

Assessment Practices at Secondary School Level in Sikkim: Perception of Stakeholders and Identification of Policy Gaps

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Abstract: *The present study uses Mixed method research to investigate the various assessment practices at secondary school level alongside the stakeholders' perception within the rather poorly investigated Indian state-Sikkim's educational system. Through questionnaire, interview, FGD, field verification schedule (and observation), this study draws upon not only the perceptions of 120 teachers, 200 students and 40 SMDC members, but also the practices and problems associated with assessment practices of ten secondary schools from Forward and ten secondary schools from Backward Districts of the state. The quantitative data were analysed using both the descriptive and inferential statistics and the qualitative section of analysis addresses the themes that emerged from respondents' responses that relate to the research questions and the assumptions that were made at the beginning of the study. The findings indicate that although stakeholders had a better recognition of various domains, purposes and use of assessment; there were certain level of dissimilarities in their perception of assessment practices. Moreover, it was revealed that the exposure of the school heads, teachers and other stakeholders by means of training, workshops and adequate education had a great deal of impact on their practices. Major problems or challenges associated with the assessment practices were; time management problems in relation to a vast syllabus, lack of adequate training in assessment and difficulty in maintaining a balance between policy guidelines and classroom practices due to lack of proper assessment tools. Implications of the study are discussed and consequently, recommendations for the continuous training and workshops of stakeholders are made.*

Keywords: Assessment practices, perception, stakeholders, teacher training, and mixed method.

1. Introduction

D. William in his article states that our students do not learn what we teach. If our students learned what we taught, we would never need to assess. No matter how carefully we design and implement the instruction, what our students learn cannot be predicted with any certainty without conducting assessment. Hence, assessment works as the connecting link between teaching and learning process. (William, 2013)

In the words of Black and William, assessment enables teachers and students to draw inferences from the information obtained and act accordingly. Such actions may aid in making the necessary improvements to teaching and learning, or simply provide a picture in time of students' competence or achievement (Black and William, 2018).

One of the significant issues in Indian school systems is the effective integration of assessment and teaching-learning. Ours is a country where both the formative and summative methods are used while assessing the students-with a comparatively more weightage given to the summative one. Furthermore, teachers use assessment in schools for a multitude of purposes, many of which are quite contradictory also. There is also a wide variation in the forms and types of assessment used in the Government schools of Sikkim in particular and the whole country in general. Earl (2013) argues that teachers should have a deep understanding of different purposes and functions of assessment practices in order to achieve the right balance of summative and formative assessments.

Though there are number of strategies that may ascertain the integration of assessment and teaching-learning, a strong emphasis on understanding the perception, expertise and practices of teachers and providing a support to the teachers in the form of improvement in policy perspectives, trainings and workshops may go a long way in the Sikkim's scenario. No matter how good the assessment policy is, there might be implementation issues at different levels owing to an ongoing tradition of evaluation, limited professional experience of those with the responsibility to assess, lack of resources to implement assessment policies, lack of awareness on the part of stake holders and the like.

Prior to 2009, the evaluation system in Indian schools-covering grades I through XII-followed the typical pattern of reliance on infrequent, high-stakes exams. Experience in the field has shown how an increased reliance on standardised assessments has led to issues such as teaching to test, a selective teaching and learning strategy as a means to pass public examination, and high reliance on probable questions that is frequently asked in public examination leading to practices that can be referred to as, 'the trick of the trade'-for passing examination (without much emphasis on learning).

Consistent with the latest development in different fields along with the rising pressure to improve students' learning; in line with other countries, assessment practices are changing to embrace assessment 'for' learning, not assessment 'of' learning in our country too.

Furthermore, regarding the assessment practices, several National level commissions and committees had pointed out to the need for improvement. In the light of the above recommendations, CBSE Board have been trying to bring about progressive changes in the assessment practices and

issuing a variety of circulars and guidelines time and again. In this regard, on 20th September, 2009, CBSE issued a circular on Examination Reforms and Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE). According to the circular, the Board exams were made optional from the academic year 2010-11. Recently, on 21st March 2017, CBSE issued a circular on the subject: Uniform System of Assessment, Examination and Report Card. According to the new assessment structure the CCE and term systems have been replaced by the single annual exam by CBSE itself.

Despite the ongoing recommendations of the commissions and emphasis on reforming the evaluation practices, the problems of assessment and learning seemed to have remained perennial due to a wide variation in understanding and implementation process of assessment practices in schools. If we pause for a while and try to analyse the present scenario, it could be understood that there is no 'one' concrete method of assessment which guarantees the desired outcome of educational endeavours-there is always one or other form of shortcomings.

Moreover, stakeholders' cognition research, which primarily focuses on identifying what stakeholders think, know and believe, is crucial to understanding their perception structure as it relates to the learners' progress. Thus, stake holders' perception on assessment constitutes a significant research field not only in order to understand the teachers' beliefs and practices, but also to account for the expectations and needs of others who are equally important in the teaching learning process.

Hence, rather than going through a series of trial-and-error methods, we need to understand what is going on in our schools a little better; and before doing any more experimentation on very significant educational issue of all the time-'the assessment in school education, ' we shall better peep into the school system through the eyes of stake holders.

An extensive review of the related literature has been done in the area of, "Assessment Practices. "

Educational leaders, stakeholders, and teachers can help improve student motivation in the classroom if they involve students in assessment practices (Panesar et al.2017). Alternative assessment is affected by planning time, training, classroom environment, language, and cognitive ability. Assessment provides essential information on learners' learning needs, monitoring of students 'progress and for helping students to structure their learning (Stiggins, 2000). Furthermore, Sewagegn (2019) acknowledges the contribution of effective assessment in making the students proficient in their study area. Therefore, it is stressed that motivation and effective factors should be given importance (Çetin 2011).

A majority of teachers mistakenly assume that they possess sound knowledge of Classroom Assessment based on their own experiences and university coursework (Gullikson, 1984; Wise, Lukin, &Roos, 1991). McMillan & Lawson (2001) notes that there is a wide variation in assessment practices.

Despite the relevance or importance of assessment in the education process, researchers as well as the stakeholders perceive the effectiveness of teachers' role in assessment differently. Sach (2012) found that teachers are less confident than they claim to be in putting actual strategies in place, supporting the findings of Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and William (2002). Ghaicha (2016), notes that assessment is either not well understood, or not done in a principled educational framework, across all educational levels.

While Alotaibi (2019) notes that there are significant perception differences between teachers' groups that mainly attributed to male and female teachers; but Jogan (2019) through the study, 'Assessment for Learning or of Learning: A Perception of Trainees, ' highlighted the perception of trainees towards assessment; revealed that there was no significant difference between the opinion of male and female.

There is a divided view in a number of international studies in relation to teachers training and assessment practices, viz.,-Introducing targeted professional development courses that aim to create innovative assessment practices could contribute to transforming teaching and learning for better student learning (Seden&Svaricek 2018). While, Widiastuti, et al. (2020) notes that teachers' Continuing Professional Development (CPD) participation has no real impact on the success of formative assessment practices, although it might influence teachers' beliefs.

Both National and International research literature shows that teachers' assessment practices have yet to be examined (McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 1999). Further, Johnston, Afflerbach and Weiss (1993) noted the lack of research in this area and, in later studies, McMillan et al. (2002) discusses the same problem.

In the Indian context, it is important to study how teachers assess and grade students as we have been changing examination systems and the curriculums time and again; and also, we need to know how teachers take into account the new guidelines on assessment.

For the past 73 years, the Indian education system has been focusing on varieties of examinations and this has led to nowhere, it seems like we are there only from where we had started. So, it is high time to do extensive research before we move on with another so-called innovation in Examination Reform-'Periodic Assessment'.

From the above observation, it was felt that, though a number of studies have been conducted in the area of Assessment Practices, a lot of gap lies with regard to context, methodologies, variables, sample and sampling techniques used. Additionally, research exploring the Assessment Practices in secondary schools in a vast country like India with an involvement of a good number of stake holders is relatively rare. The current study addresses these issues by examining stake holders' perception on Assessment Practices and also tries to identify policy gaps if any.

In this regard, the researcher would like to try to answer the following queries:

- 1) How do the stakeholders in Sikkim perceive about the Assessment Practices at Secondary School Level with respect to different Assessment aspects, viz.
 - General,
 - Purpose,
 - Use,
 - Domains and
 - Problems and Challenges?
- 2) What are the prevailing Assessment practices in secondary schools of Sikkim with respect to Assessment of
 - Scholastic/Curricular areas,
 - Co-Scholastic areas,
 - Discipline and
 - Reporting process and format?
- 3) What are the problems and challenges in implementation of policies related to assessment at secondary school level in Sikkim?
- 4) What are the initiatives taken by the Education Department, Government of Sikkim towards proper implementation of Assessment practices at secondary school level?
- 5) What is the gap between the theory and practice in proper implementation of policies related to Assessment at secondary school level in Sikkim?

2. Methodology

The present study followed the Sequential Explanatory Mixed Method design (Creswell, 2003) wherein quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed sequentially with quantitative data being collected and analysed first followed by qualitative data. The use of both forms of data allowed the researcher to generalize results from a sample to a population and to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

All the Secondary Schools of Sikkim comprises the target population of the study. There are four districts in Sikkim namely, East, West, North and South; and altogether, there are 121 Secondary schools in four districts of Sikkim. Out of four districts, East and West-districts were accessible population of the study. East is the most developed and West is the district declared as one of the 117 aspirational districts of India (NITI Ayog, 2018) with moderately developed and a few least developed blocks of Sikkim.

Selection of participants occurred in two stages. Initially during the quantitative phase, a total 120 secondary school teachers, 40 SMDC members and 200 students were selected to collect data on their perception of assessment practices. For the purpose, perception assessment Scale (PAS) containing twenty-five questions under five different aspects was administered to the sample. The questionnaire that was used in the quantitative phase served two purposes: one, to act as a rough sieve for selecting a smaller group of respondents to act as participants for interview and FGD; two, to provide a framework for the interviews and FGD. Whilst not deliberately looking for locale, gender, experience, subject and training representativity, the final sample for Interview and FGD consisted of:

- Sixty secondary school teachers (in an average of three teachers from each sampled schools).
- One FGD with students in each school. Each FGD consisted of five students. A total of 20 FGDs were conducted.

Each of these teacher participants were interviewed individually, whereas, the FGD was conducted for students in which questions were formulated from their responses to the questionnaires. Interview and FGDs were typically conducted for clarification or more detail on the data collected through questionnaires. Interviews and FGD were audio recorded and transcribed in full.

The data was collected in the manner reflected in the given figure:

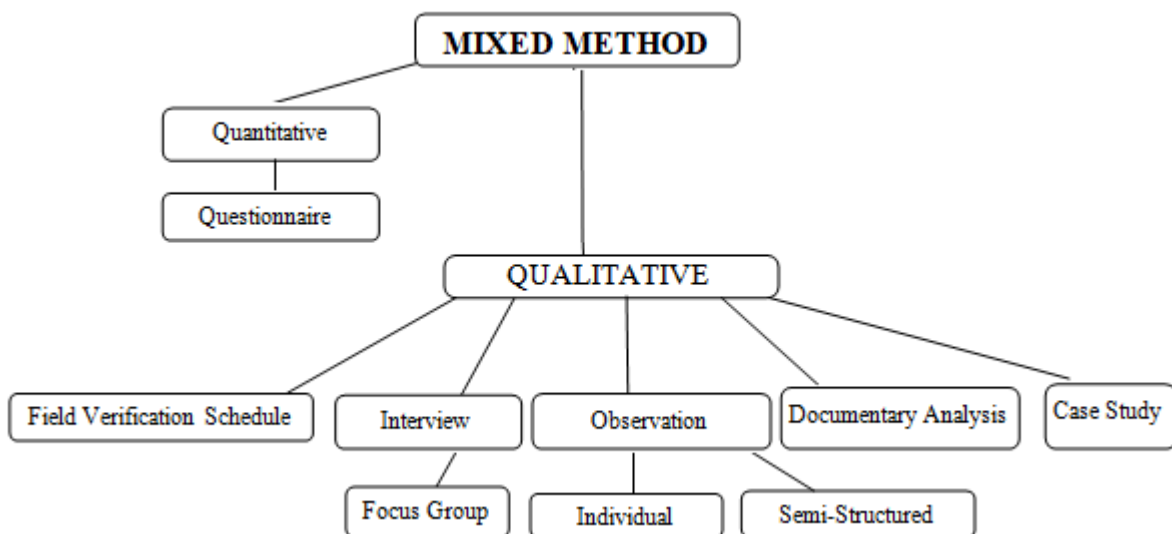


Figure 6: Data Collection Procedure

3. Major Findings, Discussion and Recommendations

In the present study, it was aimed to investigate mainly about the perception of stake holders (Teachers, Students and SMDC members) about the present assessment practices in the Secondary Schools of Sikkim, the prevailing practices of assessment in secondary schools of Sikkim in the light of CBSE guidelines, Policy Gaps if any exists in the Assessment practices at Secondary school level in Sikkim, and the innovative Assessment practices of a few Secondary Schools.

Hence, the major findings and discussion on findings of the study have been categorized under the following headings:

- 1) The perception of stake holders viz., Teachers, Students and SMDC members about the present Assessment practices in the Secondary Schools of Sikkim.
 - 2) The prevailing practices of Assessment in secondary schools of Sikkim in the light of CBSE guidelines.
 - 3) The Policy Gaps if any exists in the Assessment practices at Secondary school level in Sikkim.
- 1) The findings and discussion on perception of stake holders viz., Teachers, Students and SMDC members about the present Assessment practices in the Secondary Schools of Sikkim.

There was certain level of variations found in the quantitative study on how different stakeholders perceive about assessment practices at secondary school level of Sikkim.

- The forward (Urban) and backward (Rural) teachers exhibited overall similar perception about present assessment practices in the secondary schools of Sikkim. Nevertheless, with regard to forward (Urban) and backward (Rural) teachers, the backward (Rural) teachers have exhibited better perception than the forward (Urban) teachers on the *domains* component of assessment practices which might be because of the fact that the rural teachers are more seriously using different forms of assessment practices as compared to the urban teachers as they have to deal with comparatively lesser number of students.

On the other hand, in case of students, the forward (Urban) and backward (Rural) students exhibited similar perception about assessment practices in the secondary school of Sikkim. In addition, although there is no overall significant difference in the overall perception of (Urban) and backward (Rural) students, but there is some difference with regard to their perception on *purpose* component of assessment. The higher mean (20.49) of urban students compared to lower mean (18.08) of rural students indicates that the urban students have comparatively positive perception towards *purpose* aspect of assessment practices which might be because of the fact that the urban students are comparatively more informed by virtue of their urban context.

Furthermore, the forward (Urban) and backward (Rural) schools' SMDCs have exhibited similar perception about

present assessment practices in the secondary school of Sikkim. Whereas, forward (Urban) SMDC members were comparatively more positive and aware about the *problems and challenges* associated with the assessment practices at secondary school level in Sikkim. This could be because of the fact that they are comparatively more informed about the problems and challenges of assessment practices at secondary level schools because of their better exposure in the area.

- The male and female teachers exhibited similar perception about present assessment practices in the secondary school of Sikkim. This finding is similar to that of Jogan (2019) which revealed that there was no significant difference between the opinion of male and female teachers regarding assessment.

Likewise, there was no significant difference in the perception of boys and girl students about *use, domains, problems and challenges* aspects and also the total overall perception in the present assessment practices in the secondary school of Sikkim. In other words, we can say that the boys and girl students have exhibited similar overall perception about present assessment practices in the secondary school of Sikkim.

In the same manner, there was no significant difference in the perception of male and female SMDCs about *general, purpose, use, domains, problems and challenges* aspects and total score in the present assessment practices in the secondary school of Sikkim. In other words, we can say that the male and female SMDCs have exhibited similar overall perception about present assessment practices in the secondary school of Sikkim.

- With regard to science and non-science teachers, there was significant difference in their perception on '*general*' aspect of assessment and overall assessment practices. Further, the perception of the non-science teachers towards assessment practices was better than the science teachers in *general* and overall assessment practices at the secondary level school of Sikkim. This finding could not be corroborated much with previous studies as there were no studies found which have used the exactly same variables in the study of assessment practices. Although there were studies of Mahasneh and Al-Zou'bi (2021) which used the variables of different streams of science teachers for the study and found that mathematics teachers were more aware and positive towards assessment in comparison to science teachers.
- With regard to Trained and Untrained teachers, there was significant difference in their perception about *general, purpose, use, domains and problems and challenges* aspects of assessment practices in the secondary school of Sikkim. In other words, it could be observed that the Trained and Untrained teachers have exhibited dissimilar perception about present assessment practices in the secondary school of Sikkim. Moreover, the higher mean of trained teachers on all the components of assessment practices reveals that trained teachers have relatively more positive perceptions and are more aware of

assessment practices at secondary school level. These findings are similar to those obtained by Alotaibi (2019); Widiastuti et al., (2020) which revealed that there was a significant perception difference between teachers' groups that mainly attributed to teachers who attended training and not attended and the trained teachers were found to have comparatively better perception towards assessment practices.

- With regard to junior and senior teachers, there was a significant difference in their perception about the *general* aspect of assessment practices. Moreover, the perception of the senior teachers on the *general* aspect of assessment practices is significantly better than the junior and very senior teachers. These findings differ from the study of Onalan & Karagul (2018) which observes that neither do participant teachers' undergraduate departments nor do their years of experience had an effect on their assessment preferences. Whereas, the finding of this study is similar to those obtained by Tajeddin et al., (2018) which observed that there was more consistency in the experienced teachers' assessment literacy as compared to the inexperienced or junior ones.
- It was revealed on the basis of the study that the SMDC members with qualification of VIII-X level are comparatively more aware about the assessment practices as compared to the SMDC members with qualification of below class-VIII level; likewise, the SMDC members with the qualification level more than X (ten) are comparatively more positive and aware about the assessment practices at secondary school level as compared to the members with the qualification of below Class X (ten) level. Furthermore, it shows that the SMDC members with the higher qualification level have comparatively larger mean as compared to the members having less qualification level.
- The findings of the quantitative phase were supported to a large extent by the findings of the qualitative phase also. The qualitative data revealed that the secondary schools' teachers (irrespective of the locality and the gender) were not only aware but also having similar and positive perception towards the *general*, *purpose* and *use* aspects of assessment practices at secondary school level. However, the majority of the teachers had little emphasis on the formative side of assessment and some were found to be using limited means of assessment; they were often concerned about the achievement part that occurs at the end. Which suggested that their perception and awareness level was not adequately similar with regard to different domains of assessment.
- Likewise, in the quantitative phase, it was found that the perception of teachers was similar with regard to the *problems and suggestions* aspect and in the qualitative phase, it was further revealed that the teachers were univocal regarding an issue of syllabus coverage; and at some of the schools, teachers complained about lower teacher-pupil ratio. This particular revelation is congruent to the findings of Hayford (2007); Reema (2017) in which the teachers identified policy, larger

classes and lack of training as barriers to supporting lower attainers to improve through assessment. The teachers also complained that many a times centrally prepared questions do not focus on learning outcomes and does not match with the purpose with which the lesson is actually planned and presented, most of the teachers shared that they often face difficulty in assessing heterogenous group of students. In contrast, one senior male teacher from an urban school shared, "Art integration, guardian-teacher concept and buddy help always helps in dealing with the heterogeneity in the class rooms."

- Moreover, the findings of the qualitative study on students' perception on assessment practices revealed that their overall perception was similar about the assessment practices irrespective of locale and gender. Whereas, there were some differences in their awareness on *purpose* aspect of assessment practices among the rural and urban students; moreover, the urban students were found relatively more aware towards the *purpose* aspect of assessment practices. Under the *problems and challenges* aspect of assessment practices, examination phobia, specifically towards the result component was found. Moreover, some concerns raised by the students reflected that their views were divided regarding the gap between the teacher and students when it comes to have a friendly environment in the classroom, as only a few students interpreted teachers' push and enforcement in a positive way.

4. Conclusion on Responses of stakeholders

When comparing the perceptions of these teachers, students and the members of SMDC, it was found that both the students and teachers had a better recognition of general, purposes and use of assessment. Furthermore, they were aware of the problems and challenges associated with the assessment practices at secondary school level in Sikkim. Whereas, the members of SMDC were found to be differing in their perception towards the various aspects of assessment practices with regard to their locality and qualification level.

Findings of the present study differed from the study of Tong & Adamson (2015) which revealed that the general view of the students on the assessment practices was notably negative. On the other hand, the findings of the present study are congruent with the study of Ozan (2018); Mussawy (2021) which suggested that the general view of the students on the assessment practices was notably positive.

Some level of disagreement existed among the students as well as the teachers in terms of the *general* aspect of the assessment which caters to knowledge and knowhow regarding scope of assessment: some viewed assessment encompassing all activities during the semester, while a few viewed it as a small segment of an exam, which implies that not all the teachers had been exposed to the concept of assessment similarly and the same goes with the students as well.

Additionally, both the students and the teachers had some or other forms of problems associated with the assessment practices.

1) The findings and discussion on prevailing practices of Assessment in secondary schools of Sikkim in the light of CBSE guidelines

Prevailing assessment practices in secondary schools of Sikkim with respect to Assessment of Scholastic areas, Co-Scholastic areas, Discipline and Reporting process and format could be discussed as under:

a) Scholastic areas: Secondary schools were found to be conducting periodic test, notebook submission and subject enrichment activity as guided and prescribed by the CBSE. Though there were a certain level of dissimilarities with regard to assigning of marks to each form of periodic test, the schools were quite serious in helping their students to prepare better for the annual examination. For instance, one school head of a secondary school noted, *“Periodic test will help our teachers to know about the students’ learning progress all through the year.”* Regarding notebook submission, the teachers in sampled schools praised the initiative of Board to be helpful in inculcating the qualities of regularity, punctuality and neatness among the students at secondary school level. With regard to Subject Enrichment Activity, a few school heads were very frank to admit that their teachers relied mostly on pen-paper test or Summative assessments. For example, one urban school head mentioned, *“Some of our teachers rely on the weekly test and term end exams mostly because they believe that it helps the students who do not study the lessons daily but during the exam time only”*. This particular observation was in congruence with Ragchaa (2019) who argued that the teachers preferred to prepare students for the assessment by making them practice the test items that are similar to the school achievement test items during classes.

The researcher could note that in many schools, there were charts prepared by the students which had map work, autobiography etc. But it was disheartening to see that in many of the schools those projects submitted by the students were just lying in one corner of the office or the staff room. However, it could be assessed from the most of the school heads response that although differences were there among the teachers with regard to the ways they conduct their assessments but most of them conduct scholastic activities quite seriously and follow the CBSE guidelines while assessing the students at least at the secondary level. The findings were congruent with McMillan & Lawson (2001) who noted that there was a wide variation in assessment practices. The teachers use a "hodgepodge" of factors when assessing and grading students (McMillan & Lawson 2001). Which is supported by the suggestion that the professional educational assessment programs for teachers should be continued and tailored to the needs and nature of the teachers' classroom realities” (Alkharusi et al., 2014).

Assessment in the Context of Teaching: Investigating Teachers’ Perceptions of Assessment Practices that Enhance the Learning Process

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b) Co-Scholastic areas: Co-Scholastic areas were found to be addressed through three broad means as guided and prescribed by the CBSE, viz., Art Education, Work Experience, Health and Physical Education.

Most of the schools had started Art Education from the session 2019-2020 but there were variations in the ways of conducting the same. For instance, some schools were found to be encouraging their students to do projects based on different art forms of our country. In contrast, some school heads mentioned that they were unable to include Art Education effectively for they had shortage of staff and other infrastructural facilities. So, it could be understood that although it was not being implemented to the extent it was expected owing to the lack of manpower and infrastructure in many of the schools, but there were schools which had an understanding of the purpose of Art education and was being fulfilled to a large extent in Sikkim.

When enquired about the work experience, it was revealed that it was no more practiced separately as a co-scholastic activity but it was clubbed under the Health and Physical Education for assessment purpose.

Health and Physical Education was being conducted by all the schools all through the year. Further, it was revealed that the students were graded for the performance they show in games and sports all through the year. But variations could be observed as per the statement of different school heads viz., some of them shared that their students were graded for team-spirit, commitment and honest effort towards health and hygiene; they conduct games and sports under house activities and ultimately grades are assigned to the participating students as per their performance and attitude towards games and sports. Contrary to this, a senior female headmistress from a school said that their teachers sometimes grade their students on face value only, she insisted, *“They do not conduct much of the co-scholastic activities all through the year but just assign a grade at the time of tabulation of grades.”* She claimed, *“Such an action increases mistrust between students and teachers.”*

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that majority of the schools were found to be promoting co-scholastic activities for the holistic development of the student. But in contrast, the current practices of assessment seemed dissatisfying for some school heads given the dominance of traditional forms, assessing students at the end of the semester. Using assessment at the end of the semester leaves an instructor very little chance to use the assessment results to improve instruction and students’ learning. Conversely, in case of some other schools, application of project and other forms of co-scholastic activities that required students to perform an outside activity and then present them in their classes revealed to be not possible given the context, populated classes and teachers being responsible to teach various

subjects. In many of these schools, the least used assessment methods were peer and group assessments, and self-assessments. This finding is in agreement with the findings of research conducted by Celikkaya, Karakuş and Öztürk-Demirbaş (2010), Duban and Küçükyılmaz (2008), Gelbal and Kelecioğlu (2007).

c) Discipline: With regard to disciplinary aspect of assessment, it was found in verification that usually the class teachers grade the students on a Five-point scale (A to E) keeping in view the overall attendance, sincerity, values and behavior of their students all through the year. Moreover, it was also found that there were some schools which have developed an innovative method of assessment like-forming committee for carrying out of discipline and other co-scholastic assessment practices effectively. For instance, as enquired about the way they assess students' discipline, one female school head shared, *"At our school, we believe that discipline significantly impacts career shaping and it helps build character. She further added, "It helps us to deal with disciplinary issues of the students very effectively because they behave well when they know that they shall be graded for their behaviour also."*

d) Reporting process and format: In many schools, it was revealed that they make use of their teachers' diary for keeping record of class room assessments; which they ultimately compile and refer while assigning grades for the reporting purpose. The researcher could see from the documentary record of the schools that all the schools in Sikkim follow the Report Card format prescribed by CBSE very strictly. All the schools were following the same report card at least for standard IXth and Xth. Moreover, the proper implementation of the assessment practices was better where the school heads were adequately trained for the same.

The school heads' responses varied based on their context and availability of sufficient teachers or student-teacher ratio. There were no differences found in relation to the gender of the school heads or the practicing teachers with regard to the assessment practices at secondary school level in Sikkim but the exposure of the school heads and teachers by means of trainings and workshops had a great deal of impact on their practices. There was a very serious concern raised by all the school heads that due to the filling up of formats all the time, they do not get any time to look after the academic activities of the school. This implies that the continuation of the traditional forms at many of our schools stems not only from the lack of exposure to the new forms of assessment, but also from certain level of systemic failure. Moreover, when schools did not have high levels of assessment knowledge, the effectiveness and usefulness of their assessment practices was affected. This resulted in teachers investing a great deal of time and resources into assessment activities that were not useful in diagnosing students' learning needs, informing their learning or improving teaching plan.

2) The findings and discussion on Policy Gaps if any exists in the Assessment practices at Secondary school level in Sikkim.

The discussion on Policy Gaps was focused on the findings under three broad categories:

- a) Documentary analysis,
- b) Expert Judgement/opinion and
- c) Analysis of the Information collected through Field Verification schedule.

a) Documentary analysis

- In detail analysis of CBSE circulars and guidelines it could be observed that the Board have been issuing one after other guidelines pertaining to different policies on assessment. Although, the motive behind was to impart robust, vibrant and holistic school education but none of the policies or ideas were given sufficient time to be implemented and monitored properly. Such a practice of trial-and-error leads to confusion to those who are at the field (schools) and also to those who are entrusted with the monitoring of proper implementation of the policy (system level functionaries). The trend shows that there is frequent change of directions and guidelines for assessment methods as per the above illustrated circulars, no matter how good the Board's intentions were but it leads to a situation of confusion if it continues with its trial-and-error methods. The findings are in agreement with the findings of Khandelwal (2002) which suggests for the immediate need to equip schools with the necessary tools and capacity and provide a reasonable degree of autonomy to enable them to carry out schooling and evaluation activities effectively. It has reflected the growing concern in India at an alarming rate regarding examination reforms.
- In the study, it was revealed that the Education Department Government of Sikkim has been issuing the required guidelines from time to time for the implementation of assessment practices at schools of Sikkim. Moreover, the Department concerned has been issuing the guidelines for required qualification and training as per NCTE norms for the post of teacher. (Source: Notification No.110/Est (1) /HRDD, dated 5th Aug., 2010).
- Reports of Education Department, Government of Sikkim states that the Department of Education in Sikkim along with Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education pays close attention to the quality of education in the state. Also, the Government has accorded highest priority to the education sector by providing an outlay of almost 20% of the State's budget. As per flash statistics released by Smt. Smriti Irani, Hon'ble Union HRD Minister for the year 2013-14, Sikkim has stood 3rd in the national ranking on elementary education. As per the data on the official website of NitiAyog, the dropout rate of children in Sikkim state in the year 2008-2009 was 4.46 whereas the rate increased next year and became 7.11. Later in 2011, the rate improved and came down to 4.34" (Source – NITI Aayog). The findings suggests that the education department is committed towards better education in the state of Sikkim. But it seems that there is a lack of orientation and workshops conducted as

required before implementation of any forms of the examination reforms.

- Many schools make use of their teachers' diary for keeping record of class room assessments; which they ultimately compile and refer while assigning grades for the reporting purpose. In some of the schools, the records pertaining to the internal assessment of the students was maintained by a teacher dealing with the CBSE matters. Whereas in many of the schools, there was no proper format for maintaining all types of assessment records but they make use of the format that is prescribed by the CBSE for the final reporting of the term end exam only.

The researcher could see from the documentary record of the schools that all the schools in Sikkim follow the Report Card format prescribed by CBSE very strictly. All the schools were following the same report card at least for standard IXth and Xth. The records at schools reveals that the gap in the assessment practices emerges from the lack of exposure to the new forms of assessment. Moreover, when schools were headed by an efficient school head, they could achieve the assessment goals to a large extent.

b) Experts' Opinion

For the purpose of study, insights were gathered from three experts viz., Expert-1, the Joint Director SAMAGRA SIKSHA shared that the Department initiates a number of activities in the line of school education. Expert-2, the Principal DIET shared, "As per the roles envisaged for DIETs and SCERT, the Institutes carry out the programmes and activities under the following components: 1. Pre-Service Teacher Education 2. In-Service Teacher Education 3. On-Site support to schools 4. Research Works 5. Faculty Development. And lastly the Faculty Expert-Faculty at SCERT shared that they facilitate various research works as a part of academic activities of the Institute.

It is worth discussing that the research studies related to school and teacher education enables the Institutes to conduct research oriented/based academic interventions. As per the present study, SCERT regularly conducts various academic programmes and activities for professional development of in-service teachers and teacher educators of the state. In addition to capacity building training and workshop programs, SCERT also conducted the second phase of self-assessment programme for teachers called PINDICS for the professional development of the teachers. The tool developed for this purpose by NCERT was contextualized for the state of Sikkim during the first phase and was administered through Block Resource Centre (BRC) Coordinators. On top of all these, SCERT being the State leadership Academy of the state, it has been conducting "A One Month Certificate Course on School Leadership and Management." But it came to the notice of the researcher that the Certificate Course on School Leadership and Management was not conducted for quite some time may be because of the pandemic owing to covid-19 or some other reasons.

c) Discussion on the Information collected through Field Verification Schedule.

As per the affiliation guidelines of the Board, there shall be certain minimum facilities available at secondary schools for

fulfilling the criteria of affiliation in particular and achievement of educational objectives in general. Moreover, for the proper implementation of the assessment activities at the secondary level, the following aspects are considered to be necessary:

- Sufficient Infrastructure.
- Technological support.
- Quality and Competence of teachers.
- Learning Outcomes.

Sufficient Infrastructure: In all the sampled Secondary schools of Sikkim, separate toilets for boys and girls were available, safe drinking water facility was available, the playgrounds were available whereas, the number of toilet-units, permanent plumbing for water supply and adequate size of the playgrounds were yet to be addressed in priority. In most of the sampled Secondary schools of Sikkim, at least one or two school buildings or toilet units were not disabled friendly. It was revealed that the old structures were not built as per the norm but all the new buildings under RMSA or SAMAGRA were equipped with the disabled friendly facilities.

Technological support: It was found that classroom-based technologies have improved the classroom experience by introducing smart classroom concept and K-YAN which stands for knowledge Yantra-a feature rich EdTech device which is nationally awarded and internationally acclaimed by learning communities.

In short, with the introduction of the concept of 'Smart Classroom,' teachers have been bestowed with the user-friendly facility to design, create and contextualize the lessons; make in-class assessments interactive and fun and integrate online and offline learning seamlessly to achieve desired learning outcomes. The new technological intervention has led to increasing engagement. The classrooms are now livelier and more interactive. The State Government is also emphasizing on e-learning to be introduced in schools across the state. But it could be observed during qualitative study phase that these technologies were not being used to its optimum level. As enquired about the matter, it was revealed that there was shortage of trained faculty to handle these gadgets or there was no separate room to install the same because of which only the class where it was fitted was benefitted of the technology; moreover, at some of the schools, there was severe network failure.

Quality and Competence of teachers: It is not a rocket-science to understand that individuals with aptitude and interest towards teaching learning can be molded into good teachers through the well-organized trainings and workshops. In Sikkim, in order to ensure that by the year 2015 all the state Govt. schools would have trained teachers, all the professionally untrained teachers of Sikkim were directed to enroll themselves by the year 2013 in teachers' training institutions vide Notification No.01/HRDD/HQ, dated 23/02/2012.

But still there are a large number of teachers who did not undergo the professional courses like B. Ed. or D. El. Ed. as there was a circular issued stating that the teachers appointed

before 3rd September 2001 were exempted (Notification No.154/SPO/SSA/HRDD, dated 9th Sep., 2017). For the good quality of education of which the assessment is an integral part, quality and competence of teachers is most significant. Only if there are well trained and adequately informed teachers with a know-how of latest trend in the field of education, they can do justice to the teaching profession.

Learning Outcomes: The biggest gap assumed so far is the impact on quality of learning outcomes. The educational stakeholders believe that “Even after the massive effort put in by students, parents and teachers the pass rate and improvement in performance of students are at an all-time low.” Education is not a one size fits all approach. The real impact of assessment practices needs to be measured in terms of the impact on learning on an individual.

It was revealed from the study that the quality has not gone down that much as assumed to be by the concerned gentries. For instance, in the past if there were twenty students in a class and only half of the students were promoted to the next higher grade, and if a survey is conducted on those students, then it could be assumed that all of them perform quite well. In the next situation wherein all twenty students were promoted to the next higher grade and a survey is conducted on them, then it could be assumed that only fifty percent students perform well. Here, one needs to understand that the total number of students performing well is still ten in both of the cases; whereas, in the second case the result might seem to be comparatively poor owing to the large number of students taking part in the said survey. Hence, it would be too early to reach to a conclusion regarding the quality of learning outcomes.

However, the non-achieving of the expected outcomes in the field of education is to a large extent because of the frequent changes that Board have been trying to bring in assessment practices since quite a long time. This particular finding is in conformity with the findings of Sreekanth (2017) which observes that for the sake of Examination Reforms, though CBSE makes extensive reference to NCF 2005 in its manual, its scheme of CCE contradicts with the philosophy of that framework. The researcher observes that the differences in policy framework and implementation procedure have created confusion.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the present study, it is recommended that:

- Teacher Education Institutions like SCERT, DIETs and B. Ed. /M. Ed. Colleges should periodically organise refresher courses on new trends in assessment to maintain the knowledge base and sharpen the skills of the teachers in assessment practices.
- Teachers shall carry out effective assessment in the classrooms and outside for which they must come out of their comfort zone wherein many of them resort to use only those assessment practices which they are familiar with.

- Teachers shall be able to use multiple assessment tools to assess the learners’ progress so that there is correct and comprehensive interpretation about the learners.
- Curriculum shall be redesigned so that it can accommodate the innovative practices in assessment.
- A new notion, ‘Less can also be the best’ shall be adopted while designing the curriculum, while assigning the work load and determining the instructional hours for the teachers so that they could invest their time to innovate and explore new ideas for better performing as educators of 21st century.
- There shall be a central data base at Education Headquarter which encourages real time updating of information required by the concerned agencies.

6. Conclusion

The missing connection between theory and practice of teacher education, lack of seriousness for in-service trainings and need of well oriented school heads and teachers, innovative practices and coverage of syllabus in schools, examination-oriented teaching learning and good classroom practices in Government Secondary schools are some prominent barriers to facilitating the effective assessment practices required to achieve desired educational goals of the 21st century. The gap can however be covered if teaching-learning and assessment, are brought into better alignment with the requirement of the educational needs of the present society. But still there are issues like-engagement of school heads and teachers (especially from Government schools) in implementation of various inter and intra departmental projects which incurs a lot of valuable time which could be better utilized for the teaching-learning activities. Also, they are occupied with the filling up of formats and providing data on various factors of schools on almost every day basis. It was a great relief to observe that West district of Sikkim have recently initiated a centralized data base system in the name of education management and monitoring of information system (EMMIS) which is really an innovation in the field of data management system. This system is believed to reduce the work load of school heads and teachers to almost 20 percent with regard to filling up of format or providing data on school matters. Such an innovation is the need of the hour for we cannot afford to lose our precious time in data handling only, rather the maximum of the energy of the educational stakeholders shall be utilized for educational purposes towards achieving larger educational goals.

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