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Rethinking Classroom Assessment: Rural Nepalese Teachers' Experiences with Formative Practices

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Abstract: Formative assessment remains an evolving practice, and the Continuous Assessment System is widely recognized as one of the most effective pedagogical approaches globally, envisioned to enhance the learning process for students. However, its practical implementation remains limited in many developing nations, particularly in relation to their instructional methodologies. The gap between policy formulation and classroom practice is frequently overlooked, especially when considering the insights of a secondary-level teacher from Baghchaur Municipality, Nepal, whose reflections informed the understanding of CAS's effectiveness and the challenges impeding its application. This convergent mixed methods study employed a census-based sampling strategy, incorporating all 40 teachers from 20 secondary schools within municipalities offering subjects such as Health, Population, and Social Studies. The study utilized a combination of randomized open-ended and Likert-scale questions, with the instrument's reliability confirmed by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency distributions) and inferential statistical techniques, including independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA, both grounded in chi-square analysis. Thematic analysis was also applied to data from non-observation periods, which provided critical qualitative insights. One of the central findings indicated that teachers generally held positive perceptions of CAS, acknowledging its potential to enrich instructional opportunities. Furthermore, many educators believed that CAS could reduce purposeless absenteeism ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.81$), support consistent graduation rates ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.78$), and enhance both academic achievement and teaching licensure outcomes ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.83$). Statistical analysis revealed no significant differences based on gender or teaching experience ($p > .05$), indicating that challenges related to CAS implementation are commonly experienced across demographics. Thematic analysis identified three major barriers: acute shortages of resources and disproportionate student-teacher ratios; insufficient and ineffective professional development initiatives; and external systemic influences that are both unsupportive and underdeveloped. The study revealed that while experienced educators recognize the pedagogical value of CAS, its effective implementation is hindered by a persistent gap between policy and practice. CAS should be viewed as a flexible, evolving process requiring ongoing improvement. Achieving meaningful reform demands strategic resource allocation, sustained teacher development, and the integration of formative assessment into school culture.

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1. Introduction

Formative assessment works as an evaluative tool and at the same time also works as a pedagogical practice, widely recognized as a continuous process through which teachers as well students gather and analyze evidence of teaching learning process to challenge current understandings and promote future academic success of the learners (Panadero et al. 2018). It is based on the foundational principle of making learning visible by delivering timely, accurate, and relevant feedback that helps bridge the gap between a student's current level of understanding and the intended learning achievement (Hattie and Timperley 2007). Over the past three decades, formative assessment has contributed to a significant shift in the educational assessment landscape, redirecting attention toward formative assessment practices - commonly referred to as Assessment for Learning (AFL) as a central component of effective pedagogical practices (Black and Wiliam 2009; Wiliam 2011).

Formative assessment has served as the cornerstone for educational reform initiatives worldwide, being recognized for its potential to foster transformations in pedagogical practices by promoting effective understanding, enhanced learner autonomy, and a holistic view of equitable teaching learning (OECD 2013). One practical manifestation of formative assessment is the Continuous Assessment System (CAS), which works as a comprehensive evaluation procedure. CAS evaluate learners continuously across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains throughout an entire session of teaching learning, providing a multidimensional appraisal of student competence (Nitko and Brookhart 2011).

CAS decreases the exam-related stress and time constraints typically associated with conventional testing by integrating a comprehensive array of assessment practices seamlessly into the ongoing pedagogical practices. Formative assessment facilitates more flexible and diagnostic insights, empowering teachers to detect early signs of learning difficulties, adapt their instructional strategies, and engage students as active participants in their own learning (Stiggins 2017). Addressing this effectively requires incorporating CAS as a core component of national education policies in developing countries including Nepal, aligning with UNESCO's (2020) emphasis on inclusion and equity as essential for delivering quality education accessible to all.

In Nepal, the education system remains highly centralized, rote learning based, and exam-oriented, relying heavily on teachers' lecture and repetitive learning methods, which has contributed to elevated student anxiety and increased dropout rates (Adhikari and Trital 2021; Joshi and Ghimire 2019). Recognizing these challenges, the Government of Nepal integrated CAS at the basic education level (Grades 1-8) through its School Sector Development Plan 2016-2023, under the guidance of the Curriculum Development Centre (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2016). The policy aimed to address entrenched institutional challenges such as student overcrowding, the need to alleviate classroom congestion, and the redefinition of pedagogy from mere content delivery to fostering student-centered learning and creation (Shah 2021). Despite these well-intentioned theoretical foundations, the implementation faced significant setbacks, especially in underprivileged and resource-poor regions, where the lack of a supportive ecosystem critically undermined success. The absence of an adequate technical environment - a factor often overlooked in research - proved to be a fundamental barrier to effective execution.

Main obstacles included the difficulty of conducting individualized assessments due to large class sizes, the absence of a suitable curriculum, the dominance of a teaching-to-the-test mentality, and inadequate teacher evaluation literacy (Shah 2020; Heitink et al. 2016; Looney et al. 2018). Studies across South Asia corroborate these challenges, revealing that many assessment reforms tend to become grandiose yet fail to appreciate the importance of professional development, systemic communication, and a genuine cultural shift within schools. Consequently, these reforms risk devolving into superficial, checklist-driven exercises devoid of meaningful impact (Kanjee 2009; Rahman 2021).

Recent studies of Bhatta and Poudel (2020) and Dahal (2018) identify factors such as heavy teaching workloads, unclear guidelines, and insufficient resources as significant contributors to the increased burden on teachers (Shah 2019). Nevertheless, teachers remain pivotal agents in driving educational change, and any meaningful reform cannot be realized without their active involvement. Rather than viewing teachers as mere conduits for policy implementation, they should be understood as active participants who engage with and respond to changes within the classroom environment (Shah 2021; Priestley et al. 2015). Their perceptions of a reform's value and feasibility significantly influence its success or failure (Wyatt-Smith and Klenowski 2014).

While research addressing these issues is not entirely unprecedented, there has yet to be a study in Nepal employing a granular mixed-methods approach centered on educators' perspectives and practices within their specific context. Given Nepal's limited resources and geographically isolated settings, this research represents a pioneering effort within the academic community. Against this backdrop, the present paper aims to illuminate the challenges and inconsistencies surrounding the implementation of the CAS in Baghchaur Municipality, Nepal. Specifically, this study seeks to: assess the degree to which educators perceive the implementation of CAS as optimizing student-related outcomes; examine whether their perceptions are shaped by variables such as gender and teaching experience; and identify critical systemic obstacles that impede the sustained application of CAS in educational settings.

2. Methods

The study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to capture a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions and the practical realities surrounding the implementation of the CAS. Focusing on Baghchaur Municipality - a non-urban administrative area - this research specifically examined a rural educational setting, using Salyan District in Karnali Province, Nepal, as a representative case. Given the context, the researchers chose a census sampling method to ensure inclusion of all relevant participants and to obtain a complete profile of characteristics within this geographic region. The study involved all 40 teachers (27 male and 13 female) responsible for instructing Health, Population, and Social Studies across the 20 higher secondary schools within the municipality.

The quantitative segment of the study was conducted during May-June 2024 using specially designed self-administered questionnaires focused on the specified topic. The collected data were structured into three sections: demographic information, perceptions measured through a 5-point Likert scale, and open-ended questions intended to capture additional qualitative insights related to the challenges of implementation.

In validating the instrument's content, a panel of educational experts from Tribhuvan University was engaged, mirroring the standards typically found in similar expert panels across the United States. This parallel ensured the instrument's content validity, grounded in the expertise comparable to that of U.S. educational panels. The instrument was also piloted in a nearby setting involving teachers, where it demonstrated satisfactory reliability with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87. Written informed consent was obtained from all research participants, following ethical approval granted by the university and formal permissions secured from the Education Unit of Baghchaur Municipality and school principals. The study integrated quantitative and qualitative data by analyzing them concurrently; descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, independent samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA were conducted using SPSS Version 28 with a significance threshold of $p < .05$. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was rigorously applied following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework to identify and interpret key themes related to systemic barriers.

3. Results

The major findings of the present study are presented in the following sections.

3.1 The Participants Demographics

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the study's 40 participating teachers. Most respondents were male, comprising 67.5% of the sample. The largest age group represented was 31 to 40 years, accounting for 42.5% of participants. In terms of educational qualifications, 70.0% held a bachelor's degree, while 55.0% reported having more than ten years of teaching experience.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable Gender	Category	Frequency(f)	Percentsge(%)
Gender	Male	27	67.5
	Female	13	32.5
Age Group	21-30	8	20.0
	31-40	17	42.5
	41-50	11	27.5
	Above 50	4	10.0
Highest Academic Qualification	Intermediate (+2)	5	12.5
	Bachelor Degree	28	70.0
	Master's Degree	7	17.5
Teaching Experiences	Under 5 years	6	15.0
	5-10 years	12	30.0
	Above 10	22	55.0
Total		40	100.0

Note N=40. The second one is that percentages are never always 100, and in this case, they are. The Teacher's Perspective of CAS

3.2 Quantitative Findings

The perceived benefits of the Continuous Assessment System (CAS) among teachers were notably high. As shown in Table 2, the mean scores across all four assessed domains significantly exceeded the neutral benchmark of 3.0, indicating strong positive perceptions. The majority of teachers expressed agreement on key aspects, particularly the effectiveness of CAS in reducing student absenteeism ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.81$) and its potential to lower student dropout rates ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.78$).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Teacher Perceptions of CAS Efficacy (N = 40)

Perception Statements	M	MD
Overall CAS perception Score	4.31	068
CAS reduces the student absenteeism rate.	4.45	0.81
CAS helps reduce the student dropout rate	4.40	0.78
CAS makes teaching- learning activities more effective	4.30	0.83
CAS encourages and inspires students in their learning	4.10	0.84

An inferential analysis was conducted to determine whether teachers' perceptions of the Continuous Assessment System (CAS) varied based on gender or teaching experience. The results of the independent samples t-test revealed no statistically significant difference in overall CAS perception scores between male ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.65$) and female ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.61$) teachers, $t(38) = 0.19$, $p = .85$, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Independent Samples T-Test Results Comparing Mean CAS Perception Scores by Gender

Gender	N	M	SD	T	Df	P
Male	27	4.32	0.65	0.19	38	0.850
Female	13	4.28	0.61			

In parallel, the results of the one-way ANOVA (Table 4) revealed no statistically significant variation in perception scores among the teacher groups with differing levels of experience, $F(2, 37) = 0.45$, $p = .64$. This suggests that both the favorable views toward CAS and the challenges associated with it are consistently shared across diverse categories of teaching professionals.

Table 4: One-Way ANOVA Summary of CAS Perception Scores by Teaching Experience

Source of Variation	SS	Df	MS	F	P
Between Groups	0.38	2	0.19	0.45	.640
Within Groups	15.61	3739	0.42		
Total	15.99				

3.3 Qualitative results

The study identified systemic barriers to the implementation of the CAS. To explore this issue, a systematic analysis was conducted to interpret the qualitative responses related to implementation challenges. This analysis led to the emergence of three key themes that are crucial for understanding the factors affecting the effective implementation of CAS.

3.3.1 Ineffective Mash-Up of Students and Teachers

A large number of teachers identify this as the most prevalent issue due to insufficient facilities and overcrowded classrooms. They report that classes often contain more than 50 to 60 students, making it nearly impossible for them to focus on individual students, track their portfolios, and provide meaningful feedback. The teachers also complain that the materials meant to support practical exercises and other informal assessment methods are lacking, and project work has not been adequately provided.

Teacher T1 explains

The policy sounds excellent in theory, but in practice, managing 65 students makes it impossible for me to properly evaluate each one. I am allotted only 45 minutes for meetings, which is insufficient for thorough assessment or even for accurately recording attendance. There are no visual aids or resources provided to support the process, making CAS nothing more than excessive paperwork.

3.3.2 Professional Development

Most teachers received similar training related to CAS; however, they criticized it for being theoretical, brief, and disconnected from actual classroom experiences. The most common approach - a single, intensive workshop - is widely accepted and implemented, yet it fails to equip teachers with the practical skills needed to design effective assessment tools, analyze student data, or manage the additional responsibilities.

Teacher T2 remarked

CAS training introduction was a day's training. It was not how, but it was a why. We require the care of twenty-four-hour people. When creating a good rubric, how do you do it? Then how do you get the record of all the students, and yet it does not take all your time? It is something we have not heard talked about.

3.3.3 Resistance to CAS Implementation

This outcome occurred by deliberate choice. Teachers who tried to implement CAS experienced alienation, as they were neither supported nor respected by parents and school administrators. Many parents, anxious about the new system, favored the traditional percentage-based assessment and pressured teachers to revert to the old methods. Similarly, administrative leaders appeared more concerned with the formal appearance of compliance rather than the genuine impact of formative assessment. As Teacher 3 observed, parents mainly care about their child's overall standing and remain unaware of the ongoing progress monitoring. Likewise, the administration focuses on completing CAS documentation rather than assessing whether the content evaluated is meaningful or relevant.

4. Discussion

This research highlights a pronounced gap between the intended implementation of the CAS and its practical application in rural Nepal. Although CAS holds significant promise as a pedagogical innovation, it has not been successfully operationalized in actual classroom settings. Nevertheless, teachers demonstrate strong belief in its effectiveness and express a clear readiness to lead forthcoming educational transformations. Their notably favorable perceptions, supported by the quantitative findings, align with extensive international literature emphasizing that formative assessment fosters learner participation, motivation, and self-directed learning (Black and Wiliam 2009; Hattie 2012; Panadero et al. 2018). The accuracy of their responses - especially in recognizing CAS's role in lowering absenteeism ($M = 4.45$) and reducing dropout rates ($M = 4.40$) - indicates that educators regard it as a critical tool for cultivating safe and inclusive learning environments. This is especially important in rural settings, where the issue of student dropout continues to be a major educational challenge (UNESCO 2020).

On the one hand, it gives rather a disturbing contrast between this visually pleasing picture and the situation on the ground in the classroom with the qualitative outcomes. Besides, it is argued that the implementation of CAS is not only an endeavor, but it is also systematically perforated with fundamental deficiencies in the learning system as formulated by the view of the teachers. The various barriers outlined here not being self-enclosed phenomena per se, are interposed a priori with the overall inadequacy of resources needed to undertake the task; unreasonable size of classes, insufficient professional development, lack of buy-in of stakeholders are just various facets of a general failure of a policy to keep up within the ambits of an ambitious policy on the horizon. The results can also be duplicated in the studies of other developing nations where they have failed to gauge changes because they were unable to identify an enabling environment (Kanjee 2009; Rahman 2021). Massification of classes, especially, is a logistical backlog, and it compromises the quality of personal and specific representation of the actual formative assessment, which is notably apparent only in providing care to under-funded schools in Baghchaur Municipality (Bhatta and Poudel 2020).

The absence of ongoing professional development is highly concerning. Effective teaching, particularly in formative assessment, depends heavily on advanced assessment literacy, including the ability to create valid assessment tools, provide clear evidence of

student achievement, deliver constructive feedback, and foster student metacognition (Stiggins 2017; Wyatt-Smith and Klenowski 2014). According to participants, the current approach often limited to a one-time workshop - is insufficient because mastering these complex skills requires continuous and immersive learning experiences. Research by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) emphasizes that effective professional development should be sustained, collaborative, and embedded within teachers' daily work, a crucial element evidently lacking in the context examined by this study.

The fact that the difference was minimal in the perceptions of the experience or gender involved (as shown in the value of the t-test and ANOVA) further confirms the conclusion to be made that they are cross-cutting issues rather than teacher-level issues. Besides, the callousness of the stakeholders turns out to be the trademark of the cultural aspect of the learning transformation. CAS is now becoming an examination-oriented and high-stakes society. This may fail in case of a lockup in the classroom. Until the rather serious effort to explain the parents and communities at large how the holistic and formative assessment may be beneficial to them in the long run is made, the cultural attraction to the traditional measures will only amount to putting pressure on the teachers, thus enabling the teachers to teach to test and thereby remove the whole point of CAS (Looney et al. 2018). The proposed study will contribute to the body of knowledge of literature as the quantitative and qualitative snapshots of an understudied region in Nepal, which incidentally is a rural area, will be matched. When in the policy and practice gap, it does not matter as much as to be mentioned ever a bit, it proves, it is one of the consequences of the generation of irrational expectations of teachers without offering or training them instruments and work systems.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study underscore a significant disparity between educational policy design and its actual execution in classroom settings, particularly in the context of rural Nepal. The implementation of the CAS illustrates this disconnect, as the system's intended objectives are not being realized in practice. Quantitative data indicate that teachers maintain highly favorable attitudes toward CAS and acknowledge its potential to improve student attentiveness and retention. However, qualitative evidence reveals a stark contrast between these positive perceptions and the realities of classroom application. Teachers' willingness and enthusiasm are consistently undermined by enduring structural obstacles, including limited teaching resources, high student-teacher ratios, and a lack of targeted professional training. These systemic deficiencies not only obstruct the adoption of innovative assessment practices but also point to an institutional hesitancy to fully commit to pedagogical reform. Consequently, CAS, while supported in theory, remains largely symbolic in rural settings- highlighting an urgent need for policy-practice coherence and strategic investment in educational infrastructure and capacity building.

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