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Original Article

Educational Equity and Student Learning: Transforming Assessment Practice in Public Schools

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Abstract

This article analyzes the current assessment practice adopted by community schools in Nepal, which focuses on assessment of learning rather than assessment for learning. The current practice at the school involves ranking students. It increases test anxiety in students, parents, and schools, such as depression, pressure, and less creativity, indicating that transformation in exams is inevitable. Prioritizing exams in school and focusing on scores leads to ranking students based on performance, which has negative consequences in both school and society. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interview was used to collect the data. Headteachers and teachers are the participants in the study. Although they shared their assessment practices as good, in terms of social justice, equity, and equal learning opportunity, it does not seem to be in place. To ensure the holistic development of children and promote learning diversity, the article also provides some strategies for reforming assessment in schools. Drawing on the capabilities approach, the study proposes strategies to reform current assessment practices, fostering learning equity and ensuring all students have equitable learning opportunities for holistic development.

Keywords: Equity. Social Justice. Test Score. Transformation. Learning. Feedback.

Introduction

The formal examination system has been rooted in measuring only subject-specific knowledge and skills rather than personal merit, intelligence, skills, attitudes, and performance. Moreover, the examination practices adopted by community schools in Nepal are unclear on what to measure and how to measure the overall performance of the students (Sigdel & Sherpa, 2024). Measuring knowledge, attitude, understanding, values, and socio-emotional learning of

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students is more complex than assessing observable skills or performance. Using only the paper-and-pencil test makes it almost impossible to measure students' deeper understandings of content skills and ability (He & Lao, 2018). The paper-pencil test has largely dominated Nepal's education system, not only in school, but also in higher education (Acharya, 2022). The paper-pencil test generates a number for the rank ordering of students and comparison to each other based on norms. The student's performance compares to that of other pupils, which demotivates the learning from the psychological perspectives of students.

Assessment has various meanings and purposes for different people. Based on the purpose, it is categorised into summative and formative (Scriven, 1967). The primary purpose of the formative assessment is to support student learning, and it is also an integral part of the pedagogy (Vattoy & Gamlem, 2024). Similarly, the summative assessment is used to certify student learning. The formative assessment is primarily aligned with the ideas of assessment *for* learning and assessment *as* learning, whereas the summative assessment is used closer to the notion of the assessment *of* learning. Similarly, there are different tiers of assessment, such as classroom assessment, school-based assessment, public examination, national, regional and international assessment (Wagner, 2011). The different assessment has different purposes, such as feedback, learning improvement, certification, graduation, system monitoring, and accountability. Furthermore, the purpose of assessment can be categorised mainly as i) to know the status of student learning, ii) to certify student learning, and iii) to monitor the strengths and weaknesses of the education system (OECD, 2013). The purpose of the assessment can be determined by how the assessment information has been used by the stakeholders, i.e. formative or summative. Thus, a single assessment approach can perform multiple functions.

Lingard et al. (2006) mentioned that assessment is a "power act" to privilege and exclude learners from the learning process. This kind of power act demotivates the students to participate in the classroom learning activities. Comparing the students as good and/or bad, pass and fail based on the given criteria and ranking, competent and incompetent, does not appear to be a good practice. Such practices hinder the learning process by demotivating and disconnecting learners from real-world experiences. It is a critical question for schools and teachers to rank and compare the students, ignoring their creative possibilities and holistic development, which is not (should not be) the purpose of formal education. Realizing the same needs, the Curriculum Development Center [CDC], (2019) mentioned that the purpose of education should be to develop the holistic development of the learners.

According to Gardner (1993), everyone possesses different levels of multiple intelligences, whereas conventional paper-pencil tests in the assessment are not sufficient to measure all forms of intelligence. Temiz and Kiraz (2016) argued that student intelligence could not be identified and measured via a single method, especially through paper-and-pencil formats. In this context, Nepal's education is largely dominated by paper-and-pencil tests, and such practices measure a few forms of intelligence, like linguistic and logical/mathematical. To measure multiple intelligences, assessments should have multiple tools and approaches and focus on children's holistic learning. Using multiple assessment tools and approaches covers the diversity of student learning and different abilities. The recent reform in the school education curriculum has put emphasis on internal assessment, such as assessment through projects and practical work (CDC, 2020). However, the implementation part, as per the spirit of the written document, is widely questioned. The internal assessment score provided by the school and the external score found huge gaps (Acharya, 2025). These inconsistencies have raised questions about school-based assessment practice.

Moreover, assessment tools used in school-based assessments and even public examinations (high-stakes summative assessment) assess lower-order thinking skills (Martin Chautari, 2018). As a result, the student performance was found to be higher in knowledge and understanding than in analytical and higher-order thinking skills (Education Review Office

[ERO], 2015). Currently, most schools are not able to measure the different forms of intelligence of the learners because they use a one-size-fits-all approach, ignoring diversified learning experiences. This is the concern about the equitable learning and justice of the assessment system. In this article, the term assessment justice is used for fair and impartial support to student learning. Assessment justice covers the role of assessment in nurturing the forms of learning that promote equitable learning opportunities within the classroom. The main concern of the assessment justice is equality of access to learning (Gipps, 1994). Alignment of the assessment practice to respond to the student's individual diversity, learning style, learning pace, fairness, feedback, motivation, and support provided to learning difficulties are the areas of assessment justice. Assessment justice is the practice in the education system that can reduce the effects of negative forms of exams and the variety of disadvantages that learners may experience. Similarly, equitable learning means that students get the opportunity to learn better and get feedback to enhance learning. Thus, any form of assessment should reduce the effect of various factors that have affected learning (Gardner, 1993). The major theme of the article is whether assessment is used to promote justice and equity or reduce it.

Assessment of learning outcomes takes different forms for different educational stakeholders. Children who come to school to develop their full potential face a competitive, stress-fueled, and score-focused assessment system. Score-focused assessment and the high-stakes forms of different assessments in different grades raise questions about schooling. Few schools select the students based on merit, but in the name of "quality", it does not ensure equal access, learning opportunities, and social justice. It is also widely observed that most schools conduct the assessment to show the children's ranking for parents, which cannot justify learning equity. Schools are not ready to take responsibility for convincing parents and creating a fair society. In the name of quality education, schools offer the education that parents want, like English as a medium of instruction, more examinations, additional textbooks, punishment in the name of discipline, and so on, as presented below (see school A).

Moreover, students and parents also show their pride by having high scores on tests, even in kindergarten. It is also frequently seen that several schools share the test scores with personal details on social media. A study by UNESCO (2018) about the culture of testing in Asia and the Pacific region reveals that family and society are the greatest drivers of developing assessment culture in schools. Parents normally put a lot of pressure on their children to get high marks on exams to show their child's success. Then, the students are worried about disappointing their families. Pressure to do better in assessment leads to stress, anxiety, depression, and even suicide (Kim, 2008). In our context, there were many suicide cases found after publishing the results of Grade 10 (Rastiya Samachar Samiti, 2016). In this regard, this article explores assessment practices adopted by schools. The article examines how the assessment practice creates test anxiety in the students and questions equity and justice.

Literature Review

Assessment could have different meanings for different people. The assessment for students has different perspectives, such as anxiety, pressure, competition, success, failure, and so on (Berry & Adomson, 2011). Similarly, for parents, assessment has different meanings than for others, such as pride and prestige (UNESCO, 2018). Schools have taken it to show their quality (Luukkainen et al., 2020), and the education system itself takes it to check the system's efficiency and accountability (Postlethwaite & Kellaghan, 2008). To show the quality of education by the school, they are interested in taking normative assessments and prioritising the ranking of the students. Aligning with school practice, students are getting pressure from parents to perform better in order to gain access to a good school, a good job, a scholarship, social status, and even marriage for girls in rural areas (Cho, 2004). To perform better in exams,

taking additional classes outside the school, extending the school hours, and rote learning and memorisation practices are often focused on. As mentioned by Jeon (2010), the drawback of the assessment is that it is a "competitive pressure cooker" (p. 57). The negative consequences of the excessive emphasis on the score-centric assessment system drive the suicidal cases of children in many countries, especially in South Asia, India, Nepal, and South Korea (Kim, 2008). The assessment system itself has no such purpose, but the malpractice of the assessment leads to such negative results.

A test-oriented learning culture harms the students' psychosocial well-being and demotivates them from learning (Hutchings, 2015). Bachman and Palmer (1996) categorised the impact of test into two levels: individual teacher and student (micro) and society and education system (macro). The effect of the test on teaching and learning is called the washback effect. The washback effect of the assessment has multiple effects on teaching and learning, and the teacher can vary it, test modality, subject matter, student learning behaviour, and the assessment system adopted by the country. In the context of Nepal's education system, the washback effect is high and can be seen at both levels. In the classroom, teachers tend to focus on teaching to the test. Similarly, the education system and society also emphasize test results rather than learning. Providing the cash reward to the individual school could not contribute to the system-level reform. The content taught in the classroom is categorised as "very important" for exams and "not-so-important for exams". In general practices of classroom teaching, it seems that if students ask any question to the teacher, the teacher often responds as "this is not important for the test", or "you should focus on it", as this is a frequently asked question. In Nepal's school assessment practices, the assessment system is more structured in the specification grid, which does not provide the teacher and school with assessment flexibility. The question types categorise each lesson. The particular types of questions are asked only in the particular lesson. For example, only one short question will be asked about life skills in the secondary education examination from Social Studies (CDC, 2020). The specification grid provides a formal structure, and teachers are not flexible enough to use their creative ideas for assessing the students. It might provide clear-cut directions to teachers, and the teachers might find it easy to follow them; however, it has several demerits, such as increasing the focus on the test, rote learning, and focusing on scores rather than learning. As Popham (1987) mentioned, teaching-learning activities are influenced by the assessment focus to prepare the student for the test. In addition, assessment serves as a "curricular magnet' motivating teachers to teach the content that a test embodies (Cheng, 2000). National assessments have their own limitations, but they can be powerful agents of the top-down reform approach and accountability. There are many criticisms of test-based accountability, even though it has been accepted in many cases.

Social Justice in Education and Assessment

Social justice has different meanings in different fields. It ranges from teaching tolerance to transforming oppressive structures (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014). The major focus of social justice in education is equal access to equal learning opportunities from the school system on a fair basis (OECD, 2018). The learners need to get special support to enhance learning and develop their full potential, regardless of their background. Nepal's education system itself is inadequate in ensuring justice in access and participation, though historical improvements are in place. The school's teaching, learning, and assessment practices do not promote justice, fairness, and equity. Most of the assessment practices focused on creating a hierarchy based on test scores. It demotivates the students on one hand and widens the gap between different social groups based on exam performance. It requires careful planning by the teacher and focuses on supporting the low-performing group to ensure equitable learning

opportunities and justice. The school/classroom can be taken as a miniature society, so social justice should start from the classroom. Our present assessment practice promotes stratification based on exam scores and student selection. Students who are poor in cognitive learning are treated as a different class of people. They are humiliated during classroom activities. Thus, the school assessment practice has not been supportive and has had a negative influence to some extent. Sherpa (2021) mentioned that teachers' and school leaders' understanding of justice is limited, and the school does not appreciate and respect children's needs, desires, and interests.

Chawla (2000) emphasised the need to invest in social justice in educational communities to make assessment designs more child-responsive. However, it can be found in Nepal, where there is discrimination and deprivation in a few schools, where students take entrance tests and enroll based on merit and the parents' economic status. Deprivation is denoted by the letter "F" in the publicly published entrance result. This is an example of our education system in school about equity in education and their understanding of how policy-making attitudes, beliefs, and expectations welcome some children and exclude others based on cognitive assessment practices and how they treat the 'F' grade students. Education can contribute as an equaliser for social justice and is important in improving people's living conditions. The living conditions of the people lead to upward social mobility (OECD, 2018). Social justice cannot be ensured only by providing equal opportunity in school enrolment, but it can also provide equal learning opportunities and develop the full potential of students. It reflects the quality of learning and quality of life. As mentioned by Reay, increasing access to education cannot ensure reducing social inequalities (2013). To reduce social inequality, education should also reduce the difference in cultural capital. According to Sepulveda et al. (2022), people with highly valued cultural capital have a more advantageous position in society and get more benefits from the school system than others. The assessment practice followed in the school determines learning quality and enhances learning. However, the practice is not in place as intended. Feedback is the most important activity of the assessment, which leads to quality learning. Effective feedback contributes to quality learning, and quality learning can help to promote justice in the school and classroom, which is not well practiced in schools (Acharya, 2023). Parents and schools share the student results in different social media and society that secures good scores with high pride, the disadvantaged students and their parents feel inferior and of low status in society. This leads to demotivating the students from learning.

Effective Feedback for Social Justice in Learning

The term feedback is widely used in management and education. Ramaprasad (1983) defined "feedback as information about the gap between the actual and reference levels of a system parameter used to alter the gap in some way" (p. 4). Similarly, Hattie and Timperley (2007) defined 'feedback as information provided by teacher, peer, parent, book, or self, regarding student performance or understanding. Providing effective feedback can reduce learning disparities in the classroom and promote equitable learning opportunities. Classroom assessment is one of the assessment types that best fits for providing student feedback. To enhance student learning and create equitable learning opportunities, the teacher should have the data/information about the student's current level of learning. Teachers implement different tools and strategies for classroom assessment to get accurate and timely information about student learning. The assessment approach would be flexible, low-stakes, and even informal and individual. Hattie and Timperley (2007) stated that "feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement" (p. 81), but it varies by the type of feedback. Feedback time interval influences student learning. The person involved in giving the feedback also determines its impact. Teacher feedback is mostly corrective and encouraging. Peer feedback

suggests alternative strategies or different ways, and parent feedback encourages to learn. Hattie and Timperley (2007) further stated that effective feedback can help students' motivation to learn and increase engagement or effort.

Feedback cannot be effective without the learning context and the data about the gap in learning. A meta-analysis conducted by Hattie and Timperly (2007) calculates the effect of different kinds of feedback and found a very high (0.79) effect if the teacher provides timely and effective feedback. The most effective forms of feedback provide quest or reinforcement to learners. Feedback is widely used to close the learning gap between the expected and present levels of learning. Feedback is key to classroom assessment, which is an ongoing process that is mixed with teaching-learning activities. Feedback can be provided verbally and in writing, but should be specific and based on the evidence. According to Cumming et al. (2016), the teacher scaffolds students' cognitive development in line with the curriculum learning standards. Griffin et al. (2016) emphasized using feedback, such as information given to the students about their current performance and the proposed performance level. Effective feedback enhances learning and plays a central role in developing learners' self-efficacy (Smith, 2016). Thus, classroom assessment and feedback are interlinked, and the effectiveness of classroom assessment depends upon the use of feedback techniques. It enhances learning with equitable learning opportunities and reduces disparities.

Research Methodology

The qualitative descriptive analysis method is used to accomplish the purpose of this study. Two secondary schools were visited in the Kathmandu valley to generate data for the study. The researcher conducted interviews with headteachers and one teacher from both schools. There were altogether four respondents from the Kathmandu Valley. In addition to this, the researcher also gathered information from two teachers from Lumbini and Koshi provinces. Thus, the total participant teachers in the study is six, including two headteachers. The schools and teachers were selected as they are considered "good community schools" in the province with good test results, exam scores, and a larger number of students. So, the word 'transformation' used in this article represents community schools that are perceived as good community schools where the students are enrolled based on the entrance exam and merit basis. The in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with the Kathmandu Valley participants, whereas the telephone interviews were conducted with the two teachers of two provinces. The in-depth interviews were conducted twice with all four participants, with each interview lasting about 30 minutes. The telephone interviews were conducted twice with each participant, with each interview lasting about 15 minutes. A few pieces of information about the assessment practices of schools posted on social media (such as Facebook and Twitter) and published in the newspaper were also gathered, and the member checking strategy was used to check the authenticity of those posts.

The collected information is interpreted based on the perspectives of headteachers, teachers and the researcher through the lens of the capability approach (Sen, 1993), which is a normative framework to conceptualise and evaluate individual well-being and analyse the provision of equal learning opportunities (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). According to Sen (1993), capability is "a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being; [it] represents the alternative combination of things a person is able to do or be" (p.30). In this article, the students' learning achievement is taken as a personal capability that has multiple effects on the person. The authors further argue that " the capability approach offers a method to evaluate real educational advantage and equally identify disadvantage, marginalisation, and exclusion" (p.5). The collected information is analyzed as different cases from the perspectives of fairness, equity, and justice.

Based on the collected information, the four themes were developed to explain the assessment practices adopted by schools. While generating the themes, the collected information was read and re-read to make sense of the data to identify the common practices of the school. Further, it is analyzed from the perspectives of the capability approach, which promotes equity and fairness. Below is the information regarding the selected schools and teachers; schools A and B are located in the Kathmandu valley, with the head teacher and one teacher from each institution participating. Likewise, one teacher from school C in Koshi province and one teacher from school D in Lumbini province are the participants from each institution. The headteacher data is categorized as school data, while the teacher data is classified as teacher data. Schools A and B, situated in the Kathmandu Valley, are esteemed institutions recognized for their many awards of excellence. The student population exceeds seven hundred in each institution. The researcher visited the school once and conversed with the head teacher and a senior secondary level teacher to obtain general information. Following a three-hour visit to the school, a general conversation was conducted with the headteacher. The headteacher has recounted his experience of the school's transformation and the implementation of several assessments within the institution. A discussion lasting approximately one hour was conducted with the teacher. School C, situated in the Koshi province, is a distinguished institution where students are admitted based on merit, fostering a strong community identity. Likewise, school D is situated in Lumbini province and is substantial in size according to student enrollment. The researcher conversed with a senior secondary-level teacher by telephone. Three instances lasting around 40 minutes each, during which the teacher elaborated on the school's practices and assessment activities, as well as his personal ideas and detailed school practices. The researcher communicated with the teacher via telephone to discuss leading questions, including assessment activities employed and the students' responses to the assessment design. What is the rationale behind the implementation of assessments in schools, and what supplementary discourse occurred based on the responses and practices observed? All participants were posed with the prevalent inquiries of fairness, justice, and equitable access to learning.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section manifests the information gathered through interviews and social media posts, followed by discussions with the support of relevant literature. The data are presented specifying the practices of different schools as mentioned by the headteachers and teachers. In the beginning, the assessment practice adopted by the school from the Kathmandu valley is presented, and later the teachers' experience is mentioned.

Assessment Practice in School A

> We are offering English-medium instruction to attract the parents. It is our responsibility to fulfill our parents' desires. They demand more exams and good scores in exams. When we got good results about 15 years ago, in grade 10, the number of students started to increase. We take weekly exams in upper grades and monthly in lower grades. Exams support getting better results. Our teachers do not have the leisure time to prepare exam papers and scrutinise the answer sheets, even on Saturdays and public holidays. Sometimes, they present their dissatisfaction with more involvement in the examination process. So, we request parents to contribute a small amount of money to teacher motivation. We are doing good, parents are satisfied with us, and they are ready to pay some money on a monthly basis. We are under pressure on the children,

but we select the students based on merit. We offer quality education at low fees. Many students from the private schools have enrolled in our school.

Assessment Practice in School B

We have weekly exams, monthly exams, trimester exams, and for those who are underperforming in the exam, we provide the chance through a supplementary exam. We prepare for better results in exams, so we know the exam is important for children and parents. We know that students study for the exam. The class teacher takes unit tests at least once a month. Students should be attentive to the exam. Parents are happy with our exam practice. If the students are not able to perform better in school, we encourage them to take private tuition. Our teacher will provide the additional tuition at a low fee. If the students could not perform better in the qualifying test, we suggest that parents change the school or repeat the grades. There are very few cases, not many, but we encourage students to take extra classes and even stay in a hostel. We need to get good results in the exam to maintain our quality.

Assessment Practice Reflection by Teacher A (School C)

I believe the examination itself does not contribute to student learning without changing the approaches of teaching-learning practice. The school has taken the exam only to put pressure on students to read rather than providing support from our side. The exam helps to collect money from the parents. When the exam routine is published, all the students pay the fees; if some are not able to pay, they do not have the chance to appear in the exam. Without paying the exam fee, a student will not get an admit card. It is just to create anxiety for students and parents. Only taking exams does not support student learning; it just creates anxiety. Sometimes, the teacher just takes the exam and takes rest in the classroom. Similarly, sometimes teachers just show their work to the headteacher but do not provide constructive feedback to students. I worked for one school in the urban area and one in the rural area of Rupandehi. The schools in urban areas allocated the exam fee to teachers for preparing questions, invigilators and scrutinising answer sheets, but the schools in rural areas do not provide any allowances to the teachers. Examinations have different purposes and are used just to differentiate between the children's good and bad learning achievements. We need to follow the school rules and practice. As teachers, we have different ideas or beliefs, but it is not possible to change them.

Assessment Practice Reflection by Teacher B (School D)

I know that taking more exams is bad for the students. We need to reform classroom practice. Conducting more exams in school is our obligation. The market model of education seeks more grades or scores on the exam. To get better grades or scores, students must practice and recite the answer to the question. Sitting for more exams, they will read more and get more marks. I know about the student anxiety, pressure and demerit of more examinations. Society, parents, and even local governments want to see students' scores as the main achievement. The big question for community schools is survival. We are using the wrong practices to survive in the market. We do not want to dissatisfy our stakeholders. There are multiple approaches to transforming the present normative assessment, but I could not do it alone, and my school could not.

The present assessment system practiced by the school primarily focuses on ranking the students based on normative (score) assessment. The national curriculum framework (CDC, 2019) mentioned that education should focus on the child's holistic development; however, the school assessment practices seem to focus on the cognitive aspect. Similarly, the school has practiced comparing the children based on learning achievement. Schools tend to compare the children with each other, which is not a good practice, thereby promoting unhealthy competition among students. A growing trend has been making public students' personal details public, achievement scores and rank on social media by the school as a promotional campaign, which is not fair from the students' vantage point. This practice is not only in School A, but was also found in many other schools. One reputed secondary school has posted the results of all the grades with rank, including early childhood education (Shrestha, 2021). Similarly, a school in Rolpa posted students' results with positions first, second, and third, whereas there were only two students in Grade 2; they ranked the students first and second (Panthi, 2022). Moreover, the class teachers and schools behaved discriminately toward the students based on their learning. They only focused on the students who secured high scores in the subjects, which is not the intent of the assessment in the education system. Government-funded community schools serve about 66 percent of school-age children, but they are mostly from low economic status, disadvantaged groups, and rural areas (Centre for Education and Human Resource Development [CEHRD], 2025). The parents' attraction to the community school has declined, and during the last ten years, the percentage of institutional school enrollment has increased by 20 percent (CEHRD, 2025). Community schools are attempting to attract parents by adopting private school features like student selection for enrollment, collecting fees from parents, adding books of private publication, using English as a medium of instruction, and taking a greater number of examinations (Acharya, 2021; Pradhan & Valentin, 2020). Certainly, while the institutional school features adopted by community schools are converting low-cost institutional schools and creating barriers to access and equity. The number of examinations focused on cognitive ability increases the test anxiety of the child and increases the washback effect in teaching-learning. The respondent teacher from School B shared his experience of many students not being ready for the exam. Only the students who believe and do better in exams are ready for the examination. Many students always express their unwillingness to take the exam and show their stress about taking it. They think they will be marked as underperforming students and get scolded by their parents and humiliated by their teachers, and peers.

The following section contains four sub-themes. The first one aims to assess community school student enrollment practices to create barriers for children from disadvantaged families. The second theme discusses the assessment practice adopted by the school, which focuses on more tests than on learning. The third theme is the learning equity and learning opportunity provided by the school and how their practice creates unfairness. In the final theme, the idea explores transforming the assessment practice, which helps provide equal learning opportunities.

Student Enrollment Based on Merit

The school enrolment policy practiced by the school seems to dishearten many students, as they are not able to get enrolled. Students who do not get the chance to enroll are mostly from low socio-economic status, and disadvantaged groups. A headteacher from school A shared the enrollment trend, about ninety percent of students are from private schools. Selecting the student in the enrollment process ignites pressure on the students. Young children are pressured by their parents to perform better in student selection exams. The example presented above is from the school where they took the entrance exam to enroll in grade one. However,

the Government of Nepal circulated that there should not be entrance tests to enroll students in grade one (CEHRD, 2024). Several parents send their children to the entrance preparation center to prepare them to perform better in exams. To get enrollment in such schools, they should already have better knowledge of the assessing subject. Selecting the students based on merit, especially in grade one, demands students should have learned the language and numeracy before entering the school. Students who can spend more time in preschool will get higher scores to secure a good position. Enrollment of the students based on merit prevents the children from disadvantaged groups, minorities, low learning level students and the poor from education. The trend of taking entrance exams in community schools has recently increased. This indicates that enrollment is based on merit; the community schools in disguise are trying to serve only the high-class people. Tuition centers and entrance preparation books for grade one can be found in the urban area and it is in growing day by day. This could be an injustice to a student in terms of equal opportunity and equity. Selecting students based on entrance test results leads to injustice for some children. Students from disadvantaged groups do not have the opportunity to send their children to such preschools that prepare their kids for the entrance examination for grade 1. The schools do not enroll the students who perform poorly in the exams, even if they are near the school. They just select the better performers. The schools recognized as better performing ones charge fees to the students. Thus, the Nepali education system does not appear to support empowering disadvantaged groups. Similarly, exams on a weekly and monthly basis create mental and psychological pressure on children. The schools are doing the regular duties in a traditional manner, taking the exam and telling the parents, "Your children are not good at studying." Teacher B presented his opinion that students should sit in the exam to practice and get good grades on the final exam. As presented in School A/B, the school does not have good teaching-learning activities other than taking the exam and putting pressure on the parents and children. Socio-cultural beliefs are also present, and parents share their small children's results on social media and express their aspirations for better performance. However, the teacher (School B) has a different opinion from that of the teachers in cases one and two. Entrance-based selection violates equity and justice in education. Similarly, children who perform better in cognitive skills get an opportunity to enroll in school, which means education is not supportive of developing human capability.

The Myth: More Exam Leads to More Learning

Examination patterns in community schools can be found to be diverse and multifaceted. Some schools practiced weekly, monthly, and trimester, and some only practiced trimester. Some schools returned the answer sheet of the assessment to students; others only published the results. In most cases, the assessment does not seem to enhance the student's learning. A study by the Education Review Office (2022) indicates that the learning gap is widening in the upper grades than the lower grades and has not improved as expected for ten years. Similarly, the student's performance is quite low in the basic level examination conducted by the local governments (Acharya, 2023). It does not seem to motivate the student to learn. More exams create more anxiety and pressure on students (Yarkwah et al., 2018). However, teachers and schools focus on the exam for various purposes. The purpose of the examination should be positive and supportive of the student learning, but in practice, it does not seem effective (Moss & Brookhart, 2009). The examination should work as a windmill for the student to learn. The teachers shared that when the notice is published for the exam, students will start their preparation. This is the backwash effect (Biggs, 1995) of the examination on teaching. The practice leads the teacher to teach for the test. Marope et al. (2017) stated the issues of assessment in many education systems where teachers tend to teach for assessments, tests, and examinations. As shared by the teacher in this case, the school focused only on the

exam and tried to take many exams for grading purposes, but it did not seem to be effective for learning. The school that showed better results in the examinations from Lumbini Province has numerous examination activities. The capability approach of education focuses on children's holistic development. The Nepali education system and society are more focused on scores, and schools also focus on tests rather than learning. Normative assessment ranks the student based on their exam score. It creates anxiety, depression, and pressure on the students. Similarly, schools that enroll students based on test scores (called merit) offer education only for capable children. Social justice and education as public goods have been undermined. Education should be for all, and school pedagogy should be for all children regardless of their intellectual ability. Schools must accept all the children and adopt a diverse pedagogical approach for children's learning.

Equity in Learning and Standardized Testing

Test-based accountability has become popular, and standardized testing systems have been established globally. The criticism of standardized tests is that they focus on the score and rank the students based on their memorization ability (Kim, 2008). There is debate and discussion about the role of education, creativity, and innovation. The assessment approaches should be changed, and education should be the means of empowerment for disadvantaged groups. However, education should not only serve the interests of the privileged groups. Education could reduce social inequality and promote social justice, but the examination system creates inequality. The lack of focus on disadvantaged students and learning inequality, and education itself, has been a means of creating inequality. It only focuses on test scores and merit, categorizing good and bad, high achievers and low achievers and so on. Learning inequalities exist between different groups and regions of the country. The public education system does not seem to be effective in reducing inequality. The concern is not only access and equity but also depriving a certain group of people in the name of community school transformation. The school has become a place where students, families, educators, and administrators have thrived, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, and other social differences (Irving, 2016). However, the examination system of the school creates inequality in society and gives less priority to developing individual capability.

The examples taken from the different schools are adopting the high frequency of the assessment, selecting students based on merit, ranking the students, taking high-stakes exams, and just teaching for the test. The practice that the school adopts cannot be considered good practice. Schools should emphasize informal classroom assessment. Exams should be the tools for learning motivation (Hattie, 2012). To motivate and encourage students to learn, classroom assessment approaches should be applied on a daily basis. However, the participants shared their practice in different ways. They follow the traditional test and focus on teaching to the test. As presented in the case, the assessment is not intended for learning. This is a complete, formal task.

Transforming Assessment Practice

The major purpose of assessment carried out in school is to support student learning (formative) and certify their learning (summative). The major role of the school is to provide support, so the formative assessment has a greater impact on student learning. The government document stated that the formative assessment in Nepali schools has been poor and does not support student learning as expected (CDC, 2019; MOE, 2016; MOEST, 2021). The integrated curriculum implemented from the academic year 2077 BS has proposed different assessment strategies and focuses on classroom assessment. Despite the inadequacy of the teacher's

knowledge, understanding and skill to implement the classroom assessment, it seems difficult to implement as intended. Similarly, socio-cultural factors also influence the assessment system of schools. Parents are habituated to compare their children with their scores, and the school also provides scores based on student ranking. To develop human potential, comparing each other is not a good practice in educational organizations. The participating schools and teachers agree that they focus on the students' cognitive learning and provide the score to parents. The number of students in the classroom, resources available in the classroom, classroom environment, teacher support mechanism, and collaborative culture in the schools are other factors that inhibit the assessment practice in Nepali schools. However, the better community schools seem to focus on assessment and scores rather than on an innovative approach to assessment. They just practice formal written and cognitive tests, ranking the student based on their exam performance. Schools are not implementing such practices to reduce learning inequality and improve student learning proficiency. Each teacher should be accountable for reducing inequality or ensuring quality learning for all. The teacher can promote the classroom assessment approaches and improve classroom management to make learning more meaningful. This supports students' holistic development as well as improves the entire school system.

As per the discussion and review above, assessment practice in education is largely rooted in the assessment of learning. Due to the domination of the assessment of learning approaches, the student has not been getting adequate support from the teacher. Classroom assessment effectiveness depends upon the teacher's effectiveness (Vattoy & Gamlem, 2024). Teacher competency and autonomy are also important factors in applying classroom assessment strategies effectively. Classroom assessment practice in Nepali school education has been practiced since the beginning of formal school education development, but it has not been practiced as intended. Decreasing trends of learning achievement and increased learning inequality indicate ineffective practice of classroom assessment. Policy documents of Nepali school education, such as the national curriculum framework, the school education sector plan, and the Education Policy 2019 (MoEST, 2021), mention the importance of classroom assessment; however, the implementation in schools does not align with the intent of the assessment. As shared by all the participants, the assessment only serves good students. The teaching-learning activity focuses on teaching to test, not for learning in the true sense. Nepal's school assessment only focuses on assessing cognitive learning. In assessing multiple intelligences and students' social-emotional learning, transformation is needed in the assessment practice in the school. Effective classroom assessment practice can enhance equal student learning and promote social justice in learning. The assessment practice of our school is dominated by the assessment *of* learning rather than *for* and *as* learning, which always shows inequality. A low level of learning achievement and an increasing learning gap by the grade indicate the assessment could not contribute to better student learning. Classroom assessment is an appropriate assessment strategy for cognitive knowledge and non-cognitive skills, such as transversal skills, soft skills, or socio-emotional skills. Better classroom assessment practice can ensure better teaching-learning, better learning outcomes, and the holistic development of children. Moreover, it also contributes to reducing learning inequality. Classroom assessment could be a better approach to minimizing the learning gap in the education system.

Conclusion

Assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process and is used to support student learning. However, the current assessment practice in Nepali schools does not seem to be supportive to student learning. The schools are concentrating on creating a student rank based on test scores. The schools that have been established as good schools target the

advantaged groups and those who excel in the entrance exam. This creates social inequality and deprives certain communities of education, who are not able to pay attention to their children due to their background. An exclusive focus on normative assessments can demotivate learning and negatively impact student well-being. It is necessary to modify assessment approaches to empower students to learn better and have equal learning opportunities. Effective classroom assessment practices can lead to improved teaching and learning, better learning outcomes, and the holistic development of children. The role of education is to nurture human capability and act as an equalizer in society. In this regard, classroom assessment practices need to focus on promoting learning equity and justice.

Data Availability Statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the corresponding author, without undue reservation.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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