

As an umbrella term, translingualism has been defined by various scholars from different theoretical perspectives. According to Pennycook, translingualism refers to "the communicative practices of people interacting across different linguistic and communicative codes, borrowing, bending, and blending languages into new modes of expression" (2007). In another view, translingualism means "more flexible use of resources from more than one 'language' within a single system, transcending traditional understandings of separate languages" (Anderson, 2018). Li & Zhu (2013) critically analyzed the prefix "trans," showing three dimensions of flexible and dynamic multilingual practices.

Trans as Trans-system

Trans-system refers to fluid language practices going between and beyond the linguistic system and structure. Multilingual speakers can transcend the codes, communicative means, and channels to foster effective communication.

Trans as Transformative

The act of language is transformative. When speakers mix languages, they do more than just blend languages; their knowledge, experiences, social skills, attitudes, and beliefs all come into play and transform during the process. This process of transformation leaves a speaker with a new identity.

Trans as Transdisciplinary

Trans identifies languages as not a separate discipline, rather, language practices are ingrained into human cognitive and social structures. To get a holistic view of language practices of any community, it is crucial to investigate all the disciplines related to language evolution, namely, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, geography, and so on. Thus, a transdisciplinary approach goes one step further by investigating the structural, cognitive, and sociocultural dimensions of language practices.

In short, translingualism means fluid and dynamic use of language, which includes diverse codes, modes, knowledge and experiences to foster meaningful communication.

Norms of Translingualism
Code-meshing

To discuss the norms of translingualism, code-meshing comes first, which refers to mixing and "shuttling between" languages (Daly, 2019, p. 33). It is considered a natural occurrence in language use. Notably, code-meshing does not imply mixing between two standard languages; rather, it is an act of combining local varieties, vernaculars, and world dialects to embrace linguistic diversity. Canagarajah (2011) defines code-meshing as "merging local varieties with Standard English," such as African American Vernacular English and Black English (p. 402). Thus, code meshing allows learners to "transcend the boundaries between named language, language varieties, and language and semiotic systems" (Wei, 2017, p. 9).

Linguistic Repertoire

The term "grammar" is redefined as "repertoire" in translingualism. MacSwan (2017) differentiates between grammar and linguistic repertoire in which grammar is a set of interrelated components, and each language consists of separate grammar. This concept compels learners to communicate in a given manner following different structures for different languages. However, translingualism substitutes the notion of grammar for a linguistic repertoire that consists of a speaker's whole collection of language resources, including all languages, dialects, registers, styles, and multiple grammars, which do not exist in a separable form. Notably, it does not require language users to speak or write in a particular way. Thus, Garcia (2012) argued that ''bilinguals have one linguistic repertoire from which they select features strategically to communicate effectively.'' (p.1).

Multimodality

The process of communication via multimodality is central to translingualism. Wei (2017) asserted that "Human communication has always been multimodal; people use textual, aural, lin-guistic, spatial, and visual resources, or modes, to construct and interpret mes-sages" (p. 21). For instance, speech signals are always accompanied by facial expressions and body movements in face-to-face communication, while sign languages use many channels (hands, face, and body) to create utterances. Thus, communication is always multimodal, and any boundary across codes, modes, genres, and channels can hamper meaningful communication.

Subconscious Use of Language and Integrated Competence

The subconscious use of language is a common phenomenon and another important norm of translingualism. While a language user communicates, he/she naturally

pulls from his or her linguistic resources, as "people do not just turn one language off and another one on; all of their language practices are always all present and in play" (Daly, 2019, p. 33). Furthermore, there is no reality of cognitive psychology that claims the brain separates languages. If languages are inseparable entities, it justifies the fact that "the competence of a multilingual speaker is not as multiple separate competencies but as one integrated competence" (Spooner, 2017, p. 25).

Linguistic Proficiency as Meaning Negotiation

The translingual orientation redefines the concept of language proficiency. As language is dynamic and subject to change, the mastery of language is no longer viewed as innate. Therefore, writers' proficiency is no longer measured by their capability to produce an abstract set of conventional rules; rather, it is evaluated through their capacity to negotiate meaning by drawing on their full linguistic repertoire. To illustrate, fluency in writing or speaking can be defined as the ability to apply a diverse range of linguistic resources, and to respond effectively to linguistically diverse people. Similarly, fluency in reading encompasses the ability to construct meaning from linguistically diverse texts (Daly, 2019, p. 225).

Error as Language Differences

In the translingual paradigm, the term "error" is redefined as language differences. Unlike errors, language differences are not viewed as a negative thing; rather, they are considered to be resources to be utilized for the learners. For instance, accents influenced by their first language, unexpected phrasing, absence of definite articles, and an expression in another language do not hinder the communication process as a whole; rather, they allow language users to use their whole linguistic resources. According to Horner et al. (2011), "differences in language [are] not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening" (p. 88).

A Theoretical Contrastive Analysis of Translingualism and Established Linguistic Theories
Bi/multilingualism vs. Translingualism

Bilingualism is defined as "knowing" two languages (Valdez & Figueora, 1994), whereas multilingualism encompasses "the ability of societies, institutions, groups, and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives" (European Commission, 2007). It also refers to "the ability of societies, institutions, groups, and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives" (European Commission, 2007). Contrary to monolingual ideology, multilingualism is viewed as a positive thing in societies, as "it represents the richness of

cultural diversity in language and so enriches society, and it is beneficial for individuals too," as is bilingualism (Blommaert et al., 2013, p. 1). Apparently, bilingualism and translingualism are interchangeable terms since all these ideas celebrate language hybridity. However, a thorough insight into bi/multilingualism reveals significant differences from translingualism.

According to García and Wei (2014), bi/multilinguals and monolinguals are actually similar: both treat languages as separate entities, and society even treats bi/multilinguals as having two/three separate languages. Similarly, Pennycook (2008) described multilingualism as simply the "pluralization of monolingualism" (p. 132), or "two monolinguals in one person" (Horner et al., 2011), meaning it just adds more separate languages without changing the basic monolingual idea. Both bilingualism and multilingualism treat languages as distinct, separate boxes.

In contrast, translingualism treats all languages as one linguistic system rather than separating them into different entities. Taking the holistic view, translingualism advances the notion of multilingualism as the global norm, not in the sense of several separate languages sitting side by side; rather 'multi' in the sense of "pluriversality" (Daly, 2019, p. 29). This means that meaning is created by moving fluidly across different languages, dialects, modes, genres, and communication channels. In short, translingualism embraces an integrated view instead of dividing languages into separate compartments (Wrobel, 2019).

Next, bi/multilinguals consider a language a pre-governed system to be followed and learned. In this orientation, the language norms are more innate and static. On the other hand, under the translingual paradigm, languages are a social practice that is always emergent and remade across different social and cultural contexts. Similarly, Makoni & Pennycook (2007) argue that ''languages do not exist as real entities in the world, and neither do they emerge from or represent real environments; they are, by contrast, the inventions of social, cultural, and political movements.'' (p. 2). In this regard, the language norms are constitutive and negotiable.

Last but not least, due to the separate treatment of languages, the notions of standard and nonstandard languages have a predominant existence in bi/multilingualism. According to Bailey (2012), "focus on a constellation of linguistic features that are officially authorized as codes or languages, for example, 'English' or 'Spanish,' can contribute to the neglect of the diversity of socially indexical linguistic resources within languages" (p. 504). Likewise, Watson & Shapiro (2018) argue that one 'correct' form overlooks "the power of non-privileged genres and modes that may afford speakers of other languages and varieties" (p. 20). Hence, with great emphasis on one standard variety, multilingualism can become a political term that can instigate inequalities, hierarchy, exclusion, denial, and policing. Contrarily, there is no existence of a prestigious and non-prestigious variety of languages in the translingual paradigm since political entities linked

to the named languages exist (Wei, 2017). Thus, the translingual approach "argues for valuing the power of non-prestige languages on an equal footing along with the prestige variety to put an end to linguistic racism" (Daly, 2019, p. 19).

To sum up, translingualism does not replace bi/multilingualism; rather, it reconceptualizes it as 'Holistic Bi/multilingualism'. The holistic bi/multilinguals are not the sum of two monolinguals who separate languages into different codes; thereby reinforcing named languages, policing and inequalities. Instead, they use languages fluidly and naturally, drawing on whatever linguistic resources are available to them to negotiate meaning in context.

Code-switching vs. Translingualism

Code-switching is a natural consequence among the members of bilingual families and communities, which refers to alternating languages between sentences (MacSawn, 2017). The theoretical perspectives underlying code-switching and translingualism differ significantly despite the fact that the mixing of languages is central to the notion of translingualism. Code-switching is often regarded as an outsider perspective in which linguistic practices are analyzed by separating linguistic features as belonging to distinct languages (e.g., English phrases versus Spanish sentences). Such analyses implicitly reproduce language division, hierarchy and boundaries.

Contrarily, translingualism is considered an insider perspective, as the mixing of languages is not a forcible act; rather, it is a natural way of language functioning. Similarly, Wei (2017) talked about the 'Translanguaging Instinct,' which is "human beings have a natural translanguaging instinct and innate capacity to draw on as many different cognitive and semiotic resources available to them to interpret meaning, intention…" (p. 29). Most importantly, the mixing of linguistic codes includes not only codes but also speakers' knowledge, social relationships, identities, and life trajectories. From this perspective, analyzing languages as separate entities hamper the natural and dynamic ways of language use.

World Englishes vs. Translingualism

World Englishes (WE), pioneered by Braj Kachru in the 1980s, originated in response to the high position of English across the world (e.g., British and American English) that recognizes English as a multifaceted language shaped by local contexts, histories, and identities. WE celebrates linguistic and cultural diversity driven by different varieties of English. Kachru's influential three concentric circles model classifies English-using communities as:

Inner Circle—Traditional native-speaker bases (e.g., UK, USA, Australia), where English is the native language.

Outer Circle—Post-colonial regions (e.g., India, Nigeria, and Singapore), where English has been recognized as an official or second language.

Expanding Circle—Countries where English functions mainly as a foreign language or lingua franca (e.g., China, Japan, Brazil).

Apparently, the WE model recognizes local varieties of English and empowers non-native speakers rejecting the monolingual native-speaker ideology. Despite its revolutionary intent to promote linguistic diversity, Kachru's WE framework has faced criticisms for reinforcing hierarchies. First of all, the WE framework carries a hidden monolingual bias with the terms 'English as an International Language' (EIL) and 'English as a Lingua Franca' (ELF), which neglect the inclusive and worldwide phenomenon (Seidlhofer, 2001). Taking a translingual stance, Canagarajah (2007) came up with the term 'Lingua Franca English' (LFE) instead of ELF (p. 91). LFE refers to a social process constantly emerging from the semiotic resources available to speakers rather than a system to be followed (Pennycook, 2008). Additionally, the native speaker (NS) versus non-native speaker (NNS) dichotomy sustains power.

Ultimately, the WE paradigm laid the foundation for recognizing global varieties of English; however, evolving translingual views push further toward equality, fluidity, and emancipation from power structures.

Possibilities of Translingualism
Decolonizing Pedagogy

Translingual pedagogy has the potential to counteract the English-only approaches with the idea of integrating students' whole linguistic resources in the learning process. In addition, it liberates us from the colonized idea that English is only the correct variety to communicate successfully in educational contexts. Tai (2022) reported that translanguaging is effective in understanding concepts in EMI class among ethnic minority students.

Beyond Teaching Methods and Approaches

Translingual practices move language education beyond the debate over the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) versus Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the "better" teaching method and approach. As Kramsch (2006) suggests, the role of the teacher "should be to diversify meanings, point to meaning not chosen and bring to light other possible meanings that have been forgotten by history or covered up by politics" (p.249). Therefore, translingual orientation promotes pedagogical flexibility that emphasizes meaning-making over strict dependence on any single method or approach.

Increased Student Engagement and Motivation

Translingual pedagogy creates individual and integrated spaces for learners, which increases student participation and motivation. Wang (2024), in Chinese university EMI classrooms, found that teacher-led translanguaging practices have a great impact on students' attitudes, motivation, engagement, and overall learning outcomes. Similarly, Hamman-Ortiz et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review on PK-12 classrooms in the USA, which confirms that translanguaging enhances student engagement, collaboration opportunities, and a sense of belonging. Cenoz & Gorter (2021) also link it to better proficiency, critical thinking, and performance in multilingual classrooms.

Enhanced Cross-Cultural Communication

Translingual pedagogy is a hub of different languages and cultures since it allows students to use their linguistic resources during the meaning making process. In this context, students are able to develop strong cross-cultural and cross-variety of communicative strategies while working across linguistic and cultural differences. In Turkish EFL contexts, students reported that translanguaging improved cultural awareness, ease in expressing complex ideas, and greater motivation (Yuzlu & Dikilitas, 2024).

Equitable Assessment

Translingualism critiques monolingual biases ingrained in traditional assessment systems and calls for more equitable opportunities for all students. Schissel et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review of 33 studies that reported that integrating translanguaging into assessments increases equity, validity, and learning by making use of students' full resources (Schissel et al., 2025). Such assessment approaches provide opportunities to recognize learners' meaning-making abilities and contribute to their holistic developments.

Inclusive Pedagogy and Identity Affirmation

Translingual pedagogy offers an empowering and inclusive learning environment by recognizing students' full linguistic repertoires, reducing identity crisis, and promoting a sense of belonging. García & Wei's (2014) empirical research in diverse settings showed that translanguaging affirms cultural and linguistic identities reducing marginalization. Sangeetha and Sri Dhivya (2025) also conducted an empirical study with 75 multilingual college students in India using translanguaging activities. They reported that translingual practices in the class improved language acquisition, self-awareness, social-emotional development, and collaboration. Similarly, multilingual and multimodal resources in Hong Kong English-medium instruction (EMI) science and mathematics classes fostered inclusive pedagogy, resulting in greater student engagement, content mastery, and social

integration among ethnic minority learners (Tai & Li Wei, 2022).

Drawbacks of Translingualism

Despite its strong theoretical ground and practical implications, translingual practices have several challenges in real-classroom implementation. Empirical studies highlight challenges ranging from traditional belief systems to practical difficulties in classrooms and assessments.

Ideological Resistance

Monolingual norms are deep-rooted in societies to the extent that it is often seen as important for proper learning. Many teachers resist translingual approaches since they tend to think that it will decrease the exposure of the target language. For instance, surveys in India (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2021) and Canada (Burton & Rajendram, 2019) showed that over half of teachers believed non-English languages should be minimized, viewing translanguaging as hindering English mastery rather than supporting it. Hence, the implementation of translingual practices is demanding in a society where monolingual ideology is difficult to challenge as it is often unexpressed, taken for granted, and regarded as natural (Daly, 2019, p. 25).

Restrictive Institutional Policies

English-only or monolingual policies in school curricula create challenges to the implementation of translingual pedagogy. In multilingual settings, teachers face difficulty in handling multiple languages within institutional constraints. Systematic reviews– for example, Moraru (2025), synthesizing studies on multilingual migrant children and Hamman-Ortiz et al., (2025), analyzing 111 U.S. PK-12 studies identify—key institutional barriers, including resource shortages and policy strictness, that restrict the effective enactment of translingual pedagogical practices.

Traditional Assessment System

Traditional monolingual assessment will not serve the purpose of translingual pedagogy while redesigning its evaluative criteria also presents significant challenges. A systematic review of 33 empirical studies (2012–2023) on translanguaging in assessment reveals tensions in validity, neutrality, and integration, as school-imposed parameters fail to recognize multilingual strengths (Tian et al., 2025).

Unequal Translanguaging

Unequal translanguaging may generate power imbalances by preferring dominant languages (e.g., English or national languages) over minority languages. Empirical classroom observations in Nepal showed "unequal translanguaging," where indigenous languages were excluded, reproducing colonial hierarchies rather than equity (Sah & Li, 2022).

Limited Teacher Training and Practical Implementation

Though translingual pedagogy is implemented in many ELT contexts, many educators are not trained in this pedagogy and lack preparation for translingual strategies. Studies in ELT contexts (e.g., Turkey, 2024–2025) and systematic reviews emphasize the need for professional development to overcome self-doubt, institutional fears, and gaps between theory and practice (Ulum, 2024; Kim & Weng, 2022).

Societal Resistance

The creative usage of languages supported by translingualism may not be acceptable to all ages of people in society. Older generations, parents, or conservative communities often view fluid mixing as local culture erosion. Emerging studies in multilingual European and Asian contexts report parents view translingualism as eroding traditions and losing proficiency in formal language (Smith-Christmas, 2021, Moraru, 2025; Karpava, 2025). Additionally, when people speak in non-standard or accented language use—common in translingual interactions—can expose them to criticism and discrimination in prestige-oriented societies. Translingual practices may reinforce linguistic violence, language loss, and psychological trauma in society (Busch, 2020).

These empirically grounded challenges emphasize that while translingualism offers transformative possibilities, its success depends on addressing ideological and social resistance, policy reform, revised curriculum, growing beliefs and attitudes, and targeted training.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The study provides a thorough and critical understanding of translingualism, a 21st-century linguistic movement of hybridity, fluidity, and multimodality that goes beyond rigid boundaries in language use to enable meaningful communication. Translingualism is further characterized by its norms such as blending and shuttling between language varieties, using whole language resources subconsciously and integratively, negotiating meaning via different modes, and treating errors as language differences. In essence, translingualism is a paradigm of transcending codes, modes,

genres, channels, and all the communicative means to enrich meaning-making processes.

This study also critically examines the underpinning values of established linguistics theories of linguistic diversity i.e., bi/multilingualism, code-switching, and World Englishes. However, through the critical lens, bi/multilingualism, code-switching, and World Englishes are identified as so-called revolutionary terms that are highly affected by monolingual ideologies and discrete language systems, resulting in power structures and linguistic injustice. Translingualism offers a broader perspective (Garcı́a, 2012), such as "Holistic bi/multilingualism," "Translanguaging Instinct,"and "Lingua Franca English" to put an end to discrete language systems and political terms and promote linguistic equality among English users all over the world. (Pennycook, 2008, p. 30.7). However, some scholars (e.g., García and Vogel 2017 and MacSwan 2017) defend multilingualism as partially compatible with translingual views, while Canagarajah (2019) sees it as still code-bound. Though recent empirical syntheses (e.g., Hamman-Ortiz et al., 2025, and Ameka et al., 2025) argued how translingualism addresses gaps in traditional multilingual pedagogies.

Most importantly, the study finds that translingualism has many possibilities for linguistic justice in educational contexts, offering decolonized and inclusive pedagogy, enhancing students' motivation and engagement, promoting cross-cultural and multimodal practices, and ensuring equitable assessment and identity affirmation. Similarly, a study on Turkish school and university language learners showed positive perceptions and better engagement due to translingual practices (Yuzlu & Dikilitas 2024). In conformity with this particular finding, Horner et al. (2011, p. 307) asserted that translingualism as a linguistic justice pedagogy excludes all the language ideologies that disadvantage learners of minority groups.

However, the reality of translingual practices is far from being realized in societies that are affected by ideological and social resistance, leading to restrictive monolingual policies in education. Furthermore, there are concerns regarding the validity and practical implementation of translingual practices due to a lack of teacher training and traditional assessment systems. (Schissel et al., 2025).

In Bangladeshi ELT classrooms, translingual practices hold promise for addressing linguistic diversity and justice. For instance, in tertiary education, students' code-mixing of Bangla and English facilitates comprehension and cultural relevance, supported by empirical studies showing positive attitudes and reduced barriers in multilingual settings (Datta, 2025). Notably, translingual approaches could reduce the linguistic inequality in Bangla-dominant classrooms by valuing minority students' full linguistic repertoires, such as integrating Santali or Chakma elements in indigenous communities (Al-Amin, 2025). However, challenges such as restrictive policies, favoring English-medium instruction, lack of teacher training, and traditional belief systems must be addressed in order to effectively implement translingual practices in ELT contexts (Moraru, 2025).

This study offers theoretical insights into linguistics by highlighting the misconceptions related to certain established language theories. Additionally, it presents practical implications for ELT contexts, focusing on both the potential benefits and challenges posed by translingual pedagogy. Limitations include the predominance of Western-centric studies and the lack of primary data collection. Future directions could involve empirical investigations in Bangladeshi schools to test translingual pedagogy's impact on equity and assessment outcomes.

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