

**Policy without Preparation: A Critical Perspective on Teacher Readiness for
Assessment Reform in the Primary Schools of Nepal**

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Abstract

In March 2026, Nepal's newly elected government introduced continuous assessment system to systematize internal examinations for students in grades 1-5. The decision appears to support the internationally accepted criteria for formative assessment: assessment for, rather than of, learning. This critical policy analysis examines whether Nepal's primary teaching workforce, particularly in Kathmandu's private and community school sectors, possesses the conceptual understanding and pedagogical competency necessary to operationalise this reform as intended. Drawing on critical policy analysis, the paper argues that the policy represents sound educational philosophy that is in its current form. However, three interlocking problems: a widespread misreading of the policy, a pervasive conflation of assessment purpose with certification function, and a teacher workload crisis, are identified as responsive unsustainable cycles of formative practice. The paper argues that school's investment in teachers' professional development is being constrained by a rational but damaging calculus of retention risk. Thus, without deliberate, funded, and sustained capacity-building at the classroom, school, and system levels, Nepal's latest assessment reform will reproduce the fate of its predecessors: aspirational on paper, inert in practice.

Keywords: formative assessment, teacher readiness, education policy, policy implementation

Article information

Received: 25-05-2026 Reviewed: 18-06-2026 Revised: 24-06-2026 Accepted: 04-07-2025

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Cite this article as:

Adhikari, S. (2026). Policy without preparation: A critical perspective on teacher readiness for assessment reform in the primary schools of Nepal. *Janabhawana Research Journal*, 5(1), 63-80. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/jrj.v5i1.97902>

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Introduction

Since its initiation, education reform in Nepal has been characterized by the soaring ideals of its intentions and the lowly reality of achievements. Policy agendas - including the School Sector Development Plan 2016–2023 (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2016); the National Education Policy 2076 (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2019), and many more—have articulated aspirations toward learner-centric pedagogy, quality learning environments, and competency-focused educators. Yet, as can be observed by analysis of the system, implementing policy rhetoric in the classroom setting remains one of the most significant and damaging shortcomings of the education system (Rana et al., 2020; Educational Quality Testing Centre official, as cited in Nepal News, 2026a).

Most recently, the government of Prime Minister Balendra Shah announced in March 2026, as part of its 100-point governance reform plan, that internal examinations would no longer be held for students in Grades 1 to 5 (News24 Online, 2026). Such a reform is not, *prima facie*, unprecedented: Nepal adopted the Continuous Assessment System (CAS) in place of written tests at the primary level as early as 1999 (Nepal News, 2026a). What is genuinely new is the firm political will to enforce the directive, the rapidity with which it was announced, and the scale of its immediate reach: directly affected are more than 3.5 million primary students and over 150,000 primary teachers across all community and private institutions nationwide.

The paper does not oppose the educational philosophy that underpins the reform. Numerous international evidence points to that formative, continuous assessment leads to better learning outcomes than the occasional high-stakes testing (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam, 2011). Still, what this paper challenges is the question of implementation which is quite crucial yet barely addressed; are Nepal's primary teachers capable to implement the reform that respects its intention rather than just imitating its appearance? The paper supports the notion that they are not, not because the teachers do not want to or are not capable in principle, but because they have not been trained, the working conditions make it structurally difficult for them to engage in responsive teaching practice, and the leadership and professional development systems that may help to close this gap are, in fact, under-resourced, under-incentivized, and under-theorized in the Nepalese educational context.

This paper is interpreted as a deeply critical, document-based policy analysis and not as an empirical study of classroom practice: it does not present new fieldwork on teacher behavior, but rather analyses the policy text, available secondary literature, and contemporaneous media coverage of the reform's rollout against established theory to identify the plausible conditions for the realization of the policy's stated aims. As a result, the paper is centered on three leading questions. Firstly, what conceptual and practical

competencies does the move to continuous, formative assessment necessitate from primary teachers in Nepal, and how does this compare to the assessment literacy that the current workforce can reasonably be assumed to possess? Secondly, what working conditions and institutional structures at present limit primary teachers' abilities to perform the regular, reflective assessment practice that the reform expects? Thirdly, what incentives and constraints affect the investment of schools and the system in the professional development that is necessary to address the gap? These sections respond to these three questions in order, and then discuss reform's potential opportunities and the analytical implications for policy and practice.

Methodology

This study uses a critical policy analysis method, inspired generally by Bacchi's (2009) "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" (WPR) system. This structure views policy documents not as mere straightforward intentions, but as creations that shape a particular version of the problem they claim to be solving. At the same time, they make one set of solutions seem obviously right while others remain hidden. From this perspective, Nepal's no-examination order would be seen as turning the 'problem' of primary assessment into one of the 'old-fashioned, high-stakes testing' that can be 'fixed' with a simple change of the assessment format. This article challenges that way of thinking by first of all finding out what the policy's problem representation misses - mainly, the capacity of the workforce and the institutional conditions needed to implement the proposed alternative - and secondly, by interpreting the policy text in the light of three different but complementary bodies of theory: Earl's (2003) classification of assessment purposes, change theory and professional capital (Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) and the studies on teacher assessment literacy and workload.

The study uses three different types of evidence that are assigned varying levels of evidentiary weight through the paper. The main type of evidence with content and amount is peer-reviewed academic literature on formative assessment, teacher assessment literacy, change theory, and teacher workload, mainly obtained from international sources and complementarily from South Asian and Nepal-specific sources. The second type is government and development-partner policy documents - among them, Nepal's National Education Policy 2076, the School Education Sector Plan 2022/23-2031/32, and the Global Partnership for Education's (2024) thematic country-level evaluation of Nepal's education sector - which give the policy background and the expressed intentions against which the 2026 reform is interpreted. The third is present-day Nepali media coverage (Nepal News 2026a; Nepal News 2026b; News24 Online, 2026) which at the time of writing, remains the only source for direct quotations of named officials and for details about the announcement's

immediate reaction. This third category is regarded as a record of public statements and developing events rather than independently verified data. Its assertions are considered together, rather than instead of, the official policy documents and peer-reviewed literature.

In the argument about work burden and burnout, the teacher turnover narrative at one primary school in Kathmandu is the author's direct professional experience rather than a published source; it is simply an illustrative example and not evidence that can be generalized, and it should be taken with the same degree of skepticism as any single story. The papers assertions about teacher readiness are and based on theory, comparable empirical findings from other developing-country and South Asian contexts, and Nepal-specific evidence, rather than on primary data new data collection in Nepalese classrooms. This paper acknowledges that this is a limitation as well as a methodological decision, and it refers to this issue again when it talks about directions for future research.

The No-Examination Directive and Its Antecedents

The March 2026 announcement must be understood as the latest installment of an extended journey of Nepal's main assessment policy. The Continuous Assessment System includes daily student assessment through classwork, project work, creative work, attendance, and behavioural observation (Nepal News, 2026a). That this type of system was launched in 1999 and is still not fairly operational after more than twenty years is in fact the most direct revealing commentary available on the gap between Nepal's policy intentions and implementation capacity. As a staff member of the Educational Quality Testing Centre at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, admitted quite openly, 'The continuous assessment system is good, but there are challenges in implementing it; the government has been trying since 1999 and still has not been able to implement it properly' (Nepal News, 2026a). Before this current reform, the National Education Policy 2076 (MoEST, 2019) had recognized the establishment of competency-based and continuous assessment systems as a matter of high national importance. It emphasized teacher capacity building and substantial investment in professional learning directly connected with pedagogical reform. The School Education Sector Plan 2022/23–2031/32 (MoEST, 2022) also included quality of assessment practice among its indicators of educational progress. Still, turning these promises into paid and long-lasting professional development initiatives has remained beyond reach. The education ministry must have studied various aspects before formulating new policies, but a policy, no matter how progressive and attractive on paper, will be of no use if it does not match with the realities on the ground and lead to tangible, measurable learning outcomes for students (Nepal News, 2026a). Under-Secretary and spokesperson of the Planning and Monitoring Division at the Ministry of Education, Shiva Kumar Sapkota, said that it had only been two days since the announcement and he was open to discussing the

implementation when the time came (Nepal News, 2026a). This comment, although quite reasonable in the situation, exposes the typical sequencing problem of Nepal's education reform: the announcement of policy precedes the design of its implementation. The pattern of sequencing is not exclusive to Nepal. In his analysis, Fullan (2007) lists it as one of the major reasons for the failure of education reforms worldwide - the assumption that by simply announcing a change, it would be equivalent to actually making it, and that teachers will automatically adjust to new requirements without being given any structured support. The case at hand displays this failure with peculiar clarity.

The context of the policy is made more complex by the crisis in learning outcomes that it aims to resolve. In the Annual Grade 5 Examination in Nuwakot district, only 30.6 per cent of the students were able to pass. Besides, there were five schools that had zero-pass rates (Nepal News, 2026b). The percentage of children between the ages of 5 and 12 who are out of school has been increasing since 2080 BS, and the average learning achievement in core subjects is going down, although the government is raising its targets each year (Nepal News, 2026b). It should be noted that simply taking away examinations without improving the quality of day-to-day classroom assessment does not relieve the pressure on the system; it only changes and hides the pressure, while at the same time removing one of the few, albeit blunt, tools through which learning gaps have been identified.

Theoretical Framework: Three Purposes of Assessment and the Conditions of Change

The theoretical basis for this paper is Lorna Earl's (2003) ground-breaking three-fold classification of assessment purpose which separates assessment of learning, assessment for learning and assessment as learning. Assessment of learning - currently the model in Nepal's school culture - is a summative and retrospective type of assessment. Its main role is to confirm what students have learned at the end of a unit, term, or year; to grade students with each other; and to inform parents, institutions, and the wider community. It is an assessment that serves accountability and selection purposes. Assessment for learning, however, is formative and forward-looking. As Black and Wiliam (1998) through their review of more than 250 studies demonstrated, the goal of this type of assessment is to produce data that teachers can employ to alter teaching, spot gaps in learning, and change pedagogical methods not after the learning process but while it is still on-going. Recent scholarship has reaffirmed and extended this framework, emphasising that formative assessment knowledge and skills must be understood as contextual and situated, shaped by the specific learning environment in which teachers work (Brookhart, 2024). Wiliam (2011) condenses this into a five-element system that can be used for classroom practice: identifying what learners intend to achieve and what success looks like; creating good classroom talk; circulating feedback that helps learning to progress; making students help each other; and making students take

responsibility for their own learning. Assessment as learning involves students at the level of metacognition in tracking, analyzing, and managing their learning processes (Earl, 2003), and it is the most developed of the three types. The 2026 reform in Nepal clearly advocates assessment for learning. Referring to "alternative and psychoanalytical methods" and "stress-free and holistic learning environments" the policy language directly invokes the formative assessment tradition. It has been and still is in a large part of Nepal's public discourse and, very importantly, among many teachers, totally wrongly interpreted as a move to do away with assessment altogether. This misunderstanding is very serious. It is a fundamental conceptual mistake with clear consequences for teaching practice: when a teacher thinks that the government has taken away assessment such a teacher sees a reason not to attend student comprehension in a systematic manner at all. The differentiation between removing examinations and removing assessment is not just a matter of word-play - it is the whole essence of the reform.

Change Theory and the Human Dimension of Reform

Change theory by Fullan (2007) delineates why even very well-intentioned pedagogical reform efforts at the school level tend to fail quite often. Fullan considers the notion of change in school education to hinge upon meaning as the focal variable: those teachers who don't get the point of a reform simply will not reform their teaching with good faith, even if they formally abide by its requirements. Another point he makes is that real, long-term change is made up of three closely connected things - building up people's abilities, a team-like school culture, and moral-purpose-driven leadership - and the lack of any one of these is enough to make reform fail. The no-examination policy on Nepal is being rolled out in a system where all three of these things are very evidently missing at the classroom level.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), through their work on professional capital, present another set of ideas that nicely fit to the situation in Nepal. They hold that the level of teaching quality is not set by a star teacher, but by the whole school community's professional capital - human capital (the knowledge and skills of each teacher), social capital (the strength of the teamwork and shared learning), and decisional capital (the informed decisions that come from doing one's job for a long time). Professional capital can be undone by the system if the human capital in question is barely developed in terms of assessment knowledge, collaborative professional learning hardly occurs, teacher tenure is very short, and turnover is very high. And professional capital that has been undone is unable to meet the needs of formative assessment practice.

The Conceptual Gap: Assessment Literacy Among Nepal's Primary Teachers

The most fundamental and far-reaching obstacle to rolling out Nepal's no-exam policy is that almost all primary school teachers in Kathmandu and, by inference, in the whole country, only have a narrow understanding of assessment that mainly sees it as a tool for certification and verification. For most Nepalese primary teachers, assessment is synonymous with end-of-unit or end-of-term events: an examination, a grade, a report to parents - the mechanism by which a child's learning is condensed and communicated. This is assessment of learning in Earl's (2003) taxonomy, and although it is a genuine and essential part of any overall assessment system, it is not the kind of assessment that the 2026 reform is empowering teachers to do.

The lack of assessment literacy is evident from both structural and anecdotal sources. As mentioned in the demographic analysis of Kathmandu's primary teaching workforce, more than half of which have only secondary-level qualifications (SLC/SEE or Plus 2) (Centre for Education and Human Resource Development [CEHRD], 2016), and the qualifications distribution shows a workforce in which degree-level education, not to mention postgraduate study in pedagogy or assessment, is not common. Historically, Nepal's pre-service teacher education programs have not been the places where teachers learn about formative assessment theory and practice systematically. The National Centre for Educational Development (NCED), which is Nepal's main teacher training institution, has thirty-four training centers across the country. Still, the scale and substance of assessment literacy in-service training have not been enough to close the gap between policy expectations and actual teacher competencies in the classroom (Rana et al., 2020). This gap is not unique to Nepal: cross-national research has consistently found that teachers' formative assessment literacy - conceptualised as encompassing conceptual, practical, and socio-emotional dimensions - is inadequately developed in systems where pre-service programmes do not treat it as a core competency (Yan & Pastore, 2022). The concern is compounded in contexts where government policy mandates formative practices without accompanying investment in building those capacities, creating a structural contradiction between what teachers are expected to do and what they have been prepared to do (Brown et al., 2024).

Educationist Meenakshi Dahal pinpoints the fundamental issue exactly: "If the continuous assessment system is implemented strictly, it could be a great tool for recognizing and enhancing students' learning levels. But the question is, are our teachers ready for the sincere implementation?" (Nepal News, 2026a). This question, raised in the public forum, right after the policy announcement, is the perfect expression of both the most important and the most overlooked aspect of the change at the same time. Preparation is not

just telling the teachers about the existence of the policy. It means helping teachers to have a theory of learning which they can practically use in their work with formative assessments - one that sees teaching as a process of constant, evidence-based discovery of what works, involving making hypotheses, observing results, and making adjustments, rather than a one-way flow of content with evaluation only done at the end.

Wiliam (2011) makes this point with characteristic directness: formative assessment is not something that can be just added on to the current methods. It requires teachers to fundamentally reconceive their role - not as instructors of curriculum but as creators of learning situations. Such a change in how teachers see themselves cannot be achieved through a policy circular or a single professional development workshop. It needs long-term joint reflective involvement with the practice. Teachers who are used to the traditional ways of learning will be hesitant to conduct student assessments on a daily basis. Teachers who find it straightforward to assess students through written examinations once or twice a year may see the continuous assessment system as a source of added work and stress (Nepal News, 2026a). This glimpse of the situation from the ministry of Nepal themselves is an indication that conceptual change and behavioural change are both slow processes that do not readily yield to top-down initiatives.

The Competency Gap: Knowing Versus Doing

A second, distinct problem must be differentiated from the first. Teachers in primary schools of Kathmandu who can explain the purpose of assessment for learning - who can, if questioned, explain the difference between formative and summative assessment, or outline the three-part taxonomy - only a handful can show their proficiency to put this knowledge into practice through responsive teaching cycles. Simply knowing what assessment for learning entails and actually implementing it are two different things, and the gap between them is much wider than reform designers usually admit. This is in line with a recent systematic review of how teacher education programs prepare candidates to enact assessment for learning, which revealed that explicit instruction and conceptual modelling are almost never combined with the cyclical, supervised practice and feedback on enactment that are necessary for the knowledge to be transferred into classroom behavior (Van Orman et al. 2025).

Implementing formative assessment calls for the teacher to have a combination of conceptual understanding and practical wisdom. Only a teacher who is able to conduct assessment for learning will be able to create students' learning tasks that bring out evidence of their understanding and not only of their performing; ask questions that show their thinking rather than their memory; make inferences from student responses "on the spot" and modify instruction accordingly; provide feedback that is specific, actionable, forward-

directed, and not merely evaluative; and orchestrate the situation in the classroom where pupils willingly disclose their errors and do not hide them. To quote Black and Wiliam (1998), these teachers' ways of working "require the redefinition of teaching contracts - the implicit social agreements about the purposes of teaching and learning - and this redefinition cannot be imposed from above; it must be learned, developed through practice, and perfected over time."

In the formative teaching process at its core is a cycle of self-reflection - assess, identify gaps, reteach, and reassess - which presupposes that a teacher has the subject matter knowledge to figure out errors in understanding, the teaching knowledge to choose suitable methods for remediation, and the professional freedom to go off the beaten path of the curriculum when the evidence of student learning calls for it. In Nepal's primary education system, particularly in community schools, which are often overcrowded and where teachers have to deal with multi-grade teaching and follow prescribed curriculum packages, the scope for professional autonomy is heavily restricted. The need to complete the syllabus for external examinations at the secondary level creates a ripple effect that influences the practice of teaching at the primary level - even in situations where such exams are not formally in place -because the education system altogether still regards summative certification as the main outcome.

The Structural Impossibility Problem: Workload, Burnout, and the Conditions of Practice

The third and possibly the most time-critical challenge for the 2026 reform is that under the current working conditions of Nepal's primary teachers the structure of the formative assessment practice is not sustainable. Assessment for learning is not a passive or low-effort activity. It takes professional concentration at a very high level during the whole lesson, analyzing student work and response patterns carefully, providing immediate and meaningful feedback, and redesigning instruction based on evidence. Such requirements are not only demanding but very time-consuming as well. They are, in occupational psychology terms, high job demand (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014). Research in comparable primary school contexts has established that time constraints, workload, overcrowded curricula, and large class sizes are consistently among the most significant barriers to effective formative assessment implementation (Asare & Afriyie, 2023; Creagh et al., 2023).

The primary teachers in Nepal are already working at the edge of their physical limits of professional effort or possibly beyond it. To a large extent, teachers in private and community schools in Kathmandu have been caught up in the whirlwind of parental demands, school marketing, and the pressures of competition which combined have led to

the considerable expansion of their role beyond just teaching to a point where the administrative, ceremonial and communicative duties have become so overwhelming that there is almost no time left for reflection, let alone the psychological space it requires. Report writing is not only repetitive but burdensome and it is more designed for satisfying institutional optics rather than being useful for pedagogy. Events such as assemblies, exhibitions, inter-school competitions, parent engagement events, and sports days which have been initiated in the name of progressive, holistic education have led to the addition of hours to an already long working day. Administrative tasks - maintaining attendance records, updating digital portfolios, and entering data into school management systems - are duplicated across platforms and demanded in overlapping cycles.

These effects of structural overload can be quantified. Studies on teacher burnout in developing countries similar to Nepal show that heavy workloads, too much administrative work, and less appreciation are continually the main reasons leading to teacher stress and leaving their jobs (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014; Gavin & McGrath-Champ, 2024). Critically, evidence from Nepal itself confirms this pattern: a cross-sectional study of 218 community school teachers across 37 schools in the Kathmandu district found high levels of occupational burnout, with emotional exhaustion significantly influenced by work-related demands, limited professional development access, and poor workability (Paudel et al., 2024). Early-career teachers as well as those working in schools with high levels of accountability are most at risk of being caught in this cycle and this is precisely the group that makes up most of Kathmandu's primary teaching force. Teacher turnover figures in schools of Kathmandu bring to light the major issues. These are, notably, the teachers most at risk of attrition: a great deal of primary school teacher attrition, and the main reasons given most often are working hours are too long and there is too much of non-teaching work. These numbers depict the disheartening reality at the ground level. As one illustration, at a particular primary school in Kathmandu, in a short span of time, four teachers resigned and one of the reasons they clearly mentioned for quitting was the excessive working hours, doing the same administrative work repeatedly, report writing, and event management. Such local evidence is in line with international research on teacher attrition. In Stacey et al.'s (2022) terms, this constitutes a "triage" situation: teachers quit their jobs when the combined weight of the non-teaching tasks is so high that they hardly have any time and energy left to do the teaching work that was their professional reason for choosing a career in education. If teachers' workload has already reached this threshold, then introducing the ongoing, reflective, and evidence-responsive requirements of real formative assessment without at the same time reducing the other demands will not be a pedagogical improvement, rather, it will be an extra heavy load brought to a system that is already overwhelmed.

Some parents even insist that their children be tested through written exams by the schools (Nepal News, 2026a), this way adding yet another layer of institutional resistance that mainly teachers have to handle. Consider the position of a teacher who must explain to an anxious parent why their child has not received an end-of-term examination result - and the teacher is supposed to do this without the help of a clear, publicly communicated policy implementation setup. This means that the teacher is being asked to manage the social tensions of reform at the classroom level with very little support from the school or the education system.

The Leadership Investment Dilemma

One can hardly talk about whether teachers are ready without discussing whether a school leader invests in a teacher's professional development. Formative assessment skills cannot just be there one day without any intervention; one gets them through intentional, organized, and long-term professional development (when a teacher is enabled to do such practices through training, coaching, collaborative inquiry, lesson study, and reflective practice supported by knowledgeable leadership). Such investments require substantial resources and the benefits are realized gradually over time rather than right away. School leaders in Nepal - mainly those in the private sector, where financial sustainability is always an institutional concern - give themselves a logical, but harmful dilemma of investment. From a school's point of view, it is a strategic decision only to invest in the individual teacher's capability of formative assessment if those teachers are also going to be in the school for a long time such that the investment will eventually be a source of returns to the institution. When teacher turnover is high, as demonstrated by Kathmandu's primary school sector, the calculus of investment turned against the school point of view: a teacher who has been expensively trained in formative assessment practice may leave within a year or two, taking that professional capital to another institution or out of the sector entirely. The logical decision would be to cut down investments in individual teacher development and trust hiring already qualified teachers whose skills are ready - a tactic that is itself undermined by the qualification profile of the available workforce, in which deep assessment literacy is rare. This dynamic, as per Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), is the ongoing dilemma between the professional growth of teachers as individuals and the development of their professions as institutions. School leaders, for their part, seem to recognize this dilemma.

A qualitative research on school leaders' views about teachers' continuous professional development revealed that leaders almost always mentioned lack of stable funding and staff turnover as the main obstacles for maintaining CPD spending, even though they acknowledged the importance of CPD (Lafferty et al. 2024). They argue that the only way to solve this issue is through an entire system approach that will develop professional

capital building rather than on a school-by-school basis. When professional development is left in the hands of individual schools, which are competing with one another, then there is a drain of the collective professional capital of the system since no one actor has the incentives to invest sufficiently in it. The solution is to have either government-funded professional development to support policy reform or to have collaborative school structures that spread the costs and benefits of professional learning more equitably (Brookhart, 2024; Pastore, 2024). Neither of these structural solutions is currently in evidence in Nepal's primary school sector. This gap echoes what has been found in teacher-policy development processes in other parts of the Global South where, for example, in good-faith, governments have made policy commitments to teacher capacity building but these have mostly outpaced the availability of funding and system-level coordination necessary for their delivery (UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2023).

Potential Opportunities Within the Reform

The preceding analysis has been deliberately critical, in keeping with this paper's purpose, but a balanced reading of the reform should also register what it gets right and what it makes possible. First, the policy direction itself is well supported: the same body of evidence on formative assessment cited throughout this paper (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam, 2011) indicates that, where implemented with fidelity, continuous assessment improves learning outcomes and reduces the early exposure of five- to ten-year-old children to high-stakes testing and the anxiety it can produce. A policy that finally aligns Nepal's primary assessment practice with this evidence, after more than two decades of inconsistent implementation, is not a small achievement of political will. Second, the unusual force and visibility of the 2026 announcement may itself be an asset. Where the 1999 introduction of the Continuous Assessment System proceeded as a comparatively quiet, technocratic change with little sustained public attention, the 2026 directive has generated sustained media coverage, parental debate, and professional discussion (Nepal News, 2026a, 2026b). In Bacchi's (2009) terms, the policy's problem representation has shifted enough to attract genuine public attention to assessment reform - and that attention is itself a resource, since, as Fullan (2007) and Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) both argue, sustained public and political engagement is frequently the precondition for the system-level investment that meaningful reform requires.

Third, the reform creates an opening, even if not yet the substance, of the system-wide approach to professional capital that Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) argue is necessary: a single, national-level directive is a more tractable object for coordinated investment than the fragmented, school-by-school professional development landscape this paper has otherwise described. None of this softens the central argument that implementation has, so

far, outpaced preparation; it does suggest that the gap identified here is one of execution and investment rather than of policy direction, and that the conditions for closing it - political attention, an evidentially sound model of assessment, and a single coordinating policy text - are more favorable now than they have been at any point since 1999.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has identified three interlocking obstacles to the successful implementation of Nepal's 2026 assessment reform: a widespread conceptual misreading of the policy as the abolition of assessment rather than a shift in its purpose; a competency gap between teachers' theoretical understanding of formative assessment and their capacity to enact it through responsive teaching cycles; and a structural impossibility problem, in which workload, burnout, and high turnover make the sustained reflective practice the reform requires difficult to perform under current working conditions. Underlying all three is a leadership investment dilemma that discourages schools from building the very professional capital the reform depends on. None of these obstacles is unique to Nepal, but their combination, layered onto a policy history stretching back to 1999, gives the present moment a particular urgency.

Nepal's decision to abolish internal examinations for Grades 1 to 5 is, in principle, both defensible and commendable. The global research on whether children should do formal exams at such an early age, and which type of assessment - formative or summative - impacts children's achievement the most is unambiguous and consistent (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam, 2011; Earl, 2003). A Nepalese administration brave enough to rely on this evidence should be honored for that.

Yet, without readiness, courage means nothing but a folly. A reform that is well-grounded in theory but lacking structurally will fail. In doing so, it will discredit the very principles it was designed to advance. Continuous assessment is, in fact, a familiar concept for Nepal: the government has been endeavoring since 1999 and still has not been able to properly implement it (Nepal News, 2026a). This paper asks, in essence, what has fundamentally changed since 1999. The education system has so far not provided a convincing answer to what is different in 2026 that was not in 1999, or in the National Education Policy of 2019, or in the School Sector Development Plans that preceded it. Change of government is obvious. Still, change in factors that hinder implementation - teacher conceptual understanding, pedagogical competency, workload sustainability, and institutional investment in professional development - is not yet visible.

Whether Nepal succeeds or fails at reforming assessment is decided not by the Council of Ministers but in classrooms across Kathmandu and beyond. Success is

determined at that point of time when a teacher happens to notice a child misunderstanding the concept and makes - or does not make, as the day is already too long and next activity is already overdue - a decision to stop, rethink, and reteach. Creating the environment for that moment of professional decision-making to happen, not as a rare incidence but as a regular behavior is the main objective of this reform. Still, it is a task that calls for preparation, investment, and time.

The announcement in 2026 is marking a start of the time. The question is whether the system will spend the time it has bought in a wise manner or not, and this question will determine the future of more than three and a half million primary school students.

This paper has been deliberately conceptual and document-based, and that choice points directly to the empirical work needed next. Future research could usefully establish, through direct classroom observation and survey instruments adapted for the Nepalese context, the actual distribution of assessment literacy among Kathmandu's primary teachers, rather than relying solely on theoretical inference this paper has had to use. Comparative case studies of individual schools attempting to implement the 2026 directive - tracking how leadership investment decisions, teacher turnover, and classroom practice interact over the policy's first several years - would also test directly the leadership investment dilemma proposed here. Finally, given the scarcity of Nepal-specific empirical literature on formative assessment identified throughout this paper, replication of assessment-literacy and workload studies of the kind available from Ghana, Bangladesh, and other South Asian and developing-country contexts (Asare & Afriyie, 2023; Rahman et al., 2021) would help establish whether the obstacles identified here generalize across Nepal's diverse school types and regions, or are concentrated in particular sectors such as Kathmandu's private and community schools.

Implications

This analysis classifies three interrelated domains requiring targeted intervention: the national government, school leadership, and the teaching profession.

National Government:

The declaration of the no-examination policy only cannot work without an assessment literacy program. Teachers at the primary level must be equipped through professional development workshops about assessment and continuous support through classroom modelling coaching collaborative inquiry - for a minimum of two-year - implementation period. National Centre for Educational Development (NCED) infrastructure can act as a backbone but will require an enlarged capacity to be able to implement large-scale delivery. Besides that, the government needs to consider the aspect of communication

in reform: teachers, parents, and school leaders require clear, accessible, and sustained communication of both the policy and its implementation implications. Without explanation, the policy will be misconstrued as the complete removal of assessment, which is not a case of teacher misunderstanding but rather an issue of poor communication during implementation.

School Leaders:

Whether formative assessment practices take hold structurally depends heavily on conditions at the school level. School leaders must first audit and then systematically reduce demands on teachers that carry no pedagogical value. Besides, learning time, mostly professional collaborative time, needs to be protected, e.g., teachers designing assessments together, analyzing students' work, and reflecting on their practice. Lastly, teacher assessment literacy must be understood as a system-wide investment for the profession overall, rather than a purely institutional one - for the profession overall not simply institutional one since not even the best of trained teachers will necessarily continue to work in one particular school.

Profession:

It is imperative for teachers to understand assessment for learning thoroughly to be able to explain to fellow professionals what a correct interpretation of the assessment strategy is. For example, the distinction between the abolishing of examinations and the shift towards continuous formative assessment must be made explicit by the staff throughout conversations, other professional activities, as well as interactions with parents. This profession has to take charge of such communications themselves as they cannot simply afford to wait for the government to do so on their behalf.

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