

**The Assessment System Reform of the School Leaving Certificate Exam in Nepal:
A Grounded Theory of the Reform Process**

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents multiple facets of the assessment system reform of the **School Leaving Certificate (SLC)** exam in Nepal through grounded theory methodology. The main purpose of this study is to develop a substantive grounded theory of the reform that explicates a complete process of the assessment reform, i.e., how this reform was conceptualized, what was done as a foundational preparation, how it was implemented, and what were the preliminary responses to the reform implementation. In order to theorize the reform process, this study applied a constructivist grounded theory approach, specifically based on the work of Charmaz (1996, 2005, 2006, 2012), as the research methodology. The data were collected by conducting 10 focus group discussions and 24 one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The participants represented almost all the categories of stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, employers, teachers, students) as well as experts and educators. The emergent conceptual categories and sub-categories from the interviews and focus group discussions were categorized under three constructs: (1) Conceptualization of the reform, (2) implementation of the reform and (3) reform effects.

The first construct covers those theme categories and sub-categories that state the origin and type of the reform, reform aims, and framework as well as preparation for the reform. Similarly, the second construct includes those theme categories and sub-categories that inform the mechanism underpinning reform related information dissemination, the strategic plan used to implement the reform and factors that could influence the reform process. Finally, the third construct comprises those categories that discuss reform associated quandaries and condemnation, factors contributing to magnifying the quandaries, resultant opportunities from the reform, reform impact, step forward, and other relevant categories.

The findings have been explicated under three phases- the pre-implementation phase, the implementation phase and the post-implementation phase as the integrated grounded theory. The theoretical components presented under the pre-implementation phase include exhaustive analysis of need and feasibility; input from experts, educators and key stakeholders; clarity on reform aims and objectives; cooperative triangular relationships; comprehensive documentation; explicit roadmap and exhaustive planning; infrastructure and resource management, and capacity building. Similarly, three major theoretical components- teacher advocacy, stakeholder ownership, and timely and authentic information have been described under the implementation

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phase. Finally, eight major theoretical components, such as identification and analysis of resulting issues, immediate actions for the urgent/sensitive issues, special programs for the low-grade holders, bridge between academic and vocational programs, need for impact analysis, effective communication channel, need for institutional memory, need for an unconventional assessment system, and need for a resourceful unit of assessment and testing have been presented under the post-implementation phase. The combination of the theoretical components described under the three phases mentioned above is the integrated substantive grounded theory of the assessment system reform in Nepal.

This study contributes by adding value for those involved in assessment reform as well as the academicians and researchers because it puts forward recommendations for foundational preparation and homework in the conceptual phase of assessment reform; action steps to minimize the possible resistance to reform; strategies to implement the reform successfully; and initiatives to institutionalize the reform or address the resulting issues and concerns.

Keywords: High-stakes exam, Assessment reform, Grounded theory study, School Leaving Certificate exam

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This dissertation, which explicates the conceptualization of the assessment reform of the SLC exam, associated foundational preparation, the implementation process, and the preliminary responses of the implementation of the reform; attempts to theorize a complete process of high-stakes assessment reform. What I must acknowledge here in this section is that this massive project would not have been successfully completed without the guidance, assistance, cooperation and encouragement and emotional support from the valued and kind people.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Terms	Abbreviation
Adequate Yearly Progress	AYP
Curriculum Development Centre	CDC
Common Tasks for Assessment	CTA
District Education Office	DEO
Department of Education	DOE
Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training	CTEVT
Education Review Office	ERO
Grade Point Average	GPA
Higher Secondary Schools' Association Nepal	HISSAN
Higher Secondary Education Board	HSEB
Institutional School Teachers' Union	ISTU
Letter Grading Working Procedure	LGWP
Ministry of Education	MOE
National Assessment of Student Achievement	NASA
National College Entrance Exam	NCEE
National Curriculum Framework for School Education	NCFSE
No Child Left Behind	NCLB
National Examination Board	NEB
National Health Sector Support Program	NHSSP
Nepal National Teachers' Association	NNTA
Nepal National Teachers' Council	NNTC
National Private and Boarding Schools Association of Nepal	N-PABSON
Nepal Revolutionary Teachers' Association	NRTA
Nepal Teachers' Association	NTA
Nepal Teachers' Forum	NTF
Office of the Controller of Examination	OCE
Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test	OSSLT
Private and Boarding Schools' Organization Nepal	PABSON
Public Service Commission	PSC
Program for International Student Assessment	PISA
Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software	CAQDAS
Regional Education Directorate	RED
South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation	SAARC
South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization	SEAMEO
School Leaving Certificate	SLC
School Sector Reform Plan	SSRP
Teachers' Union of Nepal	TUN

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CHAPTER ONE: REFORM CONTEXT AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

The main purpose of this study is to explicate the process of the assessment system reform as regards the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam in Nepal via a grounded theory study. Before presenting the details of the research context, which is presented in the following section (see *Context of this Study*), the paper details Chapter one, which introduces the global assessment reform.

A GLANCE ON GLOBAL ASSESSMENT REFORM

With the rapid technological advances, the increasing level of human knowledge and the evolving perspective of human beings, numerous reforms and innovations have been evidenced in assessment and testing systems around the world. Since high-stakes tests without supportive environments can harm learning (Black, 1998; Stiggins, 2004 & Wiliam, 2006), a widespread call for new ways has been raised to evaluate assessment. As Berry (2011) notes, "Over the last few decades, there have been waves of assessment reforms around the world (p. 89)." This chapter begins with a brief discussion on reason or driving force underpinning the educational and assessment reform.

Driving Force for Assessment Reform

Masters (2013) has presented mainly four types of pressures that influence the stakeholders to reform assessment system around the world. First, several important decisions, such as pass-fail, selection, promotion, categorization, and more are made based on the information collected from the assessments. In addition, the 21st-century population is seeking better and reliable evidence to make informed decisions that may impact their lives directly or indirectly. This notion of the *need of better information for decision-making* is, in turn, creating a pressure on stakeholders to seek better means of assessments. Correspondingly, the demand or anticipation of a better means of assessment for the purpose of decision making is one of the strong motivations underpinning the assessment reform.

Second, *technology*, which has brought a revolution in the assessment systems, is another strong force for assessment reform. Technology increasingly makes paper and pencil tests and examinations unnecessary in addition to saving time, money and human resources. Moreover, the associated advancement has made the assessment system easier and accessible from any part of the world. The advances in technology has pressured the governments and institutions around the world to reform the existing old model assessment systems to meet the demands of changes.

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Third, although individual learners of the same age are at different levels regarding knowledge and rate of progress, almost all learners present the capability of further learning progress if motivated to learn and if provided with appropriate learning opportunities with respect to their current levels of progress and learning needs (Masters, 2013). In concurrence, experts and educators argue that the traditional assessment systems, which are characterized as "one size fits all" cannot assess individual learner's idiosyncratic learning profile/ability. Furthermore, the *evolving understanding of human learning*, which defines learning from a learner's perspective, is another pressure for assessment reform.

Fourth, several of the traditional assessment systems (e.g., a single paper and pencil-based summative assessment) have faced criticism that these systems fail to assess students' multi-talents, skills, and attributes. Congruently, there is pressure on stakeholders and schools to develop such assessment systems that could evaluate a wider range of life skills and attributes of test-takers. The emerging *notion of assessments of student's multiple talents, expertise and attributes* constitute another convincing motivation pushing the assessment reform.

In addition to these significant and widely shared drivers of assessment reforms, as mentioned above, other possible drivers can be associated with social values, topography, education culture, country or context specific. Irrespective of the driving force for the assessment reforms, educators have argued that if the educational institutions are to take a leap to the enhancement of student learning, the existing traditional assessment systems necessitate undergoing a reform (Black & William, 2005, 2009).

Global Assessment Reform Trend

The extant literature suggests that the reform from the assessment of learning to assessment for learning (details presented below) is predominant around the world, thus indicating the progression of the wave of assessment system reform. In concurrence, Berry (2011) states:

There have been a number of reforms ranging from a total abolition of high stakes testing in some education systems to attempts to strike a balance between classroom and large-scale assessment in a synergistic system. Common to all these visions is the notion of assessment as a positive tool for learning and an interconnected part of teaching and learning (p. 89).

The indented quote above, specifically, the last sentence evidences the waves of

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assessment reforms, especially from a high-stakes summative assessment system (assessment of learning) to a formative assessment (assessment for learning) in a number of countries around the world.

Although the flow of assessment reform demonstrates a transition from summative to formative assessment as stated above, in the recent years, the voice of supporters of the abolition of high-stakes tests, low-stakes tests or alternative to high-stakes summative and formative assessment has been stronger in academia. These notions have resulted in several research studies and public debates on advantages and disadvantages of high-stakes assessment and testing on stakeholders, curriculum, and the entire education system. Resultantly, few empirical studies (Collins, Reiss & Gordon, 2010; Aho, Pitkänen & Sahlberg, 2006) have focused on the total abolition of the high-stakes assessment system, and have mainly, explored the effectiveness of the reform including short-term and long-term consequences of the reform on stakeholders, curricula and education systems.

Nepal in the Global Assessment Reform Movement

Nepal's educational authority and school system. Nepal, which is officially called the "Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal", is a landlocked country situated in South Asia between China and India. It is bounded on the East, South, and West by India and on the North by China. It is 800 kilometers long and 200 kilometers wide (in average) with an area of 147,181 km². It has a population of about 27.8 million. It is spread into three geological zones/regions: Mountains, Hills, and Terai (Plain). An estimated 15% of the land of Nepal is covered with high mountains, including the highest peak of the world, i.e., Mt. Everest, where cold weather conditions have made life more difficult than other regions. On the other hand, 68% of the land of Nepal is covered with Hills, and the remaining 17% of the land is covered with Terai (Plain). Nepal is a country of enormous diversity in terms of language, culture, and religion. According to the National census 2011, 123 languages are spoken as mother tongue in the country. Hinduism (81-87%), Buddhism (5-7%), Islam (2-3%) and Christianity (2-3%) are the main religions in Nepal (National census, 2011).

The Ministry of Education (MOE) is the supreme authority in Nepal with respect to education, which initiates all the educational activities across the country. Moreover, different bureaus/agencies, such as the Department of Education, the National Examination Board (recently formed by combining the Office of the Controller of Examination and Higher

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Secondary Education Board), the University Service Commission, the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), and the Education Review Office (ERO) have been formed under the direct supervision of the MOE. The bureaus/agencies and their functions are briefly described in Chapter 3 along with the description of recruitment of study participants.

There are mainly three types of schools in Nepal, which include (i) Government/public school, (ii) Technical school and (iii) Private/institutional school. Interestingly, the students of both the public as well as the private schools write the same questions in the SLC exam. Similar to the public school, a separate line of Sanskrit education system also exists in Nepal from school to university level. However, very few students enroll in the Sanskrit stream. In addition to the Sanskrit school, other religious educational institutions, such as Madrasa, Gumba, and others, are also evident in the educational construct. But these have not been developed in the same capacity as the mainstream schools at the secondary level. Both the public and Sanskrit schools are government-funded whereas private schools are privately funded. Moreover, the technical and vocational schools are run by both the government and private sector.

In June 2016, the Parliament of Nepal endorsed the eighth amendment to the Education Act-1972, which proposed a reform in the existing structure of school education, for implementation. The amendment was made based on the recommendations of the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP-2009-2015). According to the reformed structure of school education, in addition to the pre-primary level, the school education has been divided into two levels: Basic (Grades 1 -8) and secondary (Grades 9-12). Both, the existing (at the time of data collection- as of 2016) and the newly reformed school systems in Nepal are shown below (Figure 1).

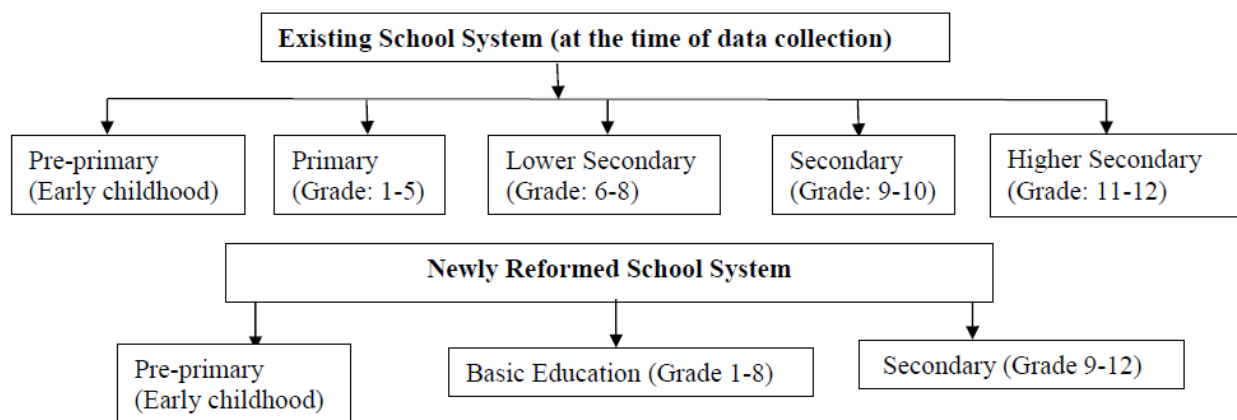


Figure 1. Comparison of the structure of school education in Nepal before and after the reform

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Although the government of Nepal had planned to fully implement the proposed School Sector Reform Plan by 2015, it could not be fully implemented until 2016, attributing to the lack of infrastructure, budgetary issues, and insufficient human resources.

Education and assessment reforms in Nepal. As most educational and curriculum reforms affect the existing assessment system, it is noteworthy to explain the assessment reform coupling with the educational reform. The following section provides a brief description of both the educational and assessment reform in Nepal.

The educational history of Nepal is not very long as Nepal was ruled by the Rana oligarchy of Nepal for 104 years, and during the rule, the door of education was closed to the ordinary people. It was limited to the Rana and the royal family and a handful of elites until the 1950s. The formal and modern education system in Nepal started only in the mid-nineties after a massive political surge (Caddell, 2007). Describing the modern education system in Nepal, Mathema (2007) states:

The modern education system in Nepal is one of the youngest in the world. In 1951, after the fall of the 104-year rule Rana oligarchy in Nepal, there were only 9,000 pupils in primary, 1,700 in secondary schools and a little over one hundred in two undergraduate colleges. The adult literacy stood at a bare 5% (p. 46).

According to this excerpt, the history of modern education along with the history of systematic assessment and testing in Nepal is very short. Since the commencement of the modern education system and systematic assessment system, the educational institutions in Nepal have evidenced the use of a traditional high-stakes summative assessment system from the elementary school to university level (MOE, Nepal, 2015). In all the schools (i.e., public, technical and Sanskrit, and private school system), a high-stakes testing system exists in every grade level from elementary level to the school end year, wherein the students must pass every grade level exams/tests to get promoted to the next level. This implies that almost every grade level test/exam is a mandatory requirement for a promotion to the next grade, in Nepal. As these exams/tests are high-stakes, students start to experience exam-driven pressure/stress from their early school life. However, starting from the academic year 2016, attempts have been made to loosen the high-stakes assessment system in Grade 10 (discussed in detail in the following sections).

Since 1950, Nepal has passed through different major political crises, which compelled

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the curriculum reform to be mandatory, especially based on the political system and its ideology (not based on the global needs and demands) in different periods. Correspondingly, evaluating this curricular change in each political shift, Caddell (2007) states that each shift in the political regime has been followed by a revision of the education system. This transition, he attributed to the incoming regime's attempt to reinforce its vision of the Nepali nation-state by re-articulating the relationship between the state, schools and the people.

In 1950, the existing school curriculum was reformed after the overthrow of the Rana oligarchy, which marked the end of Rana regime, and the establishment of a multiparty democracy system within the framework of a constitutional monarchy. The curriculum was reformed based on the norms and values of the changed political situation, which, in fact, manifested the first complete reform of curriculum. As time went on, when the King disbanded the multiparty democracy system in a royal coup in 1960, the King became the supreme authority of the nation, and again, the school curriculum was reformed based on the monarchy and its ideology. This was the second political surge, which induced changes in the existing curricular system. The third political surge, which again prompted the curriculum reform, took place in 1990 with the restoration of a multiparty democracy within the framework of a constitutional monarchy. After this movement the curriculum was reformed for the third time, incorporating the values and norms of democracy. Also, the fourth, but the greatest political surge was the abolishment of the monarchy. In 2008, the newly formed constituent assembly declared Nepal a federal democratic republic and abolished the monarchy at its first meeting. This movement brought a revolution in the education sector along with other major changes. After this giant movement in 2009, a school sector reform committee under the coordination of the MOE was formed to restructure the existing school education system. The committee was chaired by the former Vice Chancellor of Tribhuvan University, Professor Dr. Kedar Bhakta Mathema. The committee prepared a structural framework for school education, which is known by the name of "School Sector Reform Plan (2009-2015)". This committee impacted the restructuring of the school education as presented in Figure 1.

Along with the enormous political changes, the existing curricula of school education in Nepal has been reformed several times. However, the high-stakes assessment system of school education, which has been practiced for decades, was not reformed until 2015, except for some minor and structural changes. These changes included the exam's marking scheme, the process of

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test administration, the decentralization of authority (from central to local), question patterns, the pass mark, full marks, question types, etc. (MOE, Nepal). This, thus indicates that no significant or drastic changes (i.e., entire assessment reform) have been made in the assessment and testing system since its establishment until 2015. Also, the dearth of academic exploration is evident with rare articles, documents, and studies (if any) pertaining to a possible assessment reform of the School Leaving Certificate exam before 2015. To conclude, a high-stakes assessment system commenced with the advent of the modern education era in 1951, which subsequently presents a predominant use throughout the country.

Recently, in 2015, the MOE of Nepal decided to reform the assessment system of the School Leaving Certificate exam by introducing fundamental changes in its reporting system. This reform, which constitutes the focus of this study, is one of the major reforms in the history of Nepal pertaining to the assessment and testing field. The details of this reform are presented in the following sections (see *Reform Context*).

A brief history of School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam of Nepal. As the principal focus of this study is the assessment reform of the SLC exam, the following section concisely describes the SLC exam with a brief history.

Introduction to SLC exam in Nepal. The SLC exam is a national annual examination administered simultaneously to all Grade 10 students within the Nepalese secondary school system. Before the year 2015 (i.e., before the SLC exam's assessment system reform), the exam was locally known by the name of 'iron-gate' because it was a high-stakes exam, which had the power to open the door to further studies and academic careers for those who cleared the exam, but not for the students who failed (Bhattarai, 2014). In other words, it was a powerful gatekeeper for those who were required to take it. Bhattarai's (2014) study shows that the two aspects, (i) its specific academic stakes (e.g., a mandatory requirement for school graduation, a door to job opportunity, an end of school exam) and (ii) the general socio-cultural stakes (e.g., a first performance measurement exam, a large participatory national exam, a long-term investment, an issue of face and prestige) augmented the overall stakes of the SLC exam. In addition to these aspects, the MOE's policy further amplified the SLC exam stakes. As reported by Mathema and Bista (2006), the school administrators and teachers felt enormous pressure for better exam results due to MOE's policy that also contributed to an increase in the stakes of the SLC exam. Talking about the MOE's policy, Mathema and Bista (2006) states:

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In recent years, in the wake of persistent student failure, public schools and their teachers are being asked to be accountable for performance. Increasingly, it is being emphasized that the existing system of school financing should be replaced by outcome-based funding where funds to schools flow based on their performance in the SLC examinations. The Government already has a policy of withdrawing support to schools that fail to maintain a pass rate of 15% for three consecutive years. Very recently, a new policy has been adopted whereby schools that produce good results (50% or more pass rates) get additional funds (p. 9).

In addition to these aspects, a low pass rate of the examinees of the SLC exam increased the stakes of the SLC exam (Mathema, 2007, Bhatta, 2006, Bhattarai, 2014). The following table as presented in Bhattarai's (2014) study shows the SLC exam results of Nepal over the past 20 years.

Table 1

Year-wise SLC exam results (1994 - 2013)

S. No.	Year	No. Examinee	Pass %	S. No.	Year	No. Examinee	Pass %
1	1994	79420	31.30%	11	2004	255607	46.18%
2	1995	79588	42.97%	12	2005	274164	38.72%
3	1996	90458	38.30%	13	2006	295182	40.38%
4	1997	116002	36.52%	14	2007	347185	58.64%
5	1998	113257	47.54%	15	2008	367041	63.73%
6	1999	139202	49.20%	16	2009	412081	68.47%
7	2000	205539	45.72%	17	2010	412592	64.31%
8	2001	184226	31.62%	18	2011	454022	55.50%
9	2002	201068	31.22%	19	2012	528257	46.16%
10	2003	230872	32.05%	20	2013	547165	41.57%

Table 1 presents the passing percentile of SLC exam results over a 20-year period. The average pass percentage of the SLC exam in this 20-year period is 45.50%. These figures imply that more than a half of the examinees on average demonstrate a failure pattern in the SLC exam. The data thus justify the nomenclature of the SLC exam as an "Iron Gate".

Due to the academic and socio-cultural stakes of the exam, the students encountered a huge pressure for better performance, from their family, school and the society. Consequently, the pressure resulted in a number of psychological and societal problems on the test-takers

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(Mathema, 2007, Bhattarai, 2014). The stakes of the SLC exam were highly intense, so much so, that a number of students would commit suicide due to failure in the SLC exam every year (see page 22 for details).

Due to its unique historical background and reform, the SLC exam can better be portrayed in relation to the significant changes that occurred in different eras.

The SLC exam before 1934. The SLC exam of Nepal, before the establishment of the SLC Board in Nepal, used to be conducted by two Indian Universities (Mathema and Bista, 2006). For the purpose of conducting the SLC exam of Nepal, Durbar High School, the only high school in Nepal at the time, was affiliated with the Calcutta University of India in 1880 (the Nepali year 1936) and later with the Patna University of India in 1924 (the Nepali year 1980). The SLC candidates from Nepal had to travel to Calcutta or Patna University in order to sit for the SLC exam until the establishment of the SLC Board in Nepal. After the establishment of the SLC Board in Nepal in 1934 (the Nepali year 1990), students of Nepal started taking the SLC exam in Nepal, but the entire exam was developed, conducted and controlled by Patna University. The university used to prepare questions, send superintendents to Nepal in order to monitor the exams, collect answer sheets, check them and publish results. Thus, the SLC exam was formally/officially started in Nepal in 1934 with the formation of the SLC Exam Board of Nepal.

The SLC exam between 1934 and 2014/2015. Although the SLC Board was established in 1934 and Nepalese students started taking the SLC exam in Nepal, as stated above, the exam was conducted and controlled by Patna University until 1947. It was much later in 1947 (the Nepali year 2003) when for the first time, the SLC exam was conducted independently by the Government of Nepal autonomously. From 1947 to 2015, the SLC exam was solely used as a means to assess the achievement of students and evaluate the quality of education.

Although almost all grade level exams in Nepal are high-stakes, the stakes of the SLC exam before the assessment reform were immensely high. In Bhatta's (2005) words, no other educational activities in Nepal attracted as much public attention as the annual SLC exams. Pointing out the reasons why the SLC exam was considered to be more important than others, Bhatta (2005) states:

The SLC examination assumed its importance more for the role it played in determining the prospects of the student than for the enormity of its operation. If succeeded in the

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SLC examination, opened for students windows of opportunities for higher studies or widened their prospect for employment, failure in this examination greatly narrowed their options for self-development. Many people, therefore, took failure in SLC as a failure in life (p. preface, ii).

This distinct education culture of the Nepal educational construct resulted in hundreds of the SLC exam failures committing suicide during this period. Despite such incidents, and criticisms from experts and researchers, no fundamental changes were made in the assessment system of the SLC exam for a long time.

The SLC exam after the assessment reform (2015-2016). The MOE of Nepal decided to reform the existing assessment system of the SLC exam by changing the numerical grading system to a letter grading, and a pass-fail system to a no pass-fail (details presented below) starting in 2015. The detail of this reform is presented in the following section under a sub-title 'Research Context.'

End of SLC exam (2017 onward). As mentioned earlier, as of June 2015 the parliament of Nepal endorsed the eighth amendment to the Education Act-1972, which has reformed the existing structure of school education (see Figure 1, page 4). This reform has divided schools into two levels: Basic (Grades 1 -8) and secondary (Grades 9-12). When this bill comes into effect (it had not been implemented during data collection), the eight-decade-long SLC exam (i.e., recently renamed as Secondary Education Exam, SEE) is likely to end as the school level education would culminate at grade 12 instead of 10. And the issue, whether the Grade 12 exam would be called SLC exam continues to remain ambiguous, though, which is unlikely to be. This apparently would mark the end of the SLC exam, however, this does not imply that the Grade 10 exam will also be terminated. There will certainly be an exam for Grade 10 students like the previous one. This amendment does not pertain to the reform of the entire SLC exam, but to the reporting system of the SLC exam.

Internal structure and management of the SLC exam. As stated earlier, in the assessment system of the SLC exam, since its inception to till date, there have not been any fundamental changes, except a few minor changes, such as a change of full marks, question type, and decentralization of the SLC exam (i.e., administration of the exam at the regional level). Nor has the fundamental purpose of the exam changed. In consideration of these facts, the following section presents a brief account of the current internal structure and management of the SLC

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exam.

The organizational structure of the SLC exam. The SLC exam has been managed and conducted by the five Regional Education Directorates established in each of the five Development Regions (Eastern, Central, Western, Mid-Western, and Far-Western Development Region), and 75 District Education Offices (MOE website, Nepal). Particularly, the District Education Offices are the main bureaus, which manage and conduct the examinations locally. This is conducted in accordance with the instructions and regulations of the Office of the Controller of Examination (OCE). The existing organizational structure of the SLC Exam Board as of 2016 can be summarized in the following figure.

Ministry of Education, His Majesty's Government of Nepal				
Office of the Controller of Examination (National Examination Board)				
Five Regional Education Directorates				
Easter Regional Education Directorate	Central Regional Education Directorate	Western Regional Education Directorate	Mid-Western Regional Education Directorate	Far-Western Regional Education Directorate
16 District Education Offices	19 District Education Offices	16 District Education Offices	15 District Education Offices	9 District Education Offices
More than 1943 assigned exam centers in 75 districts				

Figure 2. Organizational structure of the SLC exam (MOE, 2016)

Administration of the SLC exam. The exam is administered throughout an eight-day period in April/May of each year. The exam questions cover eight subjects (six compulsory subjects, and two optional), i.e., one subject per day. The exam is taken simultaneously in all five Development Regions of Nepal. In the past, the same exam questions were used across all five Development Regions. However, in recent years, this practice has been changed due to financial considerations and decentralization of the educational system of the country. Accordingly, separate sets of questions are used in each of the five Developmental Regions. This change was brought about to better accommodate the cases of examination cancellation or postponement and reduce the economic burden of exam re-organization throughout the country.

Marking of the SLC exam. Mathema and Bista (2006) explain the marking mechanism

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of the answer sheets in the SLC exam and present the procedural steps of the marking system for the SLC exam in Nepal. Mathema and Bista make the following observations regarding the grading scheme of the SLC exam:

The answer sheets of the SLC exam are collected in marking centers assigned by the OCE. The marking centers can be both the Regional Education Directorates and District Education Offices. According to a newly established trend, answer sheets are marked through a conference marking system. In a conference marking system, examiners are required to come to the answer sheet marking centers. In this system, answer sheets are marked by a team of subject examiners. Before the answer sheets are released for marking, they are first coded in the marking centers and then given to the examiners. Coding is done only in the six core subjects, and Optional Mathematics and Computer Education.

Mathema and Bista (2006) explain the rationale for coding in this way: "The purpose of coding is to maintain the anonymity of the examinee and confidentiality of the answer sheets" (p. 199). They also explain how marks are verified:

Having finished marking the answer sheets, the teachers prepare mark slips. Two copies of the mark slips are forwarded to the OCE. After verification of marks, the SLC Examination Board approves the publication of results, which get published through a Government daily newspaper- Gorkhapatra. The result is published in June/ July within 60 days of the last exam date (p. 199).

As stated above, starting in 2015 in technical schools and 2016 in general schools, the numerical percentile and pass-fail assessment system of the SLC exam has been replaced with the letter grading and no pass-fail system. Nevertheless, the teachers provide numerical marks (not letter grades) and the OCE officials convert the numerical marks into letter grades following the *Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015*. Interestingly, in the reformed assessment system, the entire process of the SLC exam including the exam administration, marking of exam papers and publication of the results, continue to remain the same.

CONTEXT OF THIS STUDY

The Ministry of Education (MOE) of Nepal endorsed the assessment system reform of the SLC exam by introducing fundamental changes, particularly in its reporting system. The fundamental changes can be described under the following two sub-titles.

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Letter Grading with GPA, Descriptors and No Pass-fail Provision

The MOE reformed the existing assessment system of the SLC exam by altering the existing numerical grading system (percentile) to a letter grading with GPA and descriptors, and a *pass-fail* system to a *no pass-fail* system starting in the year 2015. The grading provision has been amended in the year 2016 after completion of the pilot phase (see page 67 for details).

Table 2 below shows the assessment of student performance in the newly reformed assessment system.

Table 2

Grading provision in the reformed assessment system (with amendment)

S. No.	Marks Obtained (%)	Grade	Descriptor	GPA
1	90 and above	A ⁺	Outstanding	4
2	80 to below 90	A	Excellent	3.6
3	70 to below 80	B ⁺	Very good	3.2
4	60 to below 70	B	Good	2.8
5	50 to below 60	C ⁺	Satisfactory	2.4
6	40 to below 50	C	Acceptable	2.0
7	30 to below 40	D ⁺	Partially acceptable	1.6
8	20 to below 30	D	Insufficient	1.2
9	Below 20	E	Very insufficient	0.8

Source: Letter Grading Working Procedure 2016, MOE, Nepal

The fundamental difference between the previous and the changed assessment system is that prior to the reform, students used to be allotted numerical grades in each of the eight subjects with concluding remarks of the Office of Controller of Examination (OCE), such as fail (below 32%), pass in third division (32-45%), pass in second division (46-59%), pass in first division (60-79%) and pass with distinction (80% or above).

The newly reformed assessment system evaluates students under a nine grade-point scale (i.e., grade A⁺ for 90% and above, A for 80-below 89%, B⁺ for 70- below 79%, B for 60- below 69, C⁺ for 50- below 59%, C for 40- below 49%, D⁺ for 30- below 39, D for 20- below 29, and E for below 20) with Grade Point Average (i.e., GPA 4, 3.6, 3.2, 2.8, 2.4, 2.0, 1.6, 1.2, 0.8 for grade A⁺, A, B⁺, B, C⁺, C, D⁺, D, and E respectively).

Also, descriptors such as, outstanding for GPA 4, excellent for 3.6, very good for 3.2, good

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for 2.8, satisfactory for 2.4, acceptable for 2.0, partially acceptable for 1.6, insufficient for 1.2, and very insufficient for 0.8 are provisioned for describing the competency level of the students. This implies that each grade point is a symbol for a qualitative judgment (e.g. outstanding for GPA 4, excellent for 3.6). Interestingly, the grade sheet contains no concluding remarks (i.e., such as pass or fail) of the OCE as prior to reform (i.e., presently, National Examination Board-National Examination Board was founded in 2016 by merging the OCE and Higher Secondary Education Board). However, as suggested by the grade descriptors (in the newly reformed assessment system), GPA 1.2 and 0.8 denote insufficient and very insufficient performance of the test-taker, respectively. Meanwhile, with the coordination of the MOE, Higher Secondary Education Board (which was later merged with National Examination Board) and Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT), in wake of the current reform, established revised admission criteria for grade promotion (see page 68 for detail). As presented on page 68, the admission criteria have restricted the low grade-holders (GPA 1.6 or below) from continuing in higher education and many of the CTEVT programs. Thus, the implicit meaning of no pass-fail provision, the indirect message of the grade descriptors and the admission criteria led to several concerns and questions, which will be described in the following section (see *Research Problem*).

Grade Increment Exam

The newly reformed assessment system provisioned that the students having a GPA lower than 1.6 (i.e., below Grade C⁺) could appear in a '*grade increment exam*' in order to improve their grades in those subjects (i.e., in the subjects below Grade C⁺). However, the number of subjects the students could write was limited to two in 2016. Almost the same type of provision existed in the previous assessment system, wherein, students failing up to two subjects could rewrite the exams within two months of the date of publication of the result. It was termed as a supplementary exam.

As of 2017, the MOE amended the provision of '*grade increment exam*' by removing the restriction of the number of subjects. Thus, starting from 2017, the students having GPA lower than 1.6 (i.e., lower than Grade C⁺) in more than two subjects can rewrite the '*grade increment exam*.' The primary difference between the previous and the reformed assessment system (i.e., the amended one) is that in the reformed assessment system, no limitation as regards the number of subjects has been stipulated for improvement in grades. Nevertheless, students having GPA of

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1.6 or above are not allowed to appear in the ‘*grade increment exam.*’

Commencement of the SLC Exam Assessment System Reform

In the first phase of a pilot project, students from all 99 technical education schools, termed as technical stream (e.g., agriculture, engineering, hotel and hospitality management, computer science and livestock farming, etc.) across the country wrote the SLC exam and got the exam results based on the reformed assessment system in June 2015. In their assessment sheets, they were accorded letter grades with no remarks of pass or fail. The grading system was a bit different in the pilot phase than the present one (see Figure 3 and 4 below for differences). The following figure shows the results of the SLC exam in the pilot phase 2015.

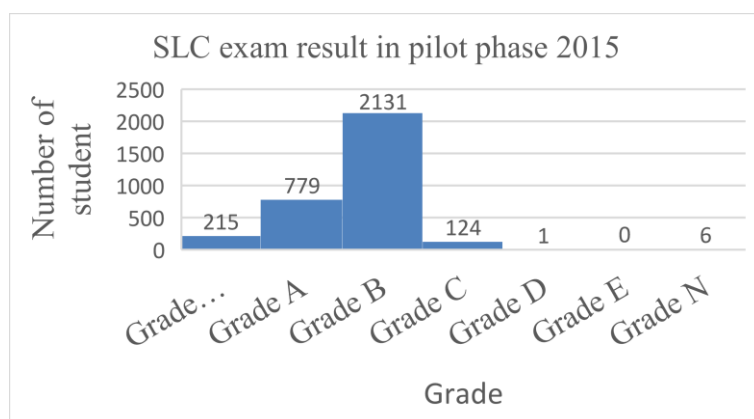


Figure 3. SLC exam results in the technical stream in pilot phase 2015

A total of 3,256 examinees, 2010 boys, and 1246 girls took the exam, which was held in March 2015. According to the OCE, 215 examinees got A⁺, 779 got A, 2131 got B, 124 got C as the overall final grades. Only one student got a grade D, none of the examinees got a grade E, and six students got N (i.e., N stands for None graded due to partially absence, or exam cancellation, etc.).

As of the academic year 2016, the MOE in Nepal implemented the assessment system, which has been mentioned above, for all Grade 10 students (both in technical and regular streams) throughout the country. Meanwhile, the MOE amended the *Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015*, a couple of times, in order to address the emerging problems and provide necessary instructions and guidelines to the implementing bodies. The result of the SLC exam in 2016 was published a bit differently based on the amended guidelines.

The following figures (Figure 4) presents the summary of the SLC exam results in technical stream published in 2016.

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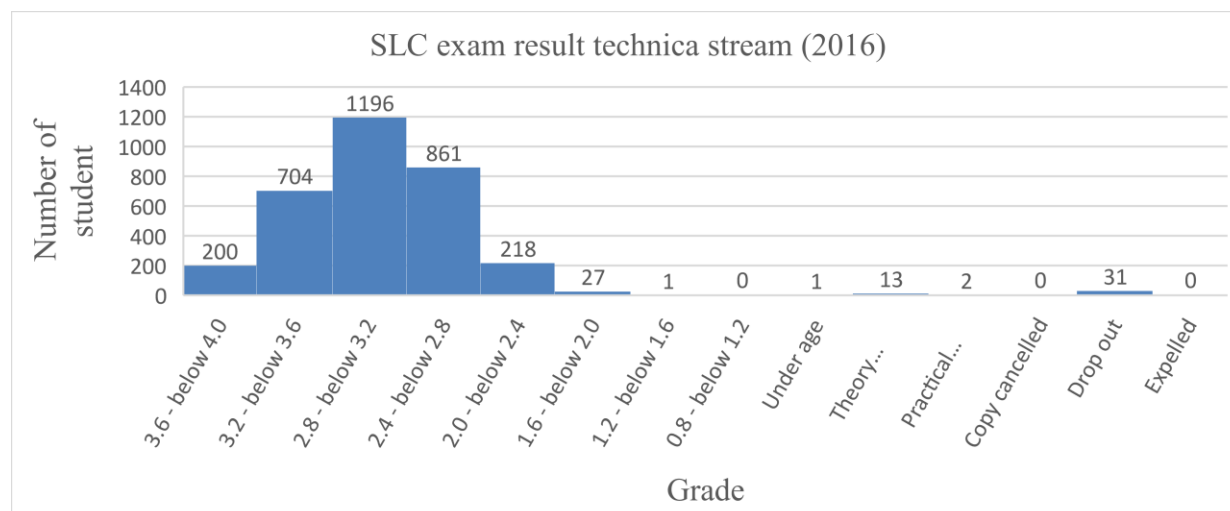


Figure 4. SLC exam results in the technical stream (2016)

Source: SLC exam results technical stream 2016 (OCE website- see Appendix A for original)

A total of 3223 students (excluding exempted students), 1965 boys and 1258 girls took the exam held in May 2016 in the technical education stream. According to the OCE, 200 examinees got GPA 3.6 to 4.0, 704 got GPA 3.2 to below 3.6, 1196 got GPA 2.8 to below 3.2, 861 got GPA 2.4 to below 2.8, 218 got GPA 2.0 to below 2.4, 27 got GPA 1.6 to below 2.0, 1 got GPA 1.2 to below 1.6, and none got GPA 0.8 to below 1.2. Out of 3223 examinees, one examinee was found underage (below 16 years old), 13 examinees partially missed the theory exams, two examinees missed their practical exams, and 31 examinees dropped out the exam.

Similarly, a total of 437326 examinees (excluding exempted students) wrote the SLC exam in May 2016 in the regular stream. Figure 5 below presents the results.

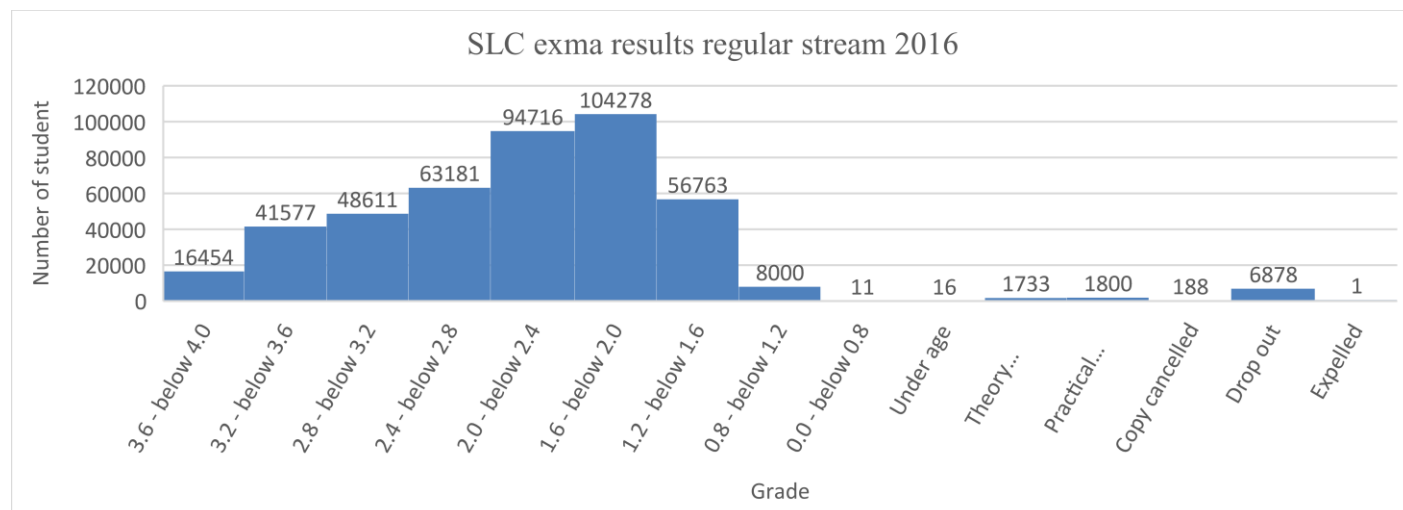


Figure 5. SLC exam results in the regular stream (2016) (OCE website- see Appendix B)

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According to the OCE, 16454 examinees got GPA 3.6 to 4.0, 41577 got GPA 3.2 to below 3.6, 48611 got GPA 2.8 to below 3.2, 63181 got GPA 2.4 to below 2.8, 94716 got GPA 2.0 to below 2.4, 104278 got GPA 1.6 to below 2.0, 56763 got GPA 1.2 to below 1.6, 8000 got GPA 0.8 to below 1.2., and 11 examinees got GPA 0.0 to 0.8. Out of 437326 examinees, 16 examinees were found underage (below 16 years old), 1733 examinees partially missed the theory exams, 1800 examinees missed their practical exams, and 6878 examinees dropped out the exam. The answer-sheets of a total of 188 examinees were canceled, and one examinee was expelled from the exam hall.

As expressed in the mass media, this transition marks a radical move from a pass-fail assessment system to a no pass-fail in assessment and testing field. Having said that, this reform of the assessment system of the SLC exam, which has been a ubiquitous concern, has, in fact, resulted in several quandaries and criticisms described in the section that follows.

AIM OF THE REFORM

The *Letter Grading Working Procedure (LGWP) 2015* (see page 66 for details), the only publicly available official documents of the MOE, mentions the following three goals/aims of the assessment system reform of the SLC exam: (1) to verify/measure students' learning abilities exactly, (2) to introduce a nine-point letter grading system in measuring student achievement, and (3) to increase the quality of education by minimizing the educational loss. However, none of the available MOE's formal documents could clarify whether the principal purpose of the reform was to minimize the stakes of the SLC exam or enhance student learning and increase the quality of education. These issues will be further stated in the following section (see Research Problem).

The *Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015* states that this reform is underpinned by the different research studies submitted to the MOE at various times, notably the School Sector Reform Project, 2009. It also contends that this reform was instituted considering the existing national and international trends and practices of assessment systems. However, on close inspection, apparently, the twelve-page long MOE's formal document lacks much information that the stakeholders wish to or should know. For instance, the *Letter Grading Working Procedure* remains silent about the stakes of the SLC exam and associated apparent (e.g., Mathema, 2007; Rijal, 2013, Yogendra, 2014) extreme negative consequence on stakeholders.

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The details about the stakes of the SLC exam are presented below (see page 22). As suggested by the researchers (e.g., Ho, 2006; Mathema, 2007) the stakes of an assessment have constituted one of the greatest challenges, especially in the Asian countries.

The LGWP, which is the only publicly available MOE's official document, fails to mention whether or not the transition from a pass-fail system to a no-pass-fail system affects the stakes of the SLC exam. In addition, it does not present the details of the reform process/procedure. Thus, it should be noted that the brief document is not a comprehensive and detailed document, which could explicate the entire reform process and guide the implementers in implementing it. As this study proceeds, it would definitely unfold the issues and concerns, which the stakeholders and general public wish to know and explore, in terms of how the stakeholders and implementers were informed and instructed for implementing the reform.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The reform of the assessment system of the SLC exam in Nepal is two-fold. First, this is a transition from a numerical grading system (percentile) to a letter grading with GPA and grade descriptors. Second, this shift has terminated the pass-fail system of the SLC exam. It means that from 2015 onwards (i.e., reform started in technical education stream in 2015 and in a regular stream in 2016), the OCE (i.e., National Examination Board as of 2016) does not mention pass or fail on the mark/grade sheet. Hence, this transition has been interpreted and understood as a giant leap in the field of assessment and testing. However, this is not still clear whether or not this reform is a giant leap. The experts, educators, and stakeholders have been still questioning whether or not this reform has practically ended the pass-fail system of the SLC exam. This transition has resulted in many questions, quandaries, and challenges, which constitute the basis of the present study.

It is natural that any large-scale reform generates questions and quandaries. However, the nature and gravity of questions and quandaries attached to the reform are specific to the change. Specifically, the question of why there are so many quandaries about the reform among implementers and students is critical and worth noting. It is also essential to know what the main cause of the questions and quandaries is: (1) Is it the nature of the reform? Or is it the process of the reform? (2) Is it due to the lack of clarity of the official documents? Or is it due to the weaknesses of policy and plans? Such questions can only be answered through an in-depth study.

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Hence, this study attempts to explicate the entire process of the assessment reform to seek answers to these and similar questions and quandaries. Some of the questions, quandaries, and challenges attached to the reform are presented below.

Issues of the No Pass-fail Provision

As stated earlier, the MOE of Nepal has reformed the existing assessment system by replacing a numerical grading system with a letter grading system. The MOE also decided not to mention pass or fail in the grade sheet of the test-takers. The provision of elimination of the pass-fail system that existed for years in the previous assessment system continued to remain one of the most debated issues about the reform. Preliminary, this provision was understood as an absolute non-failing assessment system. The publication of the admission criteria changed the previous understanding of the people. Going through the admission criteria that prevented the low grade-holders from participating in higher education, and on analysing the implicit meaning of the grade descriptors, experts, educators and many of the stakeholders except the policymakers, who were involved directly in the reform process, raised questions and concerns about the ground reality of the no pass-fail phenomenon. With regard to the no pass-fail provision, they raised these overarching questions: 1) Is the newly reformed assessment system an absolute no pass-fail system (i.e., an absolute non-failing assessment system)? 2) Is the reform a transition from a high-stakes assessment system to a low or no-stakes? The current study aims to address these crucial questions.

Issues on Involvement of Stakeholders and Necessary Preparation

Through electronic media and newspaper, several concerns and questions have been raised by experts, local authorities, private school owners, principals, teachers, and parents regarding the reform. Experts and educators (Niraula, 2016; Dixit, 2014; Koirala, 2015) including private school owners and administrators (Shahi, 2015; Rana, 2015) argue that this reform has been drafted without any consultation with the experts and local stakeholders (i.e. key stakeholders). This, in turn, has made the successful implementation of the reform immensely challenging. They also claim that the MOE neither involved the key stakeholders in the conceptual phase of the reform nor did it perform any foundational preparation and necessary homework for its implementation (Niraula, 2016). These accounts and concerns raise a couple of crucial questions. First, what roles did the regional/district authorities, school principals and teachers (who are the key stakeholders and implementers) play in the reform initiation and

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implementation process? Second, what was or should be the relationship between the reformers and other stakeholders (e.g., local authorities, school principals, and teachers)? Third, what fundamental homework or preparation was made or should be made before initiating and implementing the reform? Fourth, what theory or conceptual/theoretical framework was used or could properly guide the reform construct? These are some of the important questions that need to be addressed in this study.

Issues on Future of the Low-grade Holders

Immediately after the reform endorsement, the national and local newspaper headlines (e.g. *Kantipur Daily*, *The Himalayan Times*, *The Kathmandu Post*, and *Gorkhapatra*) were covered with the story about the impact of the reform on test-takers and the entire education system. Several educators and experts expressed their views on these issues on seminars, radio, and TV. One of the common concerns of the discussions was the future of the low-grade holders (students having Grade D or lower). Some of the questions raised by the experts, educators and other stakeholders were: Would the low-grade holders find enrollment in the colleges and universities regardless of their grades? How would they be treated by employers in the job markets? How would the ‘no pass-fail’ system enhance the student learning? How would the newly reformed assessment system motivate the low performers? In what way - would the newly reformed assessment system be different from the previous one? Doesn't the newly introduced assessment system prove to be more harmful to the low-grade holders? These questions and concerns also form the basis for this study.

Issues on Goals and Direction of Reform

As stated earlier, one of the goals of this reform is to increase the quality of education by minimizing the educational loss (*Letter Grading Working Procedure*, 2015). In this particular case, the term *educational loss* refers to a great number of failures in the LSC exam. In addition to minimizing the educational loss, the MOE, through this reform seeks to increase the quality of education. Both of these goals were found to be widely criticized by the stakeholders, experts, and educators stating that the assessment system reform solely cannot increase the quality of education and noticeably minimize the educational loss.

In one of the seminars, educator Bidhya Nath Koirala stated that neither the goals of the reform nor future direction of the reform is explicitly mentioned in the MOE's official documents (The Kathmandu Post, 31 December 2015). Further, he questioned if the main purpose of the

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reform was to improve student learning and increase the quality of education, and as such, the question of how this could be achieved by solely replacing the numerical grading system with a letter grading system remains unanswered. Furthermore, he raised the query of what effective strategies could be used to enhance the student learning and increase the quality of education by minimizing educational loss. These were the common questions raised by many other experts, educators and the key stakeholders (Niraula, 2014; Shahi, 2015). In brief, the educators, school principals, teachers, and parents contend that neither the goals of the reform nor future directions of the reform are clearly mentioned in the MOE's official documents (Koirala, 2014; Niraula, 2014; Shahi, 2015). The dilemmas and challenges mentioned above constitute the fundamental basis for this study that, to a great extent, justify the significance of the study.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

The high-stakes summative assessment/testing has been criticized for years due to its overarching negative consequences, especially on the test-takers and curriculum (Cheng, Andrews & Yu, 2010; Ho, 2006; Mathema, 2007; Sullivan & Gregory, 2006). Consequently, an emerging huge shift from the assessment of learning to assessment for learning is evident around the world. Several studies (presented under Situating the Study) and theories have been conducted on educational change and assessment reform (i.e., reform from the assessment of learning to assessment for learning). Despite a huge transition in the assessment and evaluation systems around the world, a number of theories and studies have emerged to characterize the changes. Nevertheless, a lack of the theory or study that exactly explicates a complete process of the high-stakes assessment system reform like the one depicted in this study, continues to remain. I believe that this study would provide an in-depth knowledge about a complete process of high-stakes assessment system reform in Nepal. This process includes: How the reform was conceived, what was done as a foundational preparation, how was it implemented, and what were the preliminary responses of the implementation of the reform? The study also aims to familiarize the readers with the possible problems, dilemmas, challenges, opportunities and short-term and long-term impact associated with the assessment reform. Specifically, this study would prove to be a milestone to those who would be conducting studies on the issues related to the abolition of high-stakes assessment and are contemplating reforming the current assessment and evaluation system like the one depicted in this study in their educational institutions.

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MOTIVATION TO THIS STUDY

I was born, grew up and was educated in an academic environment with high-stakes testing at the center of student life. Every grade/class test from the elementary school to graduate level was a high-stakes test/exam. Essentially, a test score was so important that it was, and still is, equated with a success or failure of the student in life, wherein, a high score in a test was believed to raise prestige and reputation in the society. Attributed to this education culture and shared assumption, during my school years, I became increasingly interested in testing and assessment, particularly in the high-stakes tests/exams of Nepal. When I started my academic career as a teacher after graduating, the interest in high-stakes tests was deeply rooted in my mind. During that period, what I experienced, heard, watched, and read in the newspapers was heartbreaking and horrible, which further intensified my interest. For instance, immediately after the publication of the annual SLC Exam results, many unexpected and tragic incidents covered the front pages of local and national newspapers of Nepal. The following newspaper headlines, which were published (cf. Risal, 2013 & Kantipur Daily) in consecutive years in Kantipur Daily (one of the popular daily national newspapers in Nepal) explicate what I imply by unexpected and tragic incidents.

(1) 19th June 2015- two girls died when they failed the SLC exam, ... (2) June 14, 2014- three girls commit suicide after failing SLC exam, ... (3) 11th June 2013— A girl killed herself immediately after hearing the result..., (4) June 2012— 5 Girls hung themselves and 2 boys consumed..., (5) June 2011— 7 girls in Rukum district committed suicide...

All these incidents are the by-product of the SLC exam failure. One may also perceive that the events described above are, in fact, only a few of the stories that emerged because they could not be hidden due to mass publicity. The National Health Sector Support Program (NHSSP) report (2011) says that there is a greater number of victims of exam failure than the figures which come out in the mass media. It means that more suicide cases occurred in reality than were reported to the police. A significant number of suicide attempts and suicide deaths, most likely, are kept private among only the core family members of the victim because suicide in Nepal is a socially unacceptable phenomenon (NHSSP report, 2011).

In fact, this curiosity about why every year many of the high-stakes test failures, particularly the SLC exam failures in Nepal commit suicide motivated me to conduct a study on the high-stakes tests of Nepal. Meanwhile, as mentioned earlier, the MOE in Nepal decided to

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reform the existing assessment system of the SLC exam by replacing (a) the numerical grading system with letter grading with GPA and grade descriptors and (b) the pass-fail system with no pass-fail starting in the year 2015. The reform of the assessment system of the SLC exam, which has been a ubiquitous concern and conundrum, thus, specifically inspired me to explore the theoretical foundation, possible problems, challenges and opportunities associated with this transition.

Given the issues, such as possible problems, challenges, and opportunities, raised by the experts, educators and the key stakeholders of the SLC exam in the mass and electronic media, I came up with the following guiding research questions meaning to explicate the assessment reform process via a grounded theory study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The overarching research questions and sub-questions that helped to explore the reform phenomena in depth are as follows:

(1) What theoretical and practical considerations were raised (i.e., especially by the policy makers, implementers, experts, and other stakeholders) to explicate the reform (i.e., assessment reform of the SLC exam) process from conceptualization to its implementation?

(i) What was the source or drivers of the reform?

(ii) What were the principal aims of the reform?

(iii) What theoretical or conceptual framework was used?

(iv) What has been done as foundational preparation and necessary homework for the reform?

(iv) How was the reform implemented? Did the reformers apply any strategies to implement the reform?

(v) Are there any factors that affect the successful implementation of the reform?

(2) What are the remarkable resulting issues of the reform, and how have they been addressed for its successful implementation?

(i) What issues, such as misconceptions, quandaries etc. were raised as preliminary responses of the implementation of the reform?

(ii) What are the strengths (opportunities) and weaknesses (condemnation) attached to the reform?

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- (iii) To what extent, has the reform addressed the demand of the time?
- (iv) What are the positive and negative impact of the reform, especially on test-takers?
- (v) What are the further steps the reformers should take immediately to make the reform successful?

These fundamental questions guided and directed this study to explore sufficient ideas and information in order to explicate a complete process of the high-stakes assessment system reform.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS: DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

In order to cater to address the readers outside of assessment and testing field, the definitions of some of the frequently used terms are presented in the following section:

Assessment

Assessment is a broad term, which includes different types of summative and formative tests/exams and several other means that are use to assess students' learning abilities and learning outcomes. In this dissertation, assessment refers to the evaluation of students' learning abilities and learning outcomes through means of different tools, such as written tests/exams, observations, oral tests etc. (see page 27 under Conceptual Framework on Educational Assessment for details).

Summative Assessment or Assessment of Learning

The assessment used primarily to measure the extent or nature of what students have learned is called summative assessment (Tan, 2011). The assessment primarily used to determine the current standing of students' achievement against the learning outcomes defined in the curriculum is called summative assessment (SEAMEO, 2012). The purpose of summative assessment is to measure test-takers' achievement and determine whether or not the targeted goal has been achieved (see page 28 under Conceptual Framework on Educational Assessment for details).

Formative Assessment or Assessment for Learning

The extensive literature on assessment for learning defines and illustrates it in several ways. "Formative assessment refers to frequent, interactive assessments of students' progress and understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching appropriately" (Looney & Poskitt, 2005, p. 21). In general terms, formative assessment is defined as the assessment used primarily to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning (see page 28 under Conceptual Framework

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on Educational Assessment for details).

High-stakes Test

The test is said to be high-stakes if its outcome is used as the sole or main determinant for making any important decision/s, such as the selection of students for admissions to colleges or universities, grouping students into programs, selection of employees, selection for promotion, and screening for potential immigrants.

Substantive Grounded Theory

A theory that provides a theoretical interpretation or explanation for a particular area is called a substantive theory. Since substantive theory is grounded in research on one particular substantive area (work, juvenile delinquency, medical education, mental health) it might be taken to apply only to that specific area (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 281). A substantive theory is considered as a stepping stone to the development of a formal grounded theory. Corbin and Strauss (2008) states:

Substantive theory is a strategic link in the formulation and generation of grounded formal theory. We believe that although formal theory can be generated directly from data, it is more desirable, and usually necessary, to start the formal theory from a substantive one (p. 281).

The details of some of the terminologies mentioned above, such as assessment, assessment of learning, assessment for learning, high-stakes test, have been presented below under Conceptual Framework on Educational Assessment (see page 27).

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented a brief background of the global assessment reform movement (details are presented in the following sections) and situated Nepal's assessment system reform, particularly the assessment system reform of Grade 10 student, which was popularly known by the name of SLC exam, in a global context. It also described the major four types of pressures that influence stakeholders towards impacting a reform in the assessment system around the world. The four types of pressures include the need of better information for decision-making, rapidly inventing/emerging new technology, evolving understanding of human learning, and emerging notion of assessment of student's multi-talent, expertise, and attribute. This chapter also explicated the study context of this study in which the MOE reformed the existing

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assessment system of the SLC exam by changing the existing numerical grading system (percentile) to a letter grading with GPA and descriptors, and a *pass-fail* system to a *no pass-fail* system. The fundamental changes effected in the newly reformed assessment system were letter grading with GPA, descriptors and no pass-fail provision and grade increment exam. The other important aspect explicated in this chapter is the research problem(s). The research problems identified in this study include: (1) Issues of the no pass-fail provision, (2) Issues on the involvement of stakeholders and necessary preparation, (3) Issues on future of the low-grade holders, (4) Issues on goal and direction of reform. Finally, this chapter presented a brief description of what this study contributes to knowledge, what motivated the researcher to conduct this study, and what the principal purpose underpinning the reform. This chapter was wrapped up with presenting the research questions and the glossary of terms. Chapter two presents a conceptual framework and a brief review of the literature to situate the present study within it.

CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW PART ONE: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptual Framework on Educational Assessment: Concepts, Principles, and Practices

It seems to be sensible to inform readers what the term conceptual framework entails in this study because conceptual frameworks have been defined and used variously in the current literature (Jabareen, 2009). Similar to Jabareen's conceptualization, where he defines *conceptual framework* as a network, or "a plan," of interlinked concepts that together provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena, the conceptual framework in this study consists of the major types of assessments and the key components of assessment that are interlinked with the construct *educational assessment*. It means that the conceptual framework in this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the key concepts and the current direction in the educational assessment that are directly or indirectly related to this study.

Educational Assessment: Summative and Formative Assessment

Educational assessment is "the systematic gathering of information to make decisions or judgments about individuals; assessment, in this conceptualization, is the superordinate term for a range of procedures that includes measurement and testing but is not restricted to these forms." (Lynch, 2001, p. 358). It means that assessment is an umbrella term that covers a broader area and a number of procedures undertaken to make decisions or judgments about individuals or programs.

The National Research Council's (2001) report states that assessments, in both classroom and large-scale contexts, are used for three purposes: to assist in learning, to measure individual achievements, and to evaluate programs. Similar to the National Research Council's (2001) report, Brown (2004) has mentioned the three purposes of assessment: to improve teaching and learning, to make students accountable for learning partly through issuing certificates and to make schools and teachers accountable for their students' progress and quality of education. A range of assessment tools and procedural modalities have been used to attain these purposes. Assessments used in educational settings represent a variety of approaches, ranging from traditional multiple-choice and open-ended item formats to different types of performance assessments (AERA, APA & NCME standards, 2014). There have been an array of principles, theories, and literature on assessment and testing that have discussed the different forms/types of assessment procedures, measures, and tools. In addition to the types of assessments, researchers

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have also mentioned several other key components associated with educational assessments. The major types of assessments and the key components that are relevant to this study include formative and summative assessments, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessments, high-stakes assessments, special assessments, and the validity of assessments. Given the nature and scope of this study, the following section highlights the concepts, principles, and practices of the key concepts (i.e., types of assessments and the key components) mentioned above.

The assessment primarily used to determine the current standing of students' achievement against the learning outcomes defined in the curriculum is called summative assessment (SEAMEO, 2012). In Tan's (2012) words, "The assessment used primarily to measure the extent or nature of what students have learned is called summative assessment." It means that the primary purpose of summative assessment is to measure the test takers' achievement and determine whether or not the targeted goal has been achieved. Summative assessments are generally given once at the end of some unit of time such as the semester or school year to evaluate the students' performance against a defined set of content standards (Centre for Assessment, 2007, p. 1). A summative assessment is used for decisions, such as certification, grade promotion, selection, and grouping.

Formative assessment is defined and described in many ways. Formative assessments take myriad forms in the classroom and are as unique to individual teachers as their instructional styles (Gareis, 2007). Before defining the term, it should be made clear that formative assessment and assessment for learning, in this study, are used synonymously. Defining formative assessment (i.e. assessment for learning), Wiliam (2011) states, "Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting the students' learning." Further he states, "The central essence of assessment for learning is to seek (through a combined effort of the teacher, peer, and learner): (1) where the learners are in their learning, (2) where they are going now, and (3) what needs to be done to get them there" (p. 12). In Clarke's (1998) words, "In order for improvement to take place the learner must first know the purpose of the task, then how far this was achieved, and finally be given help in knowing how to move closer towards the desired goal--how to close the gap" (p. 68). Centre for Assessment (2007) defines assessment for learning as:

Formative assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students'

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achievement of intended instructional outcomes. Thus, it is done by the teacher in the classroom for the explicit purpose of diagnosing where students are in their learning, where gaps in knowledge and understanding exist, and how to help teachers and students improve student learning (p. 1)

Many authors including Harlen and James (1997), Kennedy, Chan, Fok, and Yu (2008), and Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and Wiliam (2003) have presented different characteristics of summative and formative assessment. As depicted in the reviewed literature, the fundamental differences between the summative and formative assessment in terms of purposes, procedures, priorities etc., can be summarized as follows.

Table: 3

Difference between formative and summative assessment

Formative assessment	Summative assessment
Formative assessment is normally intertwined with teaching and learning activities.	Summative assessment gathers and interprets the evidence.
Its main purpose is to provide the student with immediate feedback and the teacher with information to make short-term adjustments in order to improve learning.	Its main purpose is to use the evidence for decisions, such as certification, grade promotion, selection, and grouping.
It is much less formal and does not have to comply with the same psychometric requirements.	It is more formal and has to comply with the same psychometric requirements.
It takes place on a regular basis, for example, day-to-day classroom activities.	It takes place at certain intervals when the achievement has to be reported.
It is directed at promoting student learning as a part of teaching.	It is directed at the learning achievements. It involves some quality assurance procedures.
Formative assessment involves a combination of criterion-referencing and pupil-referencing.	Summative assessment involves a combination of criterion-referencing and norm-referencing.
Inconsistencies and patterns in the behavior are taken as diagnostic information.	Inconsistencies and patterns in the behavior are taken as errors.
Validity and usefulness are paramount in formative assessment.	Both reliability and validity are paramount in summative assessment.
Formative assessment requires that pupils have a central part in it.	The information received from the assessment is paramount in summative assessment.
The information received from the assessment is used for short-term planning.	The information received from the assessment is used for long-term planning.

The extant literature on summative and formative assessment shows that the concept of summative and formative assessment (i.e., the relationship between summative and formative assessment) is not as distinct and simple as shown in Table 3 above because there are many

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components, contextual factors, and entangled issues that have made these concepts a bit complex. Given the complexity, the following section further explicates these concepts separately.

Summative Assessment or Assessment of Learning

Kennedy, Chan, Fok, and Yu (2008) have discussed two types of summative assessment: internal and external. They argued that the former involved teachers reporting to students and parents and keeping school records of the students' achievements and progress and the latter involved external bodies such as examination boards (national and local) or international tests of achievement.

Harlen and James (1997, p. 373) have presented the following characteristics of summative assessment:

- (1) It takes place at certain intervals when the achievement has to be reported.
- (2) It relates to progression in learning against the public criteria.
- (3) The results for different pupils may be combined for various purposes because they are based on the same criteria.
- (4) It requires methods that are as reliable as possible without endangering the validity.
- (5) It involves some quality assurance procedures.
- (6) It should be based on evidence from the full range of performance relevant to the criteria being used.

There have been plenty of studies and literature on summative assessments that have evidenced that summative assessments can be used for enhancing student learning, i.e., formative purposes. To take an example, let's consider the assessment system of Hong Kong, New South Wales, and Australia. In this regard, Kennedy, Chan, Fok, and Yu (2008) state:

A very promising development in the use of summative assessment has been the return of system-wide monitoring test results to schools and teachers so that they can use them to improve teaching. This happens in Hong Kong, New South Wales, and Australia. In these cases, the monitoring of performance is not used to rank schools or create league tables but to improve learning (p. 203).

These instances indicate that summative assessment can also be used for formative purposes. However, the bitter reality is that there are very limited countries, both in the East and West, that are using the scores of summative assessments for formative purposes. As suggested

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by the literature (Tan, 2012; Harlen, & James, 1997; Kennedy, Chan, Fok, & Yu, 2008), leaving a few exceptions, many of the countries in the world, especially a vast majority of Asian countries, are still accustomed to using the test scores solely for summative purposes.

Although a summative assessment has predominantly been used in many parts of the globe, it has equally been criticized by many authors (e.g., Biggs, 1998; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Brookhart, 2008; Hargreaves, Mccallum, & Gipps, 2000; Harlen, & Crick, 2003; Harlen, 2012; James, 2006; Perie, Marion, Gong, & Wurtzel, 2007; Shepard, 2000; Wiliam, & Leahy, 2007) for its negative impact on test takers and the entire education system. Biggs (1998) states that the backwash (i.e., a test's effect on the curriculum, the students' or teachers' strategies, the global educational system, or on the society as a whole) from the summative assessments is generally agreed to be negative, generating ego-related and other non-task priorities. Wiliam and Black (1996) conclude that summative assessment has not contributed to enhancing the students' learning as it has resulted in a negative impact on the students and the entire education system. They argue that a summative assessment system promotes a teaching-to-the-test tradition. While the teaching-to-the-test practice helps the students get higher marks in the tests and schools to show a higher pass percentage, many studies have shown that the practice does not enhance student learning. The details of the pro and cons of such practices have been presented below under *High-stakes Assessment*. Having said that, as suggested by the extant literature, there are still a huge number of theorists and scholars who believe that a balanced combination of summative and formative assessment is imperative in the educational setting for effective and meaningful learning to take place. If summative assessment can be better harmonized with a learning orientation, it can play a useful, rather than a destructive, role in the lives of young people (Chan, Fok, & Yu, 2008).

Taras (2009) has presented the notion of summative and formative assessment a bit differently. Her first argument is that an assessment can be uniquely summative. She contends that an assessment can be exclusively summative when the assessment stops at the judgment. There are plenty of examples that support her argument. For instance, many final examinations (i.e., taken at the end of academic year) in Asian countries, including the SLC exam in Nepal, are uniquely summative ones as they stop at judgement for grade promotion, grouping, jobs, scholarships, and so on. It means that the results are not used for the improvement of teaching, learning, and necessary educational change. Her second argument is that it is not possible for an

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assessment to be uniquely formative. She argues that feedback, which is considered as a backbone of formative assessment, is possible only after summative assessment. Put differently, no decisions for further improvement of student learning can be taken without any judgment. She goes to state that the process of assessment is the mechanism that carries out a judgment, and since the judgment cannot be made within a vacuum, points of comparison (i.e., criteria and standards) are necessary. Having said that, this is just Taras' (2009) notion of formative and summative assessment which contradicts with many of the other authors' and researchers' notions. Many argue that even a pure formative assessment involves a judgement.

To conclude, judgment is the core of assessment which has to be based on the interpretation (i.e., by comparing to a reference group or expectations) of measures and observations. The judgment normally leads to a decision, and the type of decision determines whether the assessment is formative or summative. From this conceptualization, it can be concluded that no assessment per se is a formative or summative one.

Formative Assessment or Assessment for Learning

While the essence of formative assessments as depicted in the above definitions is to enhance student learning, the process of enhancement of student learning is complex and is entangled with several factors that affect student learning. The following section, which presents the principles of formative assessment and some of the major components and contextual factors of formative assessment, further clarifies the concept of formative assessment.

Principles of formative assessment. Gareis (2007) has presented three core principles of assessment for learning. First, *formative assessment is integral to instruction*. This principle advocates that formative assessment and classroom instruction are not separate entities, and formative assessment is a part of the instruction. In this regard, Gareis states that formative assessment should help a teacher determine what the students are getting, what they're missing, and what needs to happen next.

Further, he adds, "To provide this information to the teacher and students, a formative assessment must be close in time to instruction." Second, *a formative assessment requires constructive feedback*. This principle highlights the importance of feedback on student learning. Feedback is taken as synonymous (however, not in the literal sense) to assessment for learning, as constructive feedback promotes student learning. However, such feedback should be honest, precise, and timely (Gareis, 2007; Wiliam & Leahy, 2007). The third principle states that

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formative assessment fosters student involvement. Studies have shown that the involvement of students in an assessment process is crucial to learning. Formative assessments create such an environment in which students can realize that mistakes are an inevitable part of learning and their mistakes do not affect their final grades. This situation motivates students to be involved in the assessment processes.

Components and contexts of assessment for learning. A dozens of authors (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Brookhart, 2008; Hargreaves, Mccallum, & Gipps, 2000; Harlen, & Crick, 2003; Harlen, 2012; James, 2006; Perie, Marion, Gong, & Wurtzel, 2007; Shepard, 2000; Wiliam, & Leahy, 2007) have mentioned that there are several components and contextual factors of formative assessment that affect student learning either positively or negatively. The components and contextual factors mentioned by the extant literature have been synopsised in a graphic form as depicted in the following figure (designed by me conceiving the ideas from the Assessment Reform Group, 1999).

Figure 6 below (see next page) shows the key components, contextual factors, conditions, and contexts of assessment for learning that directly or indirectly play significant roles in student learning. The reviewed literature has shown that there are twelve major components of assessment for learning, which include feedback, goal, instruction, prior knowledge, student engagement, the role of a teacher, self-assessment, peer-assessment, self-esteem, self-efficacy, a community of practice, and collaborative learning. Likewise, nine contextual factors, that is stakes of assessment, policy, school support, home support, education culture, the purpose of assessment, pedagogy, motivation, and learning theories, have been identified in the reviewed literature. I believe that this framework, which shows multi-facets of assessment for learning, has covered many dimensions of assessment for learning emerged in recent years. In the following sections, I have briefly synthesized the impact of components and contextual factors on the assessment for learning under the following two subtitles.

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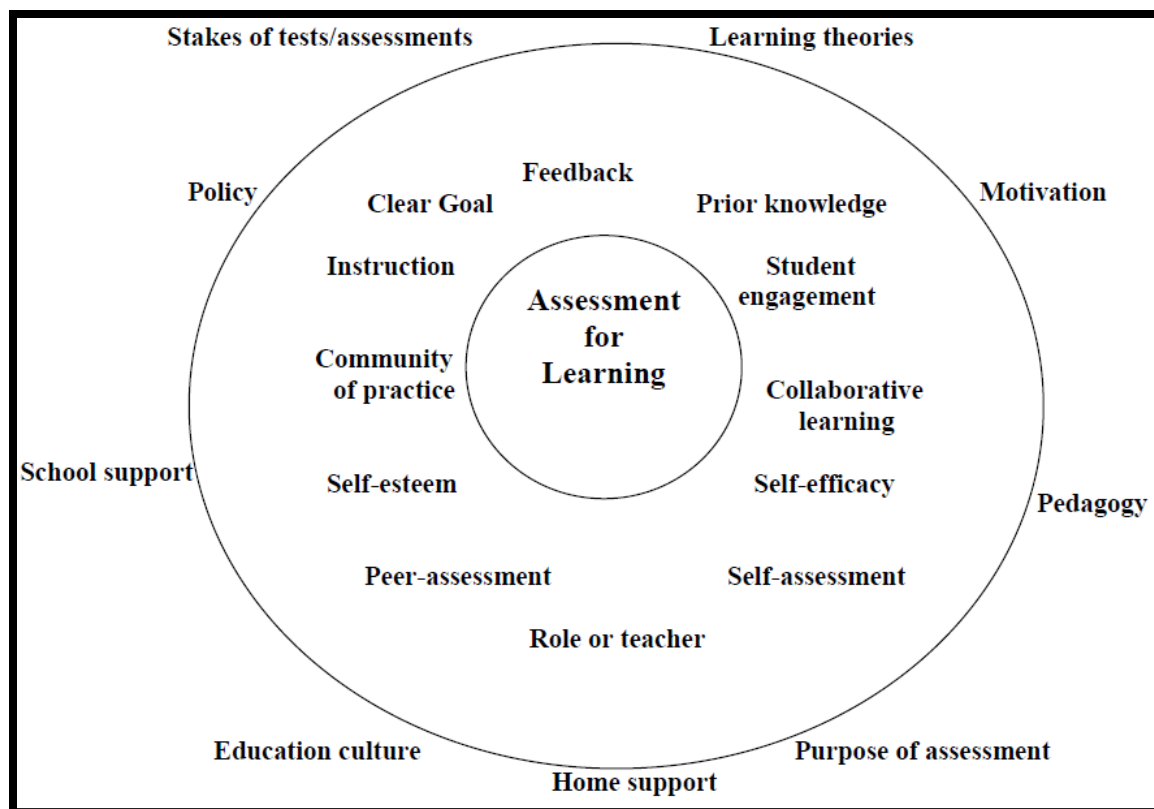


Figure 6: Components and contextual factors of formative assessment

Key components of assessment for learning and their impact on student learning. The following table (Table 4) shows how the twelve components of assessment for learning depicted in Figure 6 impact the student learning both positively and negatively.

Table 4: *Components of assessment for learning and their impact on student learning (ARG, 1999)*

Components	Positive Impact	Negative Impact
Feedback	Honest, precise, timely, and task-related feedback enhances learning (Wiliam, 2007; Black, et al. 3003).	Ego-involving and person-related feedback affects the students' motivation for learning and thus impacts them negatively.
Goal	Learning goal allows students to explore knowledge and helps them in developing higher level thinking skills.	Performance goal forces students to develop skills and strategies needed for high scores in tests.

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Instruction	Learning goal-oriented instructional strategies enhance learning as formative assessment is integral to instruction (Gareis, 2007).	Exam preparation-oriented instructional strategies may deter learning.
Prior Knowledge	Use of prior knowledge-based assessment system (individual reference norm) enhances learning (William, 2011, p. 8).	Use of comparison-based assessment system (social reference norm) may affect learning negatively.
Student engagement	Students' active participation in the entire instruction process enhances learning.	Lack of student engagement doesn't foster learning.
Role of teacher	Facilitating and encouraging the role of the teacher enhances learning.	Dictating and imposing role of the teacher may deter learning.
Self-assessment	Real learning only takes place when learners feel that they are taking ownership of their learning (William, 2003).	Sometimes self-assessment may not tell the learners' actual performance, which may affect learning negatively.
Peer-assessment	It strengthens the student's voice and improves communication between students and their teachers about their learning (William, 2003).	Sometimes, if not assessed sensitively, it may create misunderstanding between friends/peers.
Self-esteem	Learners who have high self-esteem learn faster (Harlen, 2012). It raises self-confidence.	Low self-esteem prevents learners from taking on new challenges for learning.
Self-efficacy	Learners who have high self-efficacy learn faster than others (Harlen, 2012).	Low self-efficacy lowers self-esteem and affects learning negatively.
Community of practice	Colleagues serve as critical friends whose feedback, constructive criticism, observation, and expertise enhances learning (James, 2006).	Lack of community of practice does not provide an opportunity to clarify ones' misconceptions and bewilderment.

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Collaborative learning	Working together with cooperation, communication, and critical open-mindedness enhances learning (Noddings, 2013).	A competitive learning environment may not help in developing brotherhood and togetherness and does not enhance learning.
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Contextual factors, conditions, and contexts affecting assessment for learning. Studies have shown that the effectiveness of assessment for learning, partially or to a great extent depends on the roles of the nine contextual factors (see Table 5 below) depicted in Figure 6. The key role of each of the factors is synthesized in the following table, and then the key factors are briefly described in the section that follows.

Table 5: *Contextual factors of assessment for learning*

Contextual Factors	Impact on Student Learning
Stakes of assessment	Studies suggest that stakes attached to assessment not only seriously undermine the scope and depth of learning but also deter learning (Harlen, 2012).
Policy	Teachers work within the structures and limitations set by schools, the district or local education requirements, and national policies. So, student-friendly policies that address the students' needs helps to enhance learning (Harlen & Crick, 2003)
School support	Schools can play a positive role in enhancing the students' learning by providing the necessary support and guidance to both needy students and teachers based on the evidence received from formative assessments.
Home support	A caring and encouraging home environment can enhance learning. If the parents' expectation is performance goal (this is the case in many Asian countries) rather than learning goal, it may negatively affect the students' learning.
Education culture	Performance goal dominates the learning goals in the society where students' success is associated with prestige. This situation may deter learning.

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Purpose of assessment	The purpose of assessment should be clear. If the purpose of assessment is to figure out what students are getting and what they are not getting in the classroom out of teaching and learning, and is not for the purpose of grading (Gareis, 2007), it creates a positive learning environment.
Pedagogy	Students' learning is affected positively or negatively depending on what pedagogy is used in the classroom as a means of classroom instruction.
Motivation	Motivation is an integral part of the assessment for learning as it impels learners to spend the time and effort needed for learning and solving problems (Harlen, 2003)
Learning theories	Although there is no straightforward connection between learning theories and principles of assessment for learning, the types of learning theories teachers use for assessment may influence the learning process (James, 2006).

As portrayed in Table 4 and Table 5 above, the twelve components and nine contextual factors (there might be others as well) are the important part of an assessment for learning as they can directly or indirectly contribute to the student's learning both positively and negatively. However, some of the components/factors are so influential and imperative that they have almost been used as synonymous (i.e., as was mentioned above, not in the literal sense) to assessment for learning (e.g., feedback). Given this fact, I am briefly synthesizing those components and factors of assessment for learning that have been mentioned almost in each of the literature reviewed above (i.e. Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Brookhart, 2008; Hargreaves, Mccallum, & Gipps, 2000; Harlen & Crick, 2003; Harlen, 2012; James, 2006; Perie, Marion, Gong, & Wurtzel, 2007; Shepard, 2000; Wiliam & Leahy, 2007), and have tremendous roles in student learning.

(1) *Feedback* is said to be the backbone of assessment for learning as it is one of the effective means that teachers (and others) use to enhance student learning. Studies suggest that in order to enhance learning, feedback should: (1) be honest, precise, and timely, (2) be student specific or based on the level of the student, (3) have task-related comments rather than ego-involving feedback, and (4) have an implicit or explicit recipe for future action (Wiliam, Black, & Leahy, 2007).

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(2) The other important component that directly affects the assessment for learning is classroom *instruction*. According to Gareis (2007), formative assessment is integral to instruction as instructional strategies have statistically significant effects on student achievement.

(3) The other most affecting components of assessment for learning is *student engagement* on which relies the success or failure of every individual. Doubtlessly, all authors and experts agree that student involvement in enhancing learning is paramount. Even today (although it was stated about 200 years ago), Benjamin Franklin's saying, "Tell me and I forget, Teach me, and I remember, Involve me, and I will learn (Franklin, 1750)" seems to be relevant, meaningful, and practical.

(4) The other equally important component is the *role of teachers*. It is said that a bad instrument in the hands of a good artist tunes well. Stiggins (2001) says, " Teachers can enhance or destroy the students' desire to learn more quickly and more permanently through their use of assessment than through any other tools at their disposal," tells a lot about the role of teachers.

(5) *Peer-assessment* and *self-assessment* are the other two important components of assessment for learning that are commonly used by teachers and educators to enhance student learning. Concluding their findings, Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and Wiliam (2003) contend that peer- and self-assessment make unique contributions to the development of the students' learning- they secure aims that cannot be achieved in any other way.

(6) The contextual factors such as stakes of assessment, policy (local or national), school support, home support, education culture, the purpose of assessment, pedagogy, the motivation for learning and learning theories, which are inter-related as well as have an integral part in the assessment for learning play enormous roles in enhancing student learning.

To sum up, no one assessment in itself is formative or summative. What determines whether or not the assessment is formative is the type of decision to be made based on the information received from the assessment (Wiliam & Leahy, 2007). Wiliam and Leahy (2007) argue that the same assessment can be both formative and summative because the term formative and summative applies to the functions they serve, not to the assessment itself/themselves. Further, they argue that assessment is formative when the information arising from the assessment is fed back to the system and is used to improve the performance of the system.

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Norm-referenced and Criterion-referenced Assessment

The principal basis of the distinction between a norm-referenced and criterion-referenced test is the use and interpretation of the test scores. Norm-referenced test scores provide a comparison of a pupil's performance in relation to others taking the test (Shepard, 1979). This test is primarily designed to rank order students for the purpose of selection or placement (Turnbull, 1989). In Clifford's (1973) words:

The norm-referenced evaluation framework utilizes an external referent which compares the performance of a given child with other children. Such a comparison may take the form of comparison with local or national norm data, or it may be a comparison of performance with the child's classmates (p. 325).

A criterion-referenced test is one where there is a predefined level of performance used to evaluate the outcomes, and it has nothing to do with the relative ranking among a large set of scores (Popham, 1975). About criterion-referenced assessment, Hambleton, Swaminathan, Algina, and Coulson (1978) state that criterion-referenced tests are used to monitor individual progress in objectives-based instructional programs, diagnose learning deficiencies, evaluate educational and social action programs, and assess competencies on various certification and licensing examinations. Clifford (2016) contends:

Criterion-referenced tests compare test takers against a set of clearly stated expectations or criteria. To provide enough information to assess whether someone has met a specific criterion, the expectations, or criterion statement, must describe three elements: (1) the task to be completed; (2) the conditions or contexts in which the task is to be performed; and (3) the performance standard, or level of success or accuracy, that is required (p. 225).

The following table presents a summary of some of the key characteristics presented in the extant literature (Popham, 1975; Shepard, 1979; Turnbull, 1989; Hambleton, Swaminathan, Algina, & Coulson, 1978; Clifford, 1973; Clifford, 2016) that distinguish a norm-referenced test from a criterion-referenced test.

Table 6

Difference between norm-referenced and criterion-referenced test

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Characteristics	Norm-referenced test	Criterion-referenced test
Purpose	(i) To rank each student in relation to the achievement of others in broad areas of knowledge. (ii) To differentiate between high and low achievers.	(i) To determine whether each student has achieved specific skills or concepts. (ii) To find out how much the students know before the instruction begins and after it has been completed.
Content	It measures broad skill areas sampled from a variety of textbooks, syllabi, and the judgments of curriculum experts. The predictive value is important.	It measures specific skills that make up a designated curriculum. Teachers and curriculum experts identify these skills. Each skill is expressed as an instructional objective.
Score interpretation	Each individual is compared with other examinees and assigned a score- usually expressed as a percentile or a grade equivalent score. Student achievement is reported for broad skill areas, although some norm-referenced tests do report student achievement for individual skills.	Each individual is compared with a pre-set standard for acceptable achievement. The performance of other examinees is irrelevant. A threshold (cut score) has to be established. Student achievement is reported for individual skills.

Table 6 above shows how a norm-referenced test is different from a criterion-referenced test in terms of purpose, content, and score interpretation. However, as mentioned earlier the main basis of the distinction between a norm-referenced and criterion-referenced test is the use and interpretation of the test scores.

High-stakes assessment/test

High-stakes assessment/testing is defined with regard to the consequences and importance

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of educational practices such as marks, grade promotion, graduation, or admission (Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2005). According to Madaus (1988), "High-stakes assessments are those whose results are used to make important decisions that immediately and directly affect the test takers and other stakeholders (cited in Qi, 2005)". In Amrein's and Berliner's (2002a) words, "High stakes assessment/tests are tests from which results are used to make significant educational decisions about schools, teachers, administrators, and students" (p. 1). In sum, from these definitions, one could argue that the assessment/test is said to be high-stakes if its outcome is used as the sole or main determinant for making any important decision/s.

The literature on high-stakes assessment has shown both positive and negative consequences of high-stakes assessment on students, teachers, curriculum, the society, and the entire education system. There have been many studies that looked at high-stakes assessments and their consequences from the social and political perspectives (e.g., Messick, 1989; McNamara & Roever, 2006; Shohamy, 1998, 2001). The following section presents both the positive and negative consequences of high-stakes assessments and then presents a brief account of the key construct of high-stakes assessment.

Positive and negative consequences of high-stakes tests/assessments. Minarechová (2012) states that high-stakes testing has already established a stable base in various countries and has become a natural and ordinary part of a student's life (p. 87). According to Amrein and Berliner (2002a), high-stakes tests enjoy popular support because they are believed to raise standards in a state's lowest-achieving schools (p. 9). They argue that students and teachers need such tests to understand what is important to learn and to teach (p. 4). Further, they contend that high-stakes tests motivate students to work harder and learn more in order to give their best and score well. Signorino (2007) conducted a study focusing on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA), in which perceptions of school principals, teachers, and students were the basis of the findings. The findings reported that school principals hold positive attitudes towards high-stakes testing and the publication of their results.

However, a number of researchers argue that there are negative consequences of a high-stakes test that may outweigh their benefits. For example, studies by Cheng, Andrews, and Yu (2010), Ho (2006), Mathema (2007), Suen and Yu (2006), Yu and Suen (2005), and Manman (2011) show that high-stakes tests result in many negative consequences ranging from negative impact on the curriculum and pedagogy to extremely negative consequences, such as test-taker

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distress and even suicide. Noting the negative consequences of high-stakes tests on curriculum and pedagogy, Ho (2006, p. 37) states, “it is not difficult to imagine how the *dog* (the curriculum and pedagogy) has been wagged by its *tail*” (high-stakes examinations). In other words, Ho maintains that classroom activities (teaching–learning) are not guided by the curriculum in contexts dominated by high-stakes tests, rather the activities are guided by the tests themselves. Thus, in many situations with external high-stakes tests, curriculum (a key and major component of educational activity) is overshadowed because the focus of teaching and learning activities in the classroom often becomes test preparation. Ho (2006) argues that one of the apparent negative effects of high-stakes tests in the school context is the reduction of the curriculum. She contends that teachers teach only the content that will be tested. It means that in a high-stakes testing context, test preparation gets higher priority than the coverage of the curriculum. In Qi’s (2005) words, “High-stakes testing narrows down the curriculum and changes the focus of instruction and pedagogy. The greater the importance of a high-stakes test, the more the classroom environment may be shaped by it.”

There are also many studies that have shown that high-stakes tests are discriminatory for certain groups of students when it comes to their linguistic and racial backgrounds and the economic situations of their families (Madaus & Clarke, 2001; Fox & Cheng, 2007, 2015). Madaus’ and Clarke’s (2001) study conducted in the United States focusing on minority students shows that students from low-income families, or those whose first language was not English, or students with special needs performed at a significantly lower level than all other students across three subject areas: English, Mathematics, and Science (p. 16). Fox’s and Cheng’s (2007) research on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) supports Madaus’ and Clarke’s findings. Fox’s and Cheng’s study revealed that in this high-stakes English language (i.e., literacy) test, students whose first language was not English did not perform as well as those who spoke English as their native language.

The literature on high-stakes tests has shown a variety of negative consequences ranging from exam frauds to psychological distress on test takers. Signorino’s (2007) study has shown that the stakes of tests are the major factors that are responsible for exam frauds, such as cheating, hiring examinees, and unethical or improper practices in preparing students for the exam. Some of such common practices include the use of the prior year’s test as practice, changing the students’ answers, extending the time for the test beyond the maximum limit,

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helping students during testing, and providing practice items from the actual test (Signorino, 2007). Describing the extremely negative consequences of high-stakes tests on test takers in Hong Kong, Ho (2006) states that May, June, and July, when most public examinations are held, and the candidates' results are disclosed, are also the months with the highest rate of documented suicides. Such suicides are common in many of the other Asian countries (Suen & Yu, 2006). Presenting the negative consequences of high-stakes tests, Suen and Yu (2006) contend that such tests cause psychological and pathological problems and the annual suicides of high school students who had not performed well in the national college entrance exam are very common in China. They conclude that Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Singapore also experience test-related distress and suicides every year.

High-stakes test-related distress and social pressure on test takers are not exclusively limited to the Eastern world. Rather, both the Eastern and Western worlds are experiencing these problems. However, the degree of severity of such consequences might be different. As described in Chapter two, the enactment of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in the USA mandated each State to establish State academic standards and a State testing system that meets the federal requirements, and also instituted sanctions and rewards for public schools based on each school's Adequate Yearly Progress status (Dee & Jacob, 2010, p. 149). Studies have shown that the sanctions and rewards systems have increased the stakes of the tests and have eventually created social pressure on the test takers (Simpson, Lacava, & Graner, 2004; Goertz, 2005). Similarly, there have been many studies and study reports (e.g., Mathema, & Bista led report, 2006) that have shown that many students drop out of schools due to fear of exam failure. However, there has been hardly any official data that exactly mention the number of students who drop out of school every year due to the stakes of the exams (Bhatta, 2006).

Social Dimensions of Assessments: Intensifier and Special Assessment

In recent years, educators have examined the social consequences of high-stakes testing from different perspectives. For example, scholars such as Messick (1989), McNamara and Roever (2006), and Shohamy (1998, 2001) demonstrate the social and political dimensions of language tests, including their manipulation by policy and other powerful decision makers. They have examined the multi-facets of language tests including consequences beyond classroom practices and school environments. Messick's (1989) notion of the consequential basis of construct validity has illustrated the social implications of language testing. Messick argues that

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social and cultural values and assumptions underlie the test constructs, and thereby are an integral aspect of tests.

Further, elaborating Messick's notion of consequential validity of language tests, McNamara and Roever (2006) explicate the social dimensions of high-stakes language tests, and particularly the impact they have on the society and educational systems. They suggest that test interpretation should not only consider the test itself but should also look beyond the test booklet at the larger sociopolitical contexts. They discuss how language assessments in educational systems serve social, cultural, and political goals. Similarly, Shohamy (1998, 2001) has also led a movement associated with test consequences from a sociopolitical perspective (see *Critical Language Testing*, Shohamy, 1998), in which she contends that the power and authority of tests enable policymakers to use them as effective tools for controlling the educational systems and prescribing the behavior of those who are affected by their results—administrators, teachers, and students. For instance, government and ministry policymakers who are aware of the authoritative power of tests, use them to manipulate educational systems, control curricula, and impose new textbooks and new teaching methods on teachers and students at the classroom level (Shohamy, 1998, 2001). Further, she argues that at the school level, principals use tests to influence how teachers teach and teachers use tests to influence student learning.

The literature reviewed above shows that stakes of assessments/tests are the primary and the most important factors responsible for a variety of negative consequences. In other words, the life-changing functions the high-stakes assessment/tests possess, such as selection of students for admission to college or universities, grouping students into programs, selection of employees, selection for promotion, and screening for potential immigrants put the test takers and the other stakeholders under enormous pressure (McNamara & Roever, 2006). Consequently, the ubiquitous obsession and unnecessary pressure for a better achievement makes the test takers nervous and in turn leads to a variety of negative consequences.

Intensifier: Degree of Stakes and Consequences of Assessments

A study conducted by Bhattarai (2014) focusing on the *negative consequences of high-stakes test* showed that in addition to the academic stakes of assessments/tests, such as grade promotion, selection, and screening, there are multiple factors that are associated with the socio-cultural situation, socio-economical condition, and value-based education culture of the country that intensifies the degree of stakes and consequences of the assessments/tests. The study has

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indicated that issues of prestige and face, poverty, the role of school administrators, teachers, and parents, the role of mass media, the stigma attached to the failure, marriage culture, the social value of education are some of the major factors that amplify the negative consequences of the high-stakes exam. For instance, one of the participants in the study stated, “The SLC exam failures are considered to be illiterate in our society.” As shown by the findings, after failing the SLC exam, a person's basic abilities are questioned and his/her personality is evaluated negatively. This social perception has the potential to magnify the despair felt by those who fail the exam. Messick's (1989), McNamara's and Roever's (2006), and Shohamy's (1998, 2001) notions of social dimensions of language testing support Bhattarai's (2014) findings mentioned above.

There have also been other studies (cf. Ho, 2005; Suen & Yu, 2006; Yu & Suen, 2005) that show that a number of social and cultural aspects of high-stakes tests contribute to intensifying the negative consequences. Yu and Suen (2005) have suggested that exam-driven *education fever* on stakeholders is predominant in the East. *Education fever* refers to the phenomenon of a national obsession with education; particularly parents' feverish aspiration and support for their children's educational attainment and achievement (Kim, 2004, cited in Yu & Suen, 2005, p. 18). Talking about the origin of 'education fever' in the Korean context, Lee (2005) argues that the excessive educational zeal in the present South Korean society mainly derives its origin from the academic attainment-oriented doctrines and elitism based on the tradition of Confucian education (Lee, 2005, p. 6). Traditional Confucian education, originating in China, emphasizes moral practices regarding socio-political principles and ethical values (Lee, 2005, p. 5). It is believed that education fever, not only in South Korea but also in many Asian countries, including Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam is the by-product of Confucianism. Yu's and Suen's (2005) and Lee's (2005) studies also support this notion. Yu and Suen (2005) contend that although education fever has brought about some positive consequences, it has contributed to maximizing the degree of high-stakes test-induced negative consequences on the test takers.

As some of the participants, specifically intellectual participants in the present study, have recommended the MOE of Nepal to introduce a special type of assessment that could assess an individual's specific talent, skill, and knowledge, it seems to be sensible to include *special assessment* in the conceptual framework of educational assessment. The following section presents a brief description of the *special assessment*.

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Special Assessment: Assessments for Students with Special Traits and Needs

It is a natural phenomenon that every human being is different from others in terms of skill, learning ability, performance, and so on. Heredity and the environment where one grows up are the major factors that differentiate a person from others. Due to the idiosyncratic nature of human beings, a 'one-size fits all' type of assessment cannot provide valid and reliable information about a person. In this regard, Thompson, Quenemoen, Thurlow, and Ysseldyke (2001) contend:

...individual students sometimes require particular approaches to assessment to show what they know and are able to do. For example, a student who is blind, cannot read and respond to a paper-and-pencil test, even if the student knows and understands the content on the test. For that student, taking the general assessment measures the effect of the blindness, not the student's skills and understanding. But, with the accommodation of a Braille text, the blind student who uses Braille can respond to test items and be measured against the standards expected of all students (p. 8).

Many individuals have learning disabilities, language barriers, or other specific circumstances that have parted them from the mainstream (Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004). For those students (students with special needs), the AERA, APA, and NCME standards (2014) have presented special types of assessments called *alternate assessments*. Alternative assessments are, particularly in the context of educational assessment, defined as the assessments developed for students with significant cognitive disabilities. Further, the AERA, APA, and NCME standards (2014) states:

Based on performance standards different from those used for regular assessments, alternative assessments provide these students with the opportunity to demonstrate their standing and progress in learning. An alternative assessment might consist of an observation checklist, a multilevel assessment with performance tasks, or a portfolio that includes responses to selected-response and open-ended tasks. The assessment tasks are developed with the special characteristics of this population in mind (p. 190).

To sum up, given the idiosyncratic nature of every individual, the assessment system should be developed in such a way that it could assess an individual's specific talent, skill, and knowledge. A number of assessment tools/techniques depending on the nature of the learner, such as project work, field work, task-based or performance-based assignment, observation

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checklist, self-assessment, peer-assessment, portfolio-based assessment, can be used to assess the specific knowledge, skill, and talent (AERA, APA & NCME standards, 2014).

Validity of Test Scores Interpretation

Assessments have generally been evaluated in terms of their reliability and validity, with reliability providing an indication of the consistency or stability of assessment scores, and validity addressing the meaning and utility of the scores (Kane, 2011, p. 582). Validity becomes one of the most important aspects of educational assessments when it comes to formative or high-stakes assessments. The term 'validity' has been defined and interpreted in a number of ways. Regarding interpretations of validity, the experts are mainly divided into two schools of thought—advocates of semantic interpretation of scores and argument-based approach to validity. Authors such as Borsboom, Mellenberg and Van Heerden (2004), Popham (1997), and Sackett (1998) have explained validity in terms of semantic interpretation of scores to the exclusion of most consequences (Kane, 2011). Authors such as Messick (1989), Linn (1997), Shepard (1997), and Kane (2006) have advocated for a conception of validity involving both the meaning of assessment scores and the consequences of their use. In the midst of this debate, Bachman and Palmer (1996) have presented an Assessment Use Argument (AUA) approach to interpreting validity. McNamara and Roever (2006) and Shohamy (1998, 2001), on the other hand, have analyzed the issues of validity or test validation from social and political perspectives. Given the various interpretations or notions of validity, the notions that seem to be relevant to this study are briefly presented below.

Messick's (1989) notion of validity. Messick (1989), who is well-known for the unified concept of validity, defines validity as "an integrated evaluative judgment of the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness of inferences and actions based on test scores or other modes of assessment." Messick (1996) presents a framework of validity in relation to washback and authenticity. To address the central issues of validity as a unified concept, Messick (1996) has presented six distinguishable aspects of validity: content, substantive, structural, generalizability, external, and consequential. The following table synthesizes the six aspects of construct validity and their characteristics (Messick, 1996, p. 248).

Table 7

Aspects of construct validity with their characteristics

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Aspects of construct validity	Characteristics
Content	includes evidence of content relevance and representativeness as well as of technical qualities,
Substantive	refers to theoretical rationales for the observed performance regularities and item correlations,
Structural	appraises the fidelity of the test score scales to the structure of the construct
Generalizability	examines the extent to which score properties and interpretations generalize to and across population groups,
External	refers to the assessment scores' relationship with the other measures (i.e., license, placement, etc.),
Consequential	includes evidence and rationales for evaluating consequences of score interpretation and use in both the short- and long- term.

Messick has raised two important aspects (i.e., threats to construct validity) of construct validity: construct under-representation and construct-irrelevant. Illustrating these two threats to validity, Messick states:

In the threat to validity known as construct under-representation (which jeopardizes authenticity), the assessment is deficient: the test is too narrow and fails to include important dimensions or facets of focal constructs. In the threat to validity known as construct-irrelevant variance (which jeopardizes directness), the assessment is too broad, containing excess reliable variance that is irrelevant to the interpreted construct. Both threats are operative in all assessments (p. 224).

What is obvious from the accounts presented above is that if the test is not valid or if the test doesn't test what it ought to test, the consequences will be a nightmare as many important decisions around the world, both in academia and outside of academia, are taken based on the test scores. Due to its high value (various functions and uses), the issues of validity, along with other test qualities, always come to the center of discussion and debate.

Bachman's and Palmer's (2010) notion of validity. In the context of language assessment and testing, Bachman and Palmer (2010) present their notions of usefulness in terms of a combination of six test qualities—reliability, construct validity, authenticity, interactiveness, impact, and practicality. In other words, the authors present their framework of usefulness in a

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mathematical framework: Usefulness = reliability + construct validity + authenticity + interactiveness + impact + practicality. The authors argue that the notion of test usefulness is mainly guided by the following three principles (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 18).

- (1) The overall usefulness of the test that is to be maximized, rather than the individual qualities that affect usefulness.
- (2) The individual test qualities cannot be evaluated independently but must be evaluated in terms of their combined effect on the overall usefulness of the test.
- (3) Test usefulness and the appropriate balance among the different qualities cannot be prescribed in general, but must be determined for each specific testing situation.

Focusing on the key aspects of validity, Bachman, and Palmer state that two of the qualities, reliability and validity, which are critical for tests are sometimes referred to as essential assessment qualities. They have also presented construct validity as part of the usefulness of the test. Defining the term 'construct validity', the authors state that construct validity is used to refer to the extent to which we can interpret the given test scores as an indicator of the ability/abilities, or construct(s), we want to measure. Highlighting the construct validity, Bachman and Palmer (2010) contend:

It is important for the test developers and users to realize that test validation is an on-going process and that the interpretation we make of test scores can never be considered valid.

Justifying the interpretations, we make on the basis of language test scores begins with test designs and continues with the gathering of evidence to support our intended interpretations (p. 22).

Kane's (2011) notion of validity. Kane's (2011) approach to test validation seems to be useful in terms of drawing valid inferences from the test scores. Kane (2011, p. 24) calls this an "interpretative argument," and argues, "We need an argument to defend the relationship of the score to that interpretation. The author defines "interpretative argument" as a chain of inferences from the observed performances to conclusions and decisions included in the interpretation. The chain of inferences (Kane uses the metaphor of "bridges" for each of these inferences) has widely been used by the test users to draw conclusions from the test scores. The following figure presents Kane's (2011) chain of inferences.

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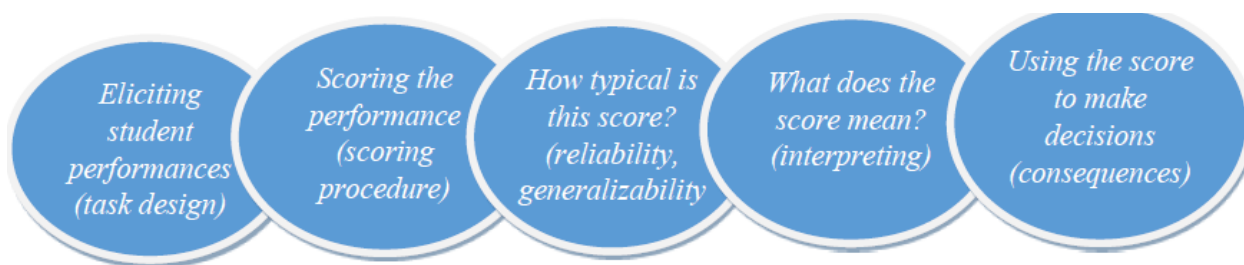


Figure 7: Kane's chain of inferences

As depicted in Figure 7, the process of inferences includes the following five steps: tests development, scoring procedure, assurance of reliability and generalizability, interpretation of scores, and decisions based on the interpretation of the scores.

Going beyond Messick's notion of consequential validity of a language test, McNamara and Roever (2006) explicate the social dimension of a high-stakes language test and its in-depth effect on society and educational systems, and Shohamy (1998) explains the political dimension of assessments (see page 43 for details). As language assessments in educational systems serve social, cultural, and political goals, McNamara and Roever (2006) and Shohamy (1998) argue that test validation should be defined from the broader societal and political perspectives, both at the micro and macro level.

The reviewed literature points out a need of commitment from the policymakers and higher authorities for not manipulating the tests in order to serve irrelevant purposes because it is by no means within the boundary of the theory of validity. The consequences of the use of invalid test interpretation for taking important decision can easily be estimated. It also suggests a number of ways that could be used to strengthen the validity of a test by curtailing the factors that could affect the validity of test score interpretation negatively.

Connecting the Key Concepts of Educational Assessment with the Present Study

As the present study is a transition of an assessment system of the SLC exam from a numerical grading system to a letter grading with GPA and grade descriptors, it seems to be essential to highlight some of the key aspects of educational assessment. More importantly, many of the intellectual participants in the present study have mentioned those aspects explicitly or implicitly during focus group discussions and interviews. For instance, almost all the participating teachers, school principals, experts, educators, and university professors have mentioned summative and formative assessment multiple times. They recommended the MOE to introduce a formative assessment in the entire education system. Likewise, some of them have

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talked about norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests while discussing the type of reform that took place in Nepal. The participants also discussed a lot about high-stakes assessment and its positive and negative consequences on test takers and the entire education system.

Additionally, many of the participants suggested the MOE should introduce a special type of assessment that could assess multi-talents, skills, and knowledge that the individual test takers possess. Some of the issues that are directly or indirectly associated with the validity of tests were raised explicitly or implicitly in the data. These circumstances made it mandatory to present concepts, principles, and practices of some of the key aspects of educational assessment, such as summative and formative assessments, norm-referenced and criteria-referenced tests, high-stakes assessments, special assessments, and validity of test score interpretations.

PART TWO: SITUATING THE STUDY WITHIN THE LITERATURE

The high-stakes summative assessments have been used worldwide (with a few exceptions) for years in such a way that it has developed to be a part of the education culture, i.e., a culture of external and/or standardized testing. This suggests the similarity of the fundamental tenets of the assessment systems all over the world. In the past, both in the East and West, the 'standards of education and student attainment' formed the core tenet of the assessment system. In the course of time, the core tenet of the assessment system was overshadowed by the advent of 'assessment for learning.' The wave of assessment for learning not only forced the Western world to reform and re-think their summative assessment systems but also shook the deep-rooted high-stakes assessment system in the Eastern world. Consequently, several countries, both in the East and West (e.g., Germany, Spain, Portugal, Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Philippines, Ghana, Egypt, and South Africa) went through assessment reform, i.e., a transition from a summative assessment to a formative one. Some instances of such shifts are presented below.

In recent years, the debate on the impact of high-stakes assessment on the student has emerged as a matter of global concerns. Given the fact that a high-stakes assessment system without a supportive environment can harm learning (Black, 1998; Stiggins, 2004; Wiliam, 2006)), many countries (e.g., Nepal, Finland, Greece, France, Wales), both in the East and West, have attempted to reduce or abolish the stakes of the assessment. These instances indicate the global nature of the assessment reform phenomenon as a concerning issue. Considering this fact, I chose the most relevant (among the available ones) literature without being confined to the

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territories or countries in order to situate this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW IN A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

The relevance of the literature review in a grounded theory approach is an extremely controversial issue. In Dunne's (2011) words, "Within the field of grounded theory research, the use of existing literature represents a polemical and divisive issue, which continues to spark debate" (p. 113). Similarly, in reference to this debate, Charmaz (2006) states that the position/place of the literature review in grounded theory research has long been both disputed as well as misunderstood. The dispute and misunderstanding of the review of extant literature began with the evolution of different types of grounded theories and continues to yet remain unresolved. The extant literature on grounded theory suggests two schools of thought over the review of the literature, as presented below.

First, there are some theorists (e.g., Glaser, 1967; Holton, 2004; Christiansen, 2011) who vehemently deny a review of the extant literature before data analysis and theory development. Advocating this notion, one of the pioneers of grounded theory, Glaser states:

The fundamental concern is based on the premise that a detailed literature review conducted at the outset may 'contaminate' the data collection, analysis, and theory development by leading the researcher to impose existing frameworks, hypotheses or other theoretical ideas upon the data, which would in turn undermine the focus, authenticity and quality of the grounded theory research (cited in Dunne, 2011, p. 114).

Following Glaser, Holton (2007) contends that grounded theory requires the researcher to enter the research field with no preconceived problem statement, interview protocols, or extensive review of the literature" (p. 269). Further emphasizing the postponement of a literature review before theory development, Christiansen (2011) states that if the researcher cannot accept the delaying of the literature review process during the research, they should decide to choose another research method. There are many other theorists and researchers who believe that conducting literature review prior to the substantial development of the theory will likely derail a potentially good theory before it has the opportunity to blossom (Evans, 2013, p. 48).

Second, there are other theorists (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006; Cutcliffe, 2000; McGhee et al., 2007; Strübing, 2007, Lempert, 2007) who support a review of literature, adopting a less extreme stance, even before or during data analysis and theory development. About the literature review, Strauss and Corbin (1998) contend:

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It is not unusual for students to become enamored with a previous study (or studies) either before or during their investigations, so much so that they are nearly paralyzed in an analytical sense. It is not until they can let go and put trust in their abilities to generate knowledge that they finally are able to make discoveries of their own (p. 49).

Trying to find a middle path between the two extreme notions (like the debate on the chicken or the egg), Strübing (2007, p. 587) argues that the fundamental point is “not whether previous knowledge should be used in actual data analysis; the important insight lies rather in how to make proper use of previous knowledge”.

Pointing out the importance of the literature review prior to theory development, a number of grounded theorists argue that an early revision of literature (prior to data analysis) can, in fact, facilitate the preparation of a solid basis for the study. It contributes to situating the study within the body of relevant literature and justifying the study, pointing out the gap between the previous studies and the present one. The literature review can serve as an opportunity to form the stepping stage for what you do in subsequent sections or chapters (Charmaz, 2006). By strongly supporting the early review of literature, Dunne (2011) contends that it would be both unfortunate and unconstructive to sacrifice the numerous advantages that are derived from conducting an early literature review based on the concern about the impact of extant ideas on the researcher (p. 117).

The instances presented above indicate that grounded theorists have been divided into two groups regarding the literature review. This controversy has created a confusing environment, especially for the users of novice grounded theory. Moreover, this integral embeddedness of issue towards grounded theory study prevents any grounded theory users/researchers to escape from it. Many researchers argue that it is the researcher who decides and justifies where to present the literature review in the study. Counteracting the purists (those who deny a literature review), Holliday (2002) and Charmaz (2006) argue that the literature review and theoretical frameworks are ideological sites, wherein, you claim, locate, evaluate, and defend your position. Similarly, questioning the pragmatic aspect of the purists' stance regarding a literature review, Dunne (2011) argues that the idea of postponing a literature review until data collection and analysis is simply unworkable for many researchers. He further expounds that this applies in particular to Ph.D. students, whose research funding, ethical approval and progression through the doctoral process may all be heavily dependent upon producing a detailed literature

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review prior to commencing with the primary data collection and analysis. In fact, “Student research projects at all levels typically require both a literature review and theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006, p. 163).

From the accounts presented above, it can be inferred that it is imperative to clarify the treatment of the extant literature in this study. Regarding literature review in a grounded theory study, Dune (2011) argues, “Whatever decision is taken, it is imperative that the researcher clearly articulates this issue from the outset and cogently outline and defend the preferred option to minimize the potential for misunderstanding between the author and the reader," which, in fact, intensified my belief. Considering the debates, discussions, and suggestions, I determined to use the extant literature both, before and after theory development. I used the literature before theory development (data analysis) in order to situate this study, and subsequently, the use of literature after data analysis helped me validate the findings. Charmaz’s (2006) following notion supports my decision:

Social constructionists disavow the idea that researchers can or will begin their studies without prior knowledge and theories about their topics. Rather than being a *tabula rasa*, constructionists advocate recognizing prior knowledge and theoretical preconceptions and subjecting them to rigorous scrutiny.

Throughout the study, however, I was aware of avoiding the imposition of preconceived ideas and categories in this study. As said by the purists, I did not let the extant literature contaminate the emergence of a new theory from the empirical data. For this, I employed a constant comparative (see Methodology section for detail) method and used the written memos extensively, which explicitly helped gain a control of the suspected impact by the extant literature. The following section attempts to situate the present study within the extant literature.

Situating the Assessment Reform within the Extant Literature

The primary purpose of reviewing the extant literature prior to data analysis, as stated above, is to situate this study around the extant literature and identify the gap that helps to justify the significance of the study. In the following section, I analytically review the most relevant literature dividing them into the three domains of assessment reform: Standard focused reform, learning-focused reform and stakes focused reform. Although I have referred to specific countries under the three domains of assessment reforms (i.e., in the following section), it does not mean that these countries have exclusively experienced a single type of assessment reform as

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mentioned above. Those countries might have gone through several other types of reform (other than the types specified above) since then to date.

Standard focused reform. An assessment that changes the approach without altering the stakes of the assessment, can be termed as *standard focused reform*. The reforms, in this domain, include changes in the exam patterns, question types, and pass marks, marking system, and other structural changes. The main purpose of such reform as stated earlier is to improve the assessment system, increase the quality of education, compete with other countries in terms of educational attainment, and address the local and global challenges in their institutions. In this type of assessment reform, the stakes of the assessment remain unchanged in the reformed assessment system. But/or in some cases, (e.g., ‘No Child Left Behind’ Act in the USA) the assessment reform increases the stakes of the assessment. Many countries, including the UK, the USA, Denmark, Russia, Latin America, Brazil, Chile, and several Asian countries, such as China, Japan, South Korea, etc. have experienced the type of reforms mentioned above in their educational institutions (Berry, 2011).

One of the most significant, but controversial, reforms that are categorized under this segregation (i.e., standard focused reform) is the enactment of ‘No Child Left Behind (NCLB)’ Act in the USA. According to Goertz (2005), NCLB mandates each state to establish *State academic standards* and a *State testing system* that meets the federal requirements. For this, the NCLB Act provisions testing in reading and mathematics from at least once during each of two grade spans (annually) - once in Grades 3 through 8 and once in high school (p. 74). In fact, the hallmark features of this legislation compelled the states to conduct annual student assessments linked to state standards, to identify schools that are failing to make “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP), and to institute sanctions and rewards based on each school’s AYP status (Dee and Jacob, 2010, p. 149). Describing how the enactment of the NCLB Act raised the stakes of assessment in the public school system, Simpson, Lacava and Sampson Graner (2004) contend:

NCLB dramatically extends the contingencies of high-stakes assessments by creating strong rewards and punishments based on students’ performance. Under NCLB guidelines, schools that perform well may receive public recognition and financial rewards, but those whose students perform poorly could receive sanctions and even be subject to State takeover (p. 68).

Studies have shown both the positive as well as negative consequences of the

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implementation of the high-stakes assessment system. Myriads of studies (e.g., Dee & Jacob, 2010; Goertz, 2005; Dee & Jacob, 2010) have shown that the enactment of the NCLB Act has created a number of challenges and problems ranging from budgetary issue to negative impact of the high-stakes assessment on the test-takers.

In the 1960s, Sweden reformed its assessment system by introducing a norm-referenced grading system with the belief that learning was something which could be quantified and measured (Wikström, 2006). With the changing view and perspective of people (i.e., the emerging new views on assessment coming from research), the assessment system was severely criticized. As a result, after years of practice, the Swedish government again reformed the assessment system through replacing the norm-referenced grading system with a criterion-referenced grading system.

Similarly, Russia reformed the assessment system of secondary schools in order to promote national standards. In 2003, the government introduced a national system of student assessment in the final year of secondary schooling in Russia which aimed at setting the minimum standards and providing the much-needed credibility to the nationally recognized certification (Berry, 2011).

New Zealand (Crooks, 2002) has also gone through almost the same type of assessment reforms in which criterion-referenced assessment replaced the current norm-referenced assessment. Similarly, as the New Zealand government changed the school curriculum multiple times, the assessment system was also reformed several times.

Such reforms have taken place multiple times all over the world including the Asian, Latin American and African countries. Irrespective of assessment reforms, many of the countries in these regions have been using high-stakes examinations/tests in their educational institutions.

Presenting a list of the countries under ‘standard focused reform’ does not imply that the assessment reforms that took place in those countries were only ‘standard focused reform’. Rather other types of reforms might have also been implemented in those countries since the date of assessment reformed mentioned above to date. In the recent years, these countries have been flowing into the mainstream of assessment reform, i.e., reform from a summative to formative assessment (Berry, 2011).

The assessment reforms presented under this category are not the same type of assessment reform as mentioned in this study. The assessment reform (NCLB Act) in the USA

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appears totally opposite to what has been done in Nepal. Wherein, the enactment of the NCLB Act, in the USA increased the stakes of the current assessments, whereas the study being presented here focuses on minimizing (or abolishing) the stakes of the assessment. However, as a grounded theory user, it was imperative to explore and review any other grounded theory studies on this topic (i.e., the topic of this study) that explicated the high-stakes assessment reform phenomena in details. Having gone through the literature on this category (i.e., standard focused reform), the review failed to reveal any grounded theory study.

Learning focused reform. The assessment that transforms from a summative to a formative one can be termed as a *learning-focused reform*. In other words, it refers to the reform, which shifts from the assessment system that assesses the student's learnings to the assessment system that primarily serves the purpose of promoting students' learning. The powerful waves of assessment reforms, as stated earlier, have been gusting through the educational institutions resulting in reforms from a high-stakes *summative assessment* system (assessment of learning) to a *formative assessment* (assessment for learning) around the world. The principal focus of such reforms apparently is to enhance teaching and learning via assessment by tracing out where the learners were in their learning in the past, where they are now, and where they are heading and what support do they need to get to the destination. There are several studies and articles on the second type of reforms, ranging from the Eastern to Western worlds, such as, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Philippines, Ghana, Egypt, South Africa and so on.

Around 1970, Germany reformed the national 6-point marking system in Grade 1–6, replacing it by different types of formative tools for assessment, such as verbal reports rather than Grades (Ingenkamp, 1971). The main impulse for reform was the massive shift in perceptions about learning that are commonly and internationally labeled as the need for “lifelong learning” and “learning-to-learn” (Berry, 2011). After years of implementation of formative assessment procedures, the reform received a number of criticisms with the arguments that it can't enhance student learning. Wagner and Valtin (2003) carried out a study by comparing marks versus verbal reports to analyze the effectiveness of the newly reformed assessment (cited in Berry, 2011). For this, 241 children from East and West Berlin were recruited and tested several times, individually or in groups, from Grade 2 to Grade 4. The findings of the study suggested that the students did not significantly benefit from the verbal

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reports. One of the possible reasons, as suggested by the study, is the singular practice formative assessment by teachers when writing the reports but not in everyday situations in the classroom. Whatever are the causal reasons for the failure of the effectiveness of the reform, the reform apparently failed to meet its aims. Unlike the current study, the focus of the study was to seek the effectiveness of the reform.

Similarly, after the fall of the dictatorship in Spain in 1975, Spain introduced an educational change along with assessment reform in 1990, underpinned with the belief that education provided in the dictatorship period cannot be appropriate in a democratic nation (Remesal, 2007). This belief was further intensified after Spain was instated as a Democratic member of the European Union. As a result, Spain reformed the assessment system from a summative assessment to a formative one. According to Remesal (2007), the reform curtailed the number of State examinations to a single exam, which existed as the gateway to university education. Except for the single State examination, all other assessments in Spain are currently, classroom and teacher based. Remesal (2007) conducted a study to investigate if the reformed assessment met its goal, for which, fifty Spanish school teachers were interviewed. The finding showed a disparity between the goal of the reform and teachers' practices. "The teachers, in particularly secondary school teachers, inclined strongly to associate assessment with accountability instead of linking assessment with teaching and learning" (Remesal, 2007). Similar to the previous study, the focus of this study was to analyze the effectiveness of the reform.

Bansilal's (2011) study conducted in South Africa focusing on assessment reform in Mathematics shows that the Mathematics teachers encounter several constraints in implementing the reform attributed to the students' diverse learning culture, backgrounds, lack of resources, a large number of students in the class, etc. The study was set in the context of an under-resourced classroom with a large number of Grade 9 learners, from disadvantaged backgrounds, presenting serious problems with fundamental mathematical concepts. For this study, data were collected through lesson observations, through two interviews with the Mathematics teacher, and a focus group discussion with the Mathematics students. According to Bansilal, when the Government of South Africa decided to implement a new national assessment tool called the *Common Tasks for Assessment* (CTA) without preparation, the concerned teachers like Vanitha (the participating teacher in the study) had to use different strategies, such as deconstruction of the big task into

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'little bits', coaching the learners, etc. in order to overcome the challenges. Highlighting the major constraints in mediation attempts, Bansilal states, "The teacher's mediation attempts were impeded by the learners' (non) readiness for the task, the task demands, the restrictions of the curriculum demands and the fact that the policy and the classroom realities are irreconcilable" (p. 107). Bansilal's (2011) study shows that the weakly planned reform resulted in many problems and challenges. In sum, this study has explored the challenges and problems attached to the implementation of a weakly planned assessment reform.

Tan (2011) presents an account of assessment reform in Singapore and its subsequent impact on the nature and quality of students' learning. The Singapore Examination and Assessment Board of the MOE has reformed the assessment system focusing on project work, Science practical assessment, source-based items in Social Studies, case study items in Economics, etc. It was clearly a reform from summative to formative assessment. According to Tan (2011), in 2004–2005, a major research project was undertaken to examine the quality of teacher assignments and associated student work in Singapore schools. Tan's study explicated the alignment between teachers' assessment tasks and associated student work in terms of enhancing student learning. Altogether, a total of 6,526 samples of teachers' assessment tasks and associated student work in 59 Singapore schools (30 primary schools and 29 secondary schools) over two years (2004–2005) were collected and analyzed. Concurrently, classroom observations were made to understand the association mechanism between the instructional and formative practices of teachers and the assessment tasks (Tan, 2011). The findings suggested that the qualitative approach-based assessment reform could not help in enhancing student learning in Singapore as the assessment tasks focused heavily on assessing students' memorization of factual and procedural knowledge.

As stated earlier, the studies from different parts of the world including Portugal, Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Philippines, Ghana, and Egypt evidence the commonplace occurrence of the reforms from a high-stakes summative to formative assessment in the 21st century in school education. Despite the proclaimed adherence to the use of assessment for learning, as suggested by the research, the teachers are still using high-stakes summative assessments in classrooms. This implies the failure in implementation or the practice enactment of the reform agenda. In his study, Fernandes (2009b) contends that formative assessment was yet to become a norm in teachers' classroom practices.

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The literature reviewed above revealed some interesting facts about the assessment reform movement. On one hand, the stakeholders including teachers demonstrate a substantial agreement that formative assessment enhances student learning. On the other hand, leaving some exception, this widely shared notion does not seem to be reflected in the classroom practices. Remesal's (2007) study showed a mismatch between the reform intentions and teachers' conceptions of assessment. Several countries in Asia and Africa planned and implemented their assessment reforms in their own distinctive ways meaning to enhance student learning, but generally found tensions between the assessment reform policies and assessment practices.

The literature above is indicative of the policy-makers and the government authorities' endorsement of the policy for implementation. But, the teachers, the real implementers, have not yet surfaced from the effect of the deep-rooted examination culture. Regardless of the endorsed policy, and general norms and principle of the assessment for learning, several teachers have been treating the formative assessment similar to the summative one. Fernandes' (2009b) study showed that although most teachers acknowledged the significance of formative assessment in student learning, they were, in fact, keener on designing tests simulating to those used in the external summative assessments. In sum, the assessment for learning does not seem to be working effectively (exceptions may apply) because the high-stakes exam culture is still impeding the smooth implementation of the assessment for learning.

The other interesting aspect evoked in the literature is the use of assessment and its interpretation. In fact, none of the assessment systems or exams is high-stakes and no-stakes or summative and formative per se. In fact, many scholars expound on how test results are used and interpreted to determine the type of assessment. Regarding the use of the test, Shohamy (1993) states:

Policy makers in central agencies, aware of the authoritative power of tests, use them to manipulate educational systems, to control curricula, and to impose new textbooks and new teaching methods. At the school level, principals use tests to drive teachers to teach, and teachers use tests to force students to study.

This indented excerpt clearly highlights the use of the results of the same test/assessment by different stakeholders for different purposes. It can be safely inferred that by only implementing the formative assessment in the classroom in adherence with its guidelines may not enhance the student learning in reality, in case the assessment results are also used for

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summative purposes. This situation may divert students' and teachers' focus from assessment for learning to the assessment of learning.

While the reviewed studies have revealed several important aspects of the assessment system reform, none of the studies has presented a complete process of the assessment system reform, which, in fact, constitutes the purpose of the current study.

Stakes focused reform. The assessment that reforms from a summative or formative to a total or partial abolition of the high-stakes assessment system can be termed as *stakes focused reform*. Put differently, the third type of reform refers to the change from a high-stakes assessment system to a low or no-stakes assessment system. The main purpose of this kind of reform is to abolish or lower the stakes of the assessment. Although the main flow of assessment reform seems to follow from a summative to formative assessment as stated above, in recent years, the voice on the abolition of high-stakes tests and alternative to summative assessment has been stronger in academia. These notions have resulted in several research studies and public debates on the positive and negative consequences of high-stakes assessments on the stakeholders, curriculum, and the entire education systems. However, a few empirical studies on the total abolition of a high-stakes assessment system have explored the impact of the reform on stakeholders and effectiveness of the reform. In addition, several research studies have been conducted on the third type of assessment reforms from Finland, France, Greece, Wales, etc.

Finland is one of the few countries which achieved better outcomes in their assessment reform. According to Sahlberg (2009), in 1968, Finland underwent a unique assessment reform beginning from the basic school level (up to Grade 5) by replacing the grading assessment system with a non-grading continuous assessment system. Grades were prohibited by law, and only descriptive assessments and feedback were employed (Sahlberg, 2009). Shedding light on the non-grade approach in Finland's basic level schools, Aho, Pitkänen, and Sahlberg (2006) state that the primary purpose of the non-grading approach was to encourage students to become responsible, make autonomous decisions, and learn to plan their own learning. Further, they state that Finland has justified the assessment reform by relating its excellent student results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 and 2003 to the success of its national school reform. A vast number of textbooks, articles, and studies on the assessment reform have presented the story of successful implementation of an educational reform in Finland (Aho, Pitkänen, and Sahlberg, 2006; Berry, 2011; Frassinelli, 2006).

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Collins, Reiss, and Gordon (2010) conducted a study, meaning to explore the experiences and opinions of Year 6 (Y6) teachers, primary head teachers and primary Science coordinators on the debate about the effect of statutory national testing in England and its abolition in Wales. The Year 6 (Y6) teachers, primary head teachers, and primary science coordinators were recruited for telephone surveys and focus group discussions. A total of 600 (300 from England and 300 from Wales) Y6 teachers were surveyed by telephone, and a total of 74 participants including Y6 teachers, Headteachers and Science coordinators from primary level were recruited for the eight focus group discussions. The findings reveal that ending high-stakes testing in science in Wales (for 11 years old students) has not immediately led to radical changes in the teachers' practice. The abolished high-stakes tests, which were only replaced by the teacher-made no-stakes tests and did not produce any system-wide changes. In other words, the change imposed from the policy level (top-down) did not affect the classroom activities. Nor did the students experience any differences before and after the abolition of stakes of the test because the school board-made questions were only replaced by the teacher-made questions. As the aim of the study was to explore the perceived impact of the abolition of the high-stakes testing in science on Y6 teachers in Wales, evidently, it did not cover many aspects of a high-stakes assessment reform. In other words, the study was limited to exploring the impact of the abolition of the high-stakes test in the classroom situation.

In 1975, France underwent a massive reform in the education system including student assessment (Brauns & Steinmann, 1999). The final school leaving public examination was replaced by the regular promotion tests given by the teachers during schooling. French teachers assess their pupils informally on a daily basis through oral or written exercises in the classroom or through homework. The purpose of assessment in the reformed assessment system, according to Brauns and Steinmann (1999), was to use the information (received from the assessment) to adopt an appropriate strategy in order to enhance student learning. At the end of the year, however, the judgments on on-going tasks of the students were used as summative judgments. Broadfoot (1985) presents his arguments in opposition to the assessment purpose that many French teachers are neither committed to nor prepared for implementing the continuous assessment as they feel the pressure brought about by the implementation of the assessment system. The focus of that study also seems to be limited to identifying the discrepancy between the policy document and its enactment in the classroom.

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Greece, like Finland, France, Wales, went through a giant assessment reform in 1981 and 1985. The educational reform agenda included the abolition of formal assessments, examinations and grading and unobstructed promotion from level to level. It means that the then traditional summative high-stakes assessment system was replaced by a continuous unobstructed grade promotion. Mavrommatis (1996) conducted a study to investigate the implementation of assessment in the Greek classroom. In his study, 20 teachers were observed and subsequently interviewed in order to review the assessment practice used by the teachers in the classroom to promote student learning. In addition to this, 360 serving and prospective teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire with the purpose to understand further how teachers practice assessment in the classroom. The findings suggested that although some of the teachers tried to implement the reform following its aims and guidelines, many teachers reported that it was difficult to follow the norms of the assessment strictly. They pointed out a couple of problems, such as large class size, lack of clear understanding of their students' progress, as the barriers to implementing the reform. This study also revealed that feedback provided by the teachers was too general and short and therefore, with this lack of specificity, most of the students could not work out what kinds of actions they individually needed to undertake for the further improvement. This study also showed a lack of compatibility between the goal of the reform and the classroom practices. Mavrommatis' (1996) study was also limited to exploring the effectiveness of the assessment system reform.

The reviewed literature on this domain (i.e., stakes focused reform) revealed that although the target of the reform was to lower the stakes of assessment, the prominent goal of the reform was to improve and enhance the student learning. It seems that the rationale behind the abolition of the summative high-stakes assessment or high-stakes national public examinations is that it lowers the stakes-induced stress on students, teachers, and school administrators. Consequently, the whole efforts of stakeholders are focussed on methodology and strategies for teaching and learning rather than exam preparation. Although I found a number of empirical studies on the theme of my study (i.e., high-stakes assessment system reform), none of the studies (if any) have found to explicate a complete process of high-stakes assessment system reform. Nor did I find any grounded theory studies on the high-stakes assessment system reform.

To sum up, the brief review of literature under the three domains as mentioned above has presented a brief account of some of the studies on the domain of assessment reforms that are the

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most relevant to my study. The most relevant studies are the ones that explore and explicate multi-dimensional aspects of the assessment system reform process. In this endeavor, focusing on the assessment reform related current literature, I singularly sought grounded theory studies that have explicated high-stakes assessment system reform. With my best attempts, I was unable to find such studies (if any). Being unable to find such studies, I refocused my search to those empirical studies that explored and explicated the assessment reform (other than grounded theory studies) phenomena in depth. I found several studies, articles, book chapter and textbooks including the ones reviewed above. However, given the fact that I was conducting a grounded theory study, I particularly excluded (i.e., actually postponed) reviewing those studies, articles, book chapter and textbooks that probe the underlying principles and processes of assessment reforms. The main reason for doing so is that, as argued by Glaser (1967), Holton (2004), Christiansen (2011), an in-depth revision of the theoretical literature prior to data analysis might 'contaminate' the data collection, analysis, and theory development by leading me to impose existing frameworks, hypotheses or other theoretical ideas upon the data. Therefore, the studies and theoretical literature that describe reform phenomena, principles, processes, etc. will be used (in Chapter 6) to support and validate the findings of this study. It means that, in this study, I have not presented a thorough review of the literature in a particular section.

Identifying the Gap in the Literature

The reviewed literature under the three domains (i.e., standard focused, learning-focused and stakes focused reforms) suggests a lack of empirical studies that explicate a comprehensive process of high-stakes assessment system reform. The primary focus of the majority of the studies on the abolition or minimization of stakes from an assessment system including the ones reviewed above (e.g., Collins, Reiss, and Gordon, 2010; Mavrommatis, 1996; Tan, 2011) seem to explore impact and effectiveness of the reform. Notably, a fully-fledged theory of transition from a high-stakes assessment system to a low/no-stakes that explicates the multi-facets of such reforms has not yet been developed. Thus, the principal focus of the current study is to address these gaps via developing a substantive grounded theory of high-stakes assessment system reform (i.e., a reform from a high-stakes assessment system to a low/no-stakes). I believe that the high-stakes assessment system reform theory I propose to develop through this study, would explore not only the positive and negative impact of such transitions on stakeholders and the education system but also explicate the underlying principles and influential factors of successful

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implementation of the reform.

The following sections present a brief description of reform-related documents, which were prepared by the MOE and under agencies and a glossary of key terms used in this study.

Reform Related Studies and Official Documents

The following section presents a brief review of those reform related studies and documents, to which some of the participants have referred during interviews and focus group discussions. The reason for mentioning these studies and documents here in this section is to develop a comprehensive understanding, regarding what the studies and documents say about the assessment system reform. It should be noted that this review is a preliminary step in the current research rather than a component of the research itself. Those studies and documents are presented below under two sub-titles: Origin related studies and Reform related documents.

Origin Related Studies

National Curriculum Framework (2005). The MOE of Nepal based on the research reports submitted to the MOE at different times and the changing educational landscape in the international arena, decided to change its school curriculum. In 2005, the Curriculum Development Center (CDC) and MOE developed a National Curriculum Framework (NCF) including an assessment policy for the school education. The NCF consisted of necessary principles and guidelines for developing, implementing and revising the national school curriculum and assessment based on a comprehensive review of the context and concerns of educational development with reference to national needs and international perspectives (NCF, 2005). It presented a comprehensive framework for school education from pre-primary to secondary level (pre-primary to Grade 12). Additionally, it highlighted the assessment system that would be employed after implementing the changed curriculum. The focus of the proposed assessment system in the reform was on formative assessment. This framework though neglected with regard to the secondary level, the kind of assessment system that was recently reformed in Nepal.

School Sector Reform Plan (2009-2015). Considering the national and international scenario, in 2006, the MOE of Nepal prepared a comprehensive school sector reform plan in order to reform the existing school education system. The main goal of the reform plan was to restructure the existing school education system in Nepal. The reform plan reduced the number of levels of the school system from five to three (see page 4 for a comparative chart). The

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reformed school system restricted the school education system to only three levels- pre-primary, basic (Grade 1-8) and secondary level (Grade 9-12). This document has pointed out a need of management of technical education and vocational training programs, teacher professional development programs, capacity development programs, monitoring and evaluation system, and resource management that were required for the reform. This document has not mentioned clearly the type of assessment that was recently reformed in Nepal, either.

Student Performance in SLC: Determinants of Student Performance in the SLC examinations (2005). A four-membered research team formed by the MOE, Nepal under the leadership of educator and researcher Kedar Bhakta Mathema submitted its reports in 2005, recommending several suggestions to improve student performance in the SLC exam. The other three members in the team included educator Min Bahadur Bista, assessment expert Dibya Man Karmacharya, and researcher Saurav Dev Bhatta. According to Bhatta (2005), the study entailed the following four specific objectives:

- (1) To identify the determinants of student performance in SLC examinations,
- (2) To assess the magnitude and dimensions of school failure,
- (3) To describe how children, parents, teachers, community members, school administrators, policy makers, and academics of Nepal perceive and interpret the problem of school failure, and
- (4) To prepare a plan for improving the examination system.

Although this study has not presented a detailed framework for a letter grading system, which was, for sure, beyond the scope of the study, it has recommended the MOE to introduce a letter grading system (i.e., along with grade descriptors) and one-subject certification provision (see *discussion section for detail*).

Reform Related Documents

Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015/2016. The MOE of Nepal formed a nine-membered committee comprising of educators, assessment experts, and representatives of central agencies for preparing a formal official document. The committee prepared an official document (see *reference for detail*), namely *Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015 (LGWP 2015)* that mainly explicates the procedures provisioned in the newly reformed assessment system. The LGWP 2015 was firstly publicized in 2015 at the outset of the pilot phase, and then amended in 2016 after implementation of the reformed assessment system fully throughout the country. The LGWP 2015 has five sections. Section One introduces the LGWP (i.e., name the document,

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define the terms used in the document, and mention objectives of the document), Section Two mentions the credit hours, Section Three presents grade provisions, Section Four presents the roles of the concerned authorities and Section Five points out a need of curriculum change. Table 3 and 4 below present both the provisions, i.e., developed in the pilot phase in 2015 and amended in 2016, respectively. For the purpose of comparison, Table 2 (see page 13) has been repeated here with different table number (i.e., Table 8).

Table 8

Letter grading provision 2015 (preliminary)

S. No.	Marks Obtained (%)	Grade	Descriptor	GPA
1	90-100	A ⁺	Outstanding	4
2	80 to below 90	A	Excellent	3.6
3	70 to below 80	B ⁺	Very good	3.2
4	60 to below 70	B	Good	2.8
5	50 to below 60	C ⁺	Above average	2.4
6	40 to below 50	C	Average	2.0
7	20 to below 40	D	Below average	1.6
8	1 to below 20	E	Insufficient	0.8
9	0	N	Not graded	0

Source: Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015, MOE, Nepal

Table 9

Letter grading provision 2016 (with first amendment)

S. No.	Marks Obtained (%)	Grade	Descriptor	GPA
1	90 and above	A ⁺	Outstanding	4
2	80 to below 90	A	Excellent	3.6
3	70 to below 80	B ⁺	Very good	3.2
4	60 to below 70	B	Good	2.8
5	50 to below 60	C ⁺	Satisfactory	2.4
6	40 to below 50	C	Acceptable	2.0
7	30 to below 40	D ⁺	Partially acceptable	1.6
8	20 to below 30	D	Insufficient	1.2
9	Below 20	E	Very insufficient	0.8

Source: Letter Grading Working Procedure 2016, MOE, Nepal (with first amendment)

By incorporating some of the important feedback collected during the pilot phase, the MOE amended the LGWP with some minor revisions as shown in the above tables. The main differences are: (1) Sub-division of Grade D (i.e., Grade D⁺ and Grade D); (2) Changes in grade descriptors; and (3) Replacement of Grade N (not graded) with Grade E (very insufficient).

Admission criteria. After ratification of the assessment system reform, the National

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Examination Board (NEB) and Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT) with the coordination of MOE set criteria for admission in Grade 11 and CTEVT programs. The admission criteria in both streams (i.e., vocational and regular stream) have been amended several times, not only after the completion of the pilot phase but also during the period of implementation of the reform. The amendment particularly includes the change of GPA that is required to get admitted and enroll in a particular stream (i.e., Science, Vocational stream) or subject. The following tables show the latest versions of admission criteria (i.e., at the time of data collection) set by the concerned authorities for grade 11 and CTEVT programs.

Table 10

Admission criteria for grade 11

S.No.	Available subjects for Grade 11	Required GPA	Subjects that need Grade C+ for admission	Subjects that need Grade D+
1	Science subject group: Physics, Chemistry, Biology/Maths/Computer Science/Agriculture	2	Science and Mathematics	English, Nepali, and Social Studies
2	Vocational Subject group: Animal Science/ Plant Science, Electrical Engineering/	1.6		
3	Mathematics/Geography/Accountancy/Economics/Computer Science/Teaching Mathematics/Psychology/Elements of Finance/Jyotish/Co-Operative Management/Business Studies/Business Mathematics	1.6		English, Nepali, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies
4	Physics Education/Chemistry Education/Biology Education/Teaching Education	1.6		English, Nepali, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies
5	English/Alternative English/Teaching English/Linguistics	1.6		English, Nepali and Social Studies
6	Mass Communication/Hotel Management/Travel and Tourism	1.6		English, Nepali, Mathematics and Social Studies
7	Nepali/Teaching Nepali	1.6		English, Nepali and Social Studies
8	History/Political Science/Culture/Home Science/Sociology/Philosophy/Library and Information Science, Rural Development	1.6		English, Nepali and Social Studies
9	Introduction to Education/Instructional Pedagogy/Health and Physical Education/Population Studies/Environment Education	1.6		English, Nepali, Science, and HPE
10	Human Value Education/General Law/Sanskrit Byakaran/Sahitya/Nyaya/Veda/Niti Shastra/Bouddha Education/Law	1.6		English, Nepali and Social Studies
11	Maithali/Hindi/Newart/French/Japanese/Urdu/German/Chinese and Other Languages	1.6		English
12	Dance/Music/Scripture/Painting/Applied Arts/Sports and Others	1.6		English

Source: MOE website (<http://www.neb.gov.np>) (see Appendix C for original).

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Table 11

Admission criteria for CTEVT programs

S.No.	Available programs	Required minimum academic qualification for admission
1	PCL Nursing	At least Grade C in Science, Mathematics, and English and Overall Grade Point Average (GPA) 2
2	PCL in General medicine	
3	PCL- Medical Laboratory Technician	
4	PCL in Dental Science (Dental Hygiene)	
5	Proficiency Certificate in Radiography	
6	PCL in Homeopathy	
7	Proficiency Certificate in Ayurvedic Science	
8	Diploma in Ophthalmic Science	
9	PCL in Acupuncture	
10	Diploma in Pharmacy	
11	Diploma in Plant Science	At least Grade C in Science, Mathematics, and English
12	Diploma in Animal science	
13	Diploma in Food and Dairy Technology	
14	Diploma in Forestry	
15	Diploma in Civil Engineering	
16	Diploma in Electrical Engineering	
17	Diploma in Electronic Engineering	
18	Diploma in Electrical and Electronic Eng.	
19	Diploma in Geometrics Engineering	
20	Diploma in Architecture Engineering	
21	Diploma in Mechanical Engineering	
22	Diploma in Auto-mechanical Engineering	
23	Diploma in Information Technology (IT)	
24	Diploma in Computer Engineering	
25	Diploma in Hotel Management	

Source: MOE website (<http://www.neb.gov.np>)

Grading training manual. With the initiation of the government of Nepal and with the financial support of the British Council, a *grading training manual* was prepared in 2016. As stated in the document, the main purpose of the manual was to guide the trainees as trainers, head teachers and teachers, and examination personnel regarding the purpose and advantages of using grades both in the classroom and for the marking, scoring, and grading of the student's achievement in examinations. The training manual presents the following objectives. At the end of this training, the trainees will be able to:

- Understand the process of grading and evaluating classroom assessments and examinations.
- Develop grading descriptors and rubrics for analyzing and supporting student development in the classroom (formative assessment).
- Understand and be able to explain grading methodologies used in tests and examinations.
- Understand the need for an improved appeal system and identify some of the requirements for conducting appeals.

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The training manual has four parts, and each part consists of training procedures, PowerPoint presentation slides, support papers, and worksheets.

Report of feedback committee. After completion of the on-field data collection, on 26 January 2017, the NEB formed a three-membered committee under the chairmanship of Bhaskar Datta Panta, Acting Director of NEB in order to submit a recommendation report (see *reference for detail*) to the NEB. The committee was mandated to investigate the shortcomings in terms of student enrollment and registration in Grade 11 resulting from the assessment reform (Official website NEB). The other two members of the committee include Gehanath Gautam, Deputy Controller, OCE, MOE, and Yukta Prasad Sharma, Deputy Director, CDC. The committee was assigned to (i) Recommend the type of action to be initiated against the institutions (if there are any) which have enrolled the SLC graduates (based on Letter Grading System) in Grade 11 defying the admission criteria set by the NEB; and (ii) Recommend the best way of resolving such cases, wherein, the students, who have not met the admission criteria set by the NEB, have been enrolled in Grade 11.

The committee collected feedback and necessary information from the under agencies and stakeholders and also conducted interactions and workshops, in addition to discussions on the telephone, Skype, Viber, etc. in order to prepare the recommendation report. The report shows that a total of 1,315 Grade 10 graduates, who could not meet the admission criteria set by the NEB, were enrolled in Grade 11 in different parts of the country. In other words, it presented the discrepancy between the admission criteria and its enactment in schools during the admission period. It also recommended some suggestions to the NEB towards addressing the problems of the 1,315 students, as mentioned above.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

As the grounded theorists have been divided into two groups regarding the literature review, the literature review section in a grounded theory study has been a challenge, especially for a novice researcher. Given this fact, this chapter began with a conceptual framework on educational assessments. The conceptual framework presented in the first part provides a comprehensive understanding of the key concepts and the current direction in the educational assessment that are directly or indirectly related to this study. Similarly, the second part presents the justification of why and a brief account of the mode of conducting the literature

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review. There are mainly two purposes of conducting a literature review in this study: (1) To situate the assessment system reform in Nepal within the extant literature, and (2) To justify and compare the findings of this study. To serve this purpose, and not to let the extant literature influence or ‘contaminate’ (Glaser, 1967) the emergence of a grounded theory from the data, a superficial literature review was undertaken in this chapter and an in-depth analysis of literature was done in Chapter six under the section of Discussion on Findings.

The reform related literature was reviewed under three domains, namely standard focused, learning-focused and stakes focused reform, which, in turn, helped me characterize the nature of this study and consequently, contributed to focus only on the most relevant literature. The review of the literature suggested that there is still a lack of empirical studies that explicate a comprehensive process of high-stakes assessment system reform. This chapter also introduced the reform-related documents, which include National Curriculum Framework (2005), School Sector Reform Plan (2009-2015), Student Performance in SLC (2005), *Letter Grading Working Procedure* 2015 (LGWP 2015), Admission Criteria, **Grading training manual**, Report of Feedback Committee (2016). The underpinning idea was to possibly help the readers understand the nature and purpose of the reform to a great extent. The following chapter presents research philosophy and method including interpretive and methodological framework.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY AND RESEARCH METHOD

Stating explicitly about what philosophical assumptions (i.e. what belief and views - historical, ethical political- a researcher brings to the study) and interpretive frameworks (i.e. how the philosophical beliefs are enacted in the study) shape and guide a study, has almost been commonplace in the research field. *Part One* in the following section presents specifically the philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks that guided this study. Along with the description of the philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks, this part also presents a methodological framework for this study. Similarly, *Part Two* below presents the research method along with the description of data collection and data analysis processes.

PART ONE: RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

Guiding Research Philosophy

A dozen authors, including Denzin and Lincoln (2011), Rubib and Rubin (2011), Linciln and Lynham (2011), Creswell (2013), Schwandt (2000), Neuman (2000) and Crotty (1998), have mentioned that **ontology**, **epistemology**, **axiology**, and **methodology** are the key premises of philosophical assumptions that guide and shape a study. According to Creswell (2013), philosophical assumptions underpin the formulation of our problem and research questions and how we seek information to answer them. Describing why we need to mention philosophical assumptions in dissertations, Rubin and Rubin (2011) states:

First, the assumptions of the research paradigm guide how you do your work; second, they enable you to explain the methods you are using to your professors and members of the thesis committee; third, each research paradigm comes with its own standards for evaluating the quality of research; and finally, fully understanding the assumptions that undergird the techniques you use gives you the confidence to build on the strengths and offset the weaknesses of those techniques (p. 15).

However, these assumptions can evolve over time, and over a career. Moreover, whether or not the multiple philosophical assumptions can be used in a study has been a long-debated issue (Creswell, 2013). These instances justify the inclusion of philosophical assumptions - ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology in the qualitative studies. The following section presents a short description of these philosophical assumptions, i.e., ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology.

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Ontology

In general terms, ontology is a branch of philosophy that describes the nature of reality. It portrays the characteristics of reality and is concerned about whatever there is to know about the world (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013). According to these writers, the key ontological questions concern whether or not there is a social reality that exists independently of human conceptions and interpretation. The next related question is whether there is a shared social reality or only multiple or context-specific ones (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls and Ormston, 2013).

Concerning the present study, the principal aim was to explicate the assessment system reform process via a grounded theory study/qualitative approach. For this purpose, interviews and focus group discussions were mainly used as data sources. The interviews and focus group discussions, which covered a wider range of stakeholders, yielded diverging opinions and varied lived experiences including some controversial responses on certain issues. The assessment reform process was explicated via a grounded theory study by incorporating and addressing (maximally possible) the multi-opinions and controversies emerging from the data. In sum, as I believe that reality is context-specific and may exist in multiple forms, my ontological position in this study would be a relativist.

Epistemology

Epistemology deals with the philosophical questions, such as what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified. Epistemology is concerned with ways of knowing and learning about the world and focuses on issues such as how we can learn about reality and what forms the basis of our knowledge (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2013). Key epistemological questions concern how knowledge is known or how the required information is sought. With the epistemological assumption, conducting a qualitative study implies that researchers try to get as close as possible to the participants under study (Creswell, 2013, p. 20).

The main source of information or knowledge (i.e., data) in this study is the opinions, views, and experiences of the participants. It is well known that collecting subjective information from strangers for a research purpose is a herculean task. We can only gather in-depth and trustworthy information from the participants when we establish a good rapport with them. It is also equally important to understand the research context including participants' personal profile because it helps the researcher understand, infer and analyze the phenomenon in depth. The

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longer researchers stay in the field or get to know the participants, the more 'they know what they know' from firsthand information (Wolcott, 2008a, cited in Creswell, 2013). From the beginning to the end of the data collection process, during the current research, I always tried my best to minimize the distance between the participants and myself. And for the same, I employed tools like telephone conversation and in many cases by visiting them in person to their places.

Axiology

Axiology describes the role of values in a research study. All researchers bring value to a study, but qualitative researchers make their values known in a study (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). In other words, the individual values and biases every researcher possess plays a significant role in the process of data analysis, interpretation and report writing. Apart from the researcher's values and biases, the values and biases of the participants reflected in the data influence the researcher's role by making it more sensitive and complex. Incorporating those value-laden ideas and biases of the participants and, refraining from the researcher's biases are challenging tasks.

As mentioned earlier in the previous chapter, I was born, raised, and educated in such an academic environment where high-stakes testing constituted an important part of the student life. Considering the value-laden pre-occupied mind (doubts may arise because of the high-stakes assessment culture and social assumption where I grew up) throughout the data collection to interpretation and report writing phase, I was highly cognizant of it and tried my best to be as neutral as possible from the biases and pre-conceived mind.

Research methodology

Methodology, which is another branch of philosophy (Guba & Lincoln, 2007; Creswell, 2013), explains the entire procedure of research. Selecting an appropriate methodology for a qualitative study is a phenomenal task. Evans' (2013) following tenets clarify the notion mentioned above.

The selection of the methodology is always a difficult task for the researcher who must be aware of "what is the relationship between the world thought, the researcher, the researched and the issue under investigation?" For the researcher, it is important to have a full understanding of the philosophy that the research method puts forward and to select the one that best suits all aspect of the study (Howell, 2013, p.14 cited in Evans, 2013, p. 47).

The basis of this study is a qualitative approach which is, according to Creswell (2013), basically characterized as inductive, emerging and shaped by experiences of the researchers in

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collecting and analyzing the data. Defining qualitative research, Holloway, and Wheeler (2010) state, "Qualitative research is a form of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live." Creswell's (2013) following definition covers almost every aspect of qualitative research, such as a theoretical framework, characteristics, procedures, etc. Creswell states:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem qualitative researchers, use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voice of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change (p.44).

Although it is defined and described in several ways, the main aim of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of the social reality of individuals, groups, and cultures, and to explore the behaviors, perspectives, feelings, and experiences of people and what lies at the core of their lives.

In the words of Atkinson et al. (2001, p. 7), a qualitative approach is an umbrella term, and a number of different approaches exist within the wider framework of this type of approach (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). Some of these commonly used approaches include Strauss, Glaser and Corbin's (1967, 1990, 1998) **grounded theory**, Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) **narrative research**, Moustakas' (1994) **phenomenological research**, Wolcott's (1999) **ethnographic procedures**, and Stake's (1995) **case study** research. Given the research purpose, nature of the study and expertise of the researcher, the research methodology (not only as a method) employed a qualitative approach in general, and a grounded theory approach, in particular, for study purposes. The rationale for the choice of grounded theory approach will be presented below.

Grounded theory approach

A grounded theory approach, with its aim to develop an explanatory theory concerning social life patterns, has emerged from the symbolic interaction tradition of social psychology and sociology (Chenitz & Swanson, 1994, cited in Annells, 1996). In Annells' words, symbolic interactionism is both a theory of human behavior and an approach to an inquiry about human

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conduct and group behavior. The emergence of grounded theory can be seen as a reaction to external forces, and in this case, the hegemony of quantitative research methods during that particular period (Dunne, 2011, p.11 2).

Grounded theory is defined as a method of conducting qualitative research that focuses on creating conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive analysis from the collated data (Charmaz, 2006). Inductive analysis means that the researcher instead of starting with a hypothesis or theory and then proving or disproving it, first starts by collecting data in the setting, concurrently analyzes it, and then generates a hypothesis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In Glaser's words, " A grounded theory is a general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area" (cited in Evans, 2013, p. 37). Defining a grounded theory approach, Creswell (2013) states that grounded theory is a qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (theory) of a process, an action or an interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants (p. 83). Presenting one of the main characteristics of grounded theory, Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves.

The Rationale for Selecting the Grounded Theory Methodology

The availability of several research methodologies to choose from, it seems to be essential to justify the choice. With regard to the selection of methodology, Howell (2013) says that for the researcher it is important to gain a full understanding of the philosophy put forward by the research method and to select the one that is most appropriate for all study aspects (cited in Evans, 2013, p. 47). The other dimensions of the study that influence the choice include (but not limited to) purpose and nature of the study, type of data, expertise of the researcher. Based on the philosophical assumptions, the selected interpretive framework, purpose, and nature of this study, and the type of data, the best methodology for this study is apparently the grounded theory methodology. Furthermore, the following notions became the inspiration (i.e., determinant factors) for the choice of the grounded theory approach as the methodology and research method for my study:

(1) The pioneers of grounded theory Glaser and Strauss (1966) argue that the grounded theory is used in introductory, exploratory, and descriptive studies for phenomena where scarce research

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has been conducted. Although plenty of theories and studies explicate educational change or assessment reform or transition, no specific theory has been evidenced that deals with the issues and concerns pertaining to the transition from a *pass-fail* assessment system to a no *pass-fail*. Nor has there been any theory that explicates a complete process of a high-stakes assessment system reform. The transition has a number of novel aspects that need to be theorized.

(2) In a grounded theory approach, the researcher focuses on a *process* or *action* that has distinct steps or phases that occur over time (Creswell, 2013, p. 85). In the case of the current study, the transition is from a *pass-fail* assessment system to a no *pass-fail* is a process rather than a snapshot phenomenon. One of the appropriate methodologies that can guide to explore the multi-dimensions of a reform process is the grounded theory approach.

Having said that, choosing a grounded theory approach as a research methodology is not as straightforward as is commonly perceived. There have been multiple versions of grounded theories in practice. So, it is imperative to inform the readers which version of grounded theory has been used in this study.

Multiple Versions of Grounded Theory: Which One to Choose from?

Since its conception to date, multiple versions/approaches to grounded theory have been propounded by the researchers, such as, classical grounded theory by Strauss and Glaser (1967), modified grounded theory by Corbin and Strauss (1998, 2007), feminist grounded theory by Wuest (1995), constructivist grounded theory by Charmaz (2006) etc. Debates abound over which version of grounded theory methodology is genuine, and the verbal sparring occasionally has gotten nasty (Larossa, 2005, p. 838). Before stating, which version of the grounded theory, I am choosing for this study, a short description of each of the four versions of grounded theory identified by Fernandez (2012) is presented below.

Classical grounded theory (Strauss & Glaser, 1967)

The first revolutionary publication in the field of qualitative research in general and grounded theory in particular, which ended the hegemony of quantitative research, is *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research (1967)* by the two founding fathers of grounded theory, Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss. The grounded theory developed by these two American sociologists jointly is called the classical grounded theory. However, the theory has encountered several modifications and changes since its inception to date. One of the salient features of classical grounded theory, supported by authors like (Deady,

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2011; Loy, 2011; Simmons, 2011), is that the methodology has offered the greatest amount of freedom in the development of a substantive theory. The classical grounded theory seems to be rigid in terms of a literature review. It argues that reviewing literature before making assumptions may lead to the contamination of the induction of a new theory (Glaser & Strauss). With regard to the coding process, the classical grounded theory uses two types of coding: Substantive and theoretical.

Straussian grounded theory/Modified grounded theory (Corbin & Struss, 1998, 2007)

A modified version of grounded theory appeared in 1990 with the publication of *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* by Strauss and Corbin. One of the reasons why it is called Straussian grounded theory might be that it brought about an ideological split between the two pioneers (i.e., Glaser and Strauss) of grounded theory. The main change they incorporated in the new version was the detailed coding procedure, which explicated how to code and structure the data (Evans, 2013, p. 43). The modified grounded theory by Strauss and Corbin is more structured and precise. Straussian grounded theory uses four types of coding: Open, focused, axial and selective coding.

Feminist grounded theory (Wuest, 1995)

Feminist grounded theory was developed initially for nurses in recognition of the androcentric bias and to ensure that women's voices were heard in the research community (Wuest, 1995, cited in Evans, 2013). As a feminist grounded theory, which is widely used in nursing fields and popular among health professionals, it uses methodological elements of other grounded theories mentioned above and appears more like a perspective than a separate theory itself. In Wuest's words, "Feminism is not a research method; it is a perspective that can be applied to a traditional disciplinary method (cited in Evans, 2013)".

Constructivist grounded theory (Charma, 2006)

Charmaz (2000, 2006, 2008), a student of Glaser and Strauss, is one of the prominent critics of classical grounded theory who strongly advocates social constructivist grounded theory. In Mills, Bonner and Francis's (2006) words, Charmaz (2000) has emerged as the leading proponent of constructivist grounded theory. Charmaz (2006) states that constructivist grounded theory is part of the interpretive tradition and objectivist grounded theory is derived from positivism. She contends that the classical grounded theory (primarily the work of Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and other modified grounded theories published then (e.g., work of Strauss &

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Corbin, 1990, 1998) lack or fail to describe the characteristics of constructivism. A constructivist approach places priority on the phenomena of study and considers both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data (Charmaz, 1990, 1995b, 2000, 2001 & Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996; cited in Charmaz, 2006, p. 130). Critiquing *Basics of Qualitative Research* published by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998), Charmaz contends that Strauss and Corbin did not simply offer guidelines, albeit they prescribed procedures as a path to qualitative success. She went on to state that *Basics of Qualitative Research* became something of a bible for novices, who often interpreted the method in concrete ways that muted the social constructionist elements in the method.

Mills, Bonner and Francis (2006) also agree with Charmaz that two kinds of grounded theory (ontologically and epistemologically) have existed in practices. Unlike Charmaz, however, Mills, Bonner and Francis argue that the classical grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss has not entirely neglected the elements of constructivism. They contend that the different opinions about the ontological nature of Strauss and Corbin's (1994) work (i.e., objectivism vs. constructivism) are, partly the by-product of Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) two major grounded theory texts, in which the authors never directly address the paradigm of thought that underpins their method.

One of the fundamental characteristics of the constructivist grounded theory is that it begins with a review of the literature (i.e., as claimed by Charmaz) to determine what has been done before in the area of interest, and for situating the study. In terms of coding, the constructivist grounded theory has not recommended a distinct type of coding process.

Fitting this Study into a Compatible Version of Grounded Theory

The development of multiple versions of grounded theory has puzzled the novice researchers in selecting a version suitable to their study. Several articles and studies advocate a particular type of grounded theory and criticize other. In fact, none of the versions is an exception to criticism. Considering the difficulty, which the novice researchers face in selecting a right version of the grounded theory, Evan (2013) suggests that for the researcher, it is not about which method is superior, it is more which one fits both the data and the researcher.

The current study has used a constructivist grounded theory approach as a research paradigm because the perceptual/methodological framework of the present study seems to be compatible with many of the characteristics of Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory. Table

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12 below shows how the conceptual framework of the present study relates to the characteristics of constructivist grounded theory.

Table 12

Characteristics of constructivist grounded theory and conceptual framework of this study

Constructivist Grounded Theory	Conceptual Framework of this Study
It resides in the interpretive tradition-it believes that there are multiple realities	The study adopts an interpretive paradigm
The theorists assume that data represent subjective facts about a problematic world	Subjective data (i.e., via focus group discussion and interview) were collected to explore findings
It includes the social contexts- it analyses participants lived experiences and seeks meanings from their knowledge and experiences	The findings were derived from participants' opinions, knowledge, and experiences
In constructivist, grounded theory, a theory is believed to construct (not discover) from the data	A grounded theory of high-stakes assessment system reform was developed/constructed

Although this study follows Charmaz's (1990,1995, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2006) constructivist grounded theory approach as an interpretive framework (i.e., a research paradigm), it adopts other grounded theorists', such as Glaser and Strauss' (1967), Strauss and Corbin's (1995), Charmaz and Mitchell's (1996) notions to describe other methodological aspects of this research including data analysis.

Guiding Interpretive Framework

Interpretative frameworks, which may be social science theories (i.e., theories related to social issues, such as leadership, attribution, political influence and control etc.) or social justice theories/ Marxist models (i.e., theories that advocate and seek to bring about change or address social justice issue, such as equality, nonviolence, peace) inform the reader how it depicts the problem to a study, how it formulates the research questions, and how it collects, analyses and interprets the data in a study. Some of the prominent interpretative frameworks include positivism, postpositivism, interpretivism, constructivism, hermeneutics, feminism, racialized discourse theory, critical theory, queer theory, postcolonialism, postmodernism, transformative perspective theory, disability approach theory, etc. Exploring these frameworks in depth is beyond the scope of this study. However, for the purpose of this study, it seems to be imperative to explicate one of the frameworks that guided the present study. Based on the nature of the study and the philosophical assumptions expressed above, one of the compatible interpretive

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frameworks seemed to/could be a constructivist framework.

Constructivist Framework

Constructivists believe that meanings are constructed by human beings engaging and interacting with the world which they inhabit. Most qualitative researchers use the constructivist framework with the belief that meanings and understandings are plural; individuals and groups see and interpret reality through their own lenses as understanding is subjective (Rubin, 2004, p. 22). Mentioning one of the key assumptions of constructivism, Crotty (1998) states:

Humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspective we are all born into a world of meaning bestowed upon us by our culture.

Thus, qualitative researchers seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally. They also make an interpretation of what they find, an interpretation shaped by the researchers' experiences and backgrounds.

From an ontological point of view, realities are capturable in the form of multiple and intangible mental constructions, which are local and specific in nature (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). As the constructions, in qualitative research, are the by-product of multiple ideas, experiences, and various knowledge source, in addition to being alterable and relatively true. From epistemology perspective, the investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the findings are literally created as the investigation proceeds (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). Constructivists argue that constructions are transactional and subjective. Similarly, about methodology, constructivists contend that individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through an interaction between and among investigator and respondents. These constructions are interpreted through hermeneutics (i.e., the study and interpretation of human behavior and social institutions) and dialectical process.

From the description given above, it can be safely concluded that philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks are interrelated due to the fact that the philosophical assumptions of a researcher determine the interpretive framework. The interrelationship is briefly described below.

The Relationship between Philosophical Assumptions and Interpretive Framework

In Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) words, "Philosophical assumptions are folded into interpretative framework used in a qualitative study." Supporting their view, Creswell (2013)

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states that the philosophical assumptions are embedded within interpretative frameworks used by the qualitative researchers when they conduct a study (p. 22). Having gone through the literature about the philosophical assumptions and interpretative frameworks, I came up with a figure that depicts their relationship. The following chart, which I developed based on my understanding of philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks, shows the relationship between philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks.

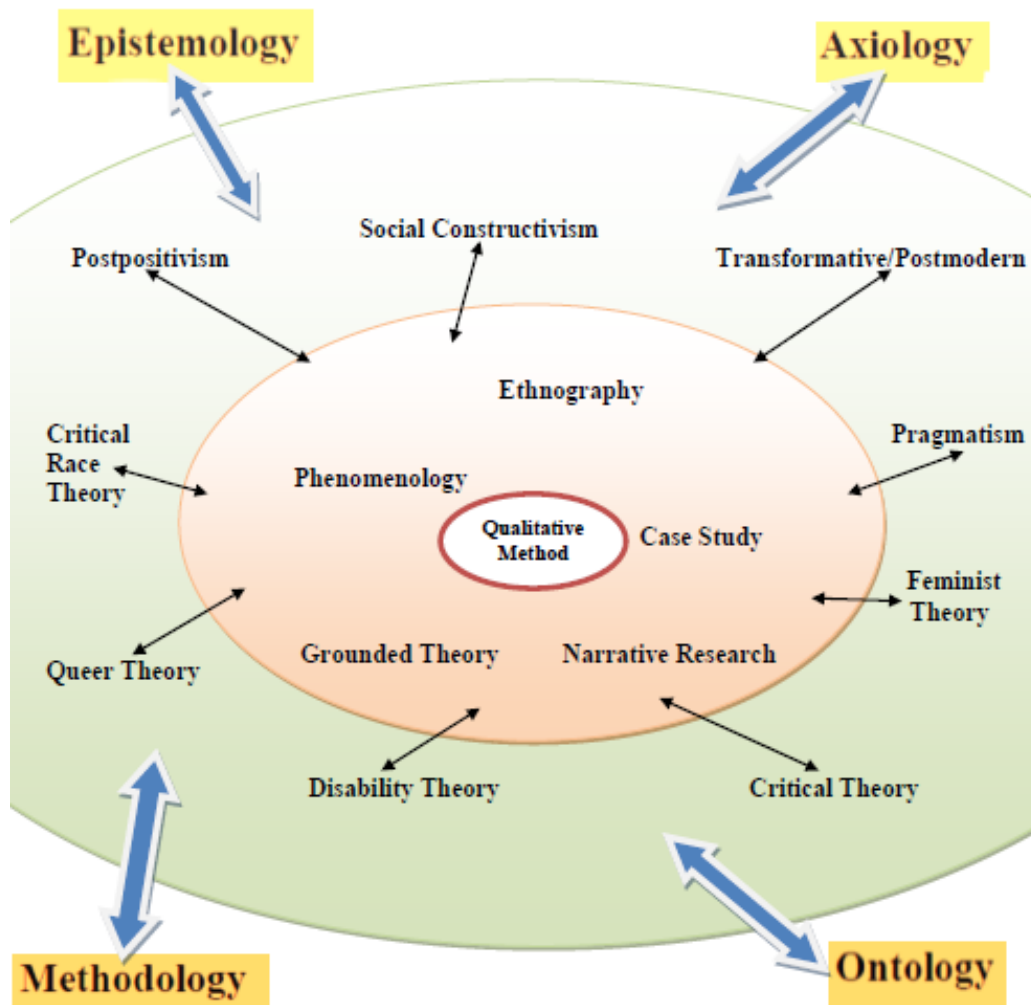


Figure 8. The relationship between philosophy and interpretative framework

Figure 8 shows that research problems or research questions are formulated based on a researcher's philosophical beliefs (e.g., ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology), i.e., how the researcher views the world and truths. Based on the philosophical assumptions, the researcher chooses a theoretical perspective, such as positivism, postpositivism, social constructivism, and critical theory etc. And based on the theoretical perspective, background

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knowledge and experience of the researcher, and nature of the problem to be researched, the researcher selects a methodology and method (such as grounded theory or narrative approach, or ethnography or case study, or phenomenology).

Table 13 below presents/reflects the positing of the current study as regards the ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological positioning within the interpretive framework (i.e., constructivist paradigm).

Table 13

Summary of philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks

Interpretative framework ↓	Philosophical Assumptions			
	Ontology	Epistemology	Axiology	Methodology
Constructivism	As understanding is subjective, meanings and understanding are plural. Individual participants view and interpret reality through their own lenses. So, multiple realities may exist.	The purpose is to describe the high-stakes assessment reform process through the perspectives of the participants. And to incorporate the various and contradictory views (if appear).	Incorporating those value-laden ideas and biases of the participants and, refraining from my own biases.	Under the umbrella of a qualitative approach, a constructivist grounded theory by Charmaz (1990, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2006) and et al. mainly guided the entire process of this research- from conceptualization of research questions to data collection, analysis, interpretation and theory development.

Methodological Framework

In the case of Nepal, the assessment reform has been taken as a unique and revolutionary change, which created several discussions and debates about its immediate and short-term and long-term impact on stakeholders and the entire education system.

At the outset of the study, a question of what philosophical assumption and research methodology could optimally address the reform-related issues haunted my mind for days. The pioneers of grounded theory Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue that the grounded theory is used in introductory, exploratory, and descriptive studies for phenomena where little research has been conducted. Because this study requires an in-depth explanation, description, and analysis of the newly introduced phenomenon (i.e., a reform from a pass-fail to a no pass-fail assessment

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system), I decided to use a constructivist research paradigm and a grounded theory methodology.

Considering the multiple versions of the grounded theory, and the various research strategies employing in it, a constructivist grounded theory led by Charmaz (1995, 2005, 2006) was used for this study. A three-level coding system, specifically, open coding, axial coding and selective coding, which is mostly used in grounded theory study, was used for this study. To explicate the entire process of the high-stakes assessment system reform via a grounded theory study, the following five tenets of grounded theory were used as guidelines: (a) The constant comparative method, (b) theoretical coding, (c) theoretical sampling, (d) theoretical saturation, and (e) theoretical sensitivity. The details of these tenets are described in the following sections in Chapter 4. Figure 9 below is the summary of a methodological framework for the present study.

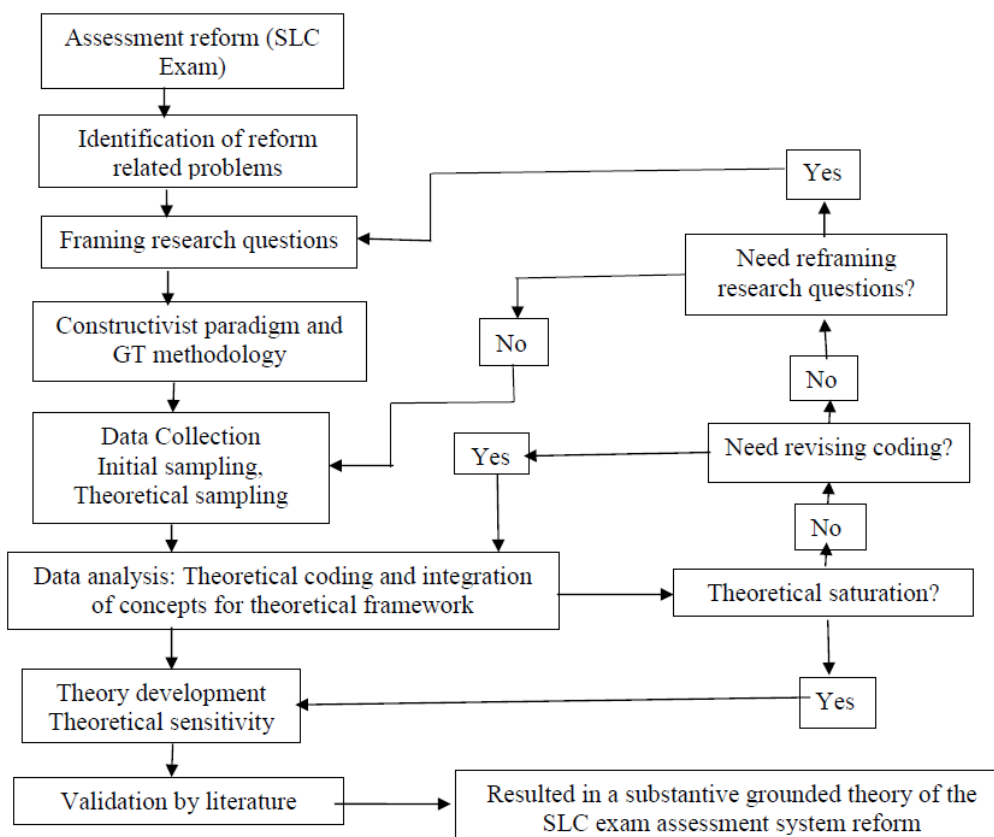


Figure 9: Methodological framework

Figure 9, uses a visual representation to depict the entire process of the present study. As the main purpose of grounded theory approach is to generate a theory, the process follows different stages/phases, which include deciding on a research problem, framing the research

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questions, data collection, data coding and analysis, and theory development (Bitsch, 2005). As shown in Figure 9, the reform-related problems were identified and research questions were formed based on the problems. Having framed the research questions, the research process proceeded with data collection. With regard to the literature review, only superficial revision of peripheral literature was done in order to optimally situate the present study; and an in-depth review of the relevant literature was done in the discussion section. Coding and analyses of data were performed concurrently with data collection as the emerging themes and categories indicated whether or not more data were required. The data collection process continued till theoretical saturation (i.e., a condition where more new theme categories stop emerging) was obtained. It means that data collection, coding, and analysis continued until the theme categories were satisfied. Due to the emergence of unprecedented theme categories, the research questions were reframed a couple times. This process was repeated until themes categories were saturated and the theory of the assessment system reform of the SLC exam completed. As stated above, the dimensions of the emergent theory of the assessment reform were validated by the extant literature.

PART TWO: RESEARCH METHOD

Data Collection and Analysis

Synthesis of the Method in Relation to the Main Research Questions

As stated earlier, this study applied a qualitative research method in general and a constructivist grounded theory methodology in particular. It means that this study followed the underlying assumptions and principles of grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory for the entire process of data collection, analysis and interpretation. Before describing the demographics of participants, data collection instruments, data collection procedures and analyses in detail, the following section presents a synthesis of the method in relation to the main research questions. This synthesis includes research questions, the essence of each of the research questions (i.e., focus of the study), types of data collection instruments that were used, and the participants recruited in the study.

Table 14

A glimpse of the research method

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Research Questions	Area of Exploration	Instruments	Participants
(1) What theoretical and practical considerations were raised to explicate the reform process from conceptualization to its implementation?	Source of reform, preparation for reform, problems and challenges attached to it	Focus group, Interview, Memo, Field note, Document	MOE official, Expert, Professor, Educator, Teacher's Union Local official, Administrator Principal, Teacher, School owner, College owner, Employer
(2) What are the remarkable resulting issues of the reform, and how have they been addressed for its successful implementation?	Emergent responses as a result of reform implementation, short- and long-term impact of the reform, and future direction	Focus group, Interview, Memo, Field note, Document, Demographic survey	MOE official, Expert, Professor, Educator, Teacher's Union Local official, Administrator Principal, Teacher, School owner, College owner, Employer, Parent, Student

Table 14 above shows that each of the research questions presented specific focus areas of exploration. Based on the focus areas of exploration, necessary data tools, such as focus group discussions, one-on-one interviews, official documents, memos, etc. were developed. The participants with an in-depth knowledge and experiences in the focus areas of exploration and who could contribute to addressing the research questions were recruited. For instance, participants like experts, educators, MOE officials, school principals, and teachers were recruited with the purpose to collect an in-depth theoretical and practical knowledge about the reform. Similarly, participants like students, parents were recruited with the expectation that, however, not exclusively, they would share their experiences of about how the reform impacted them both directly and indirectly.

Demographics of participants

The participants were recruited by using a theoretical sampling method (described below).

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The following sections present demographics of participants, participant recruitment process, development of data collection instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis briefly. As many participants recruited in this study represent different organizations/institutes, it seems to be meaningful to briefly introduce the organizational structure of MOE of Nepal before presenting the demographics of participants in the study. The following figure presents some of the main agencies under the MOE in a hierarchical order.

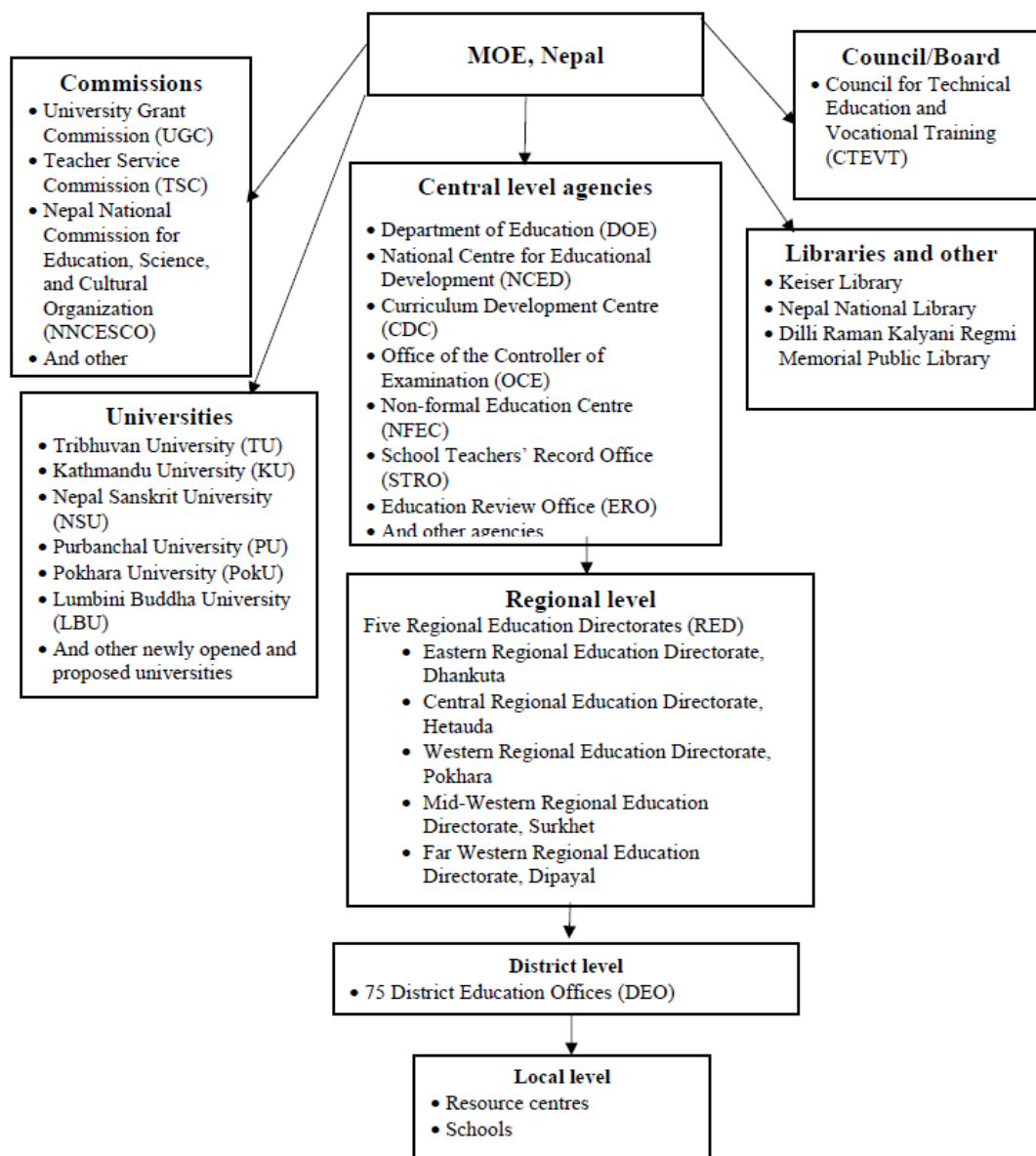


Figure 10. The organizational structure of Ministry of Education (MOE), Nepal
Source: MOE official website (www.moe.gov.np)

As shown in Figure 10, several central, regional, district and local level agencies and commissions, councils, universities, libraries, etc. work under the supervision of MOE,

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Government of Nepal. The central level agencies are responsible for constituting educational policies and plans. While, the regional, district and local level agencies and organizations, working under the instruction and supervision of the central agencies, implement the policy.

Describing all the agencies and organizations presented in Figure 10 is beyond the scope of this study. In the following sections, I am briefly describing (only) those organizations (along with a brief account of demographics of the participants) from which the participants in the study were recruited. In addition to this, I am also presenting a brief overview of the demographics of the remaining participants. Before introducing the organizations and presenting the demographics of the participants, I would like to mention a parameter of the demographic information.

The parameter of the demographic information

To maintain the confidentiality of the participants, their designation has not been mentioned in this study. In many cases, mentioning the designation of the participants could reveal their identity. In addition, this situation applies to many of the regional and local level agencies too when it comes to the matter of the participant's confidentiality. In which case, I have avoided mentioning the designations of the participants whose confidentiality is in jeopardy. In the following section, I am also mentioning what pseudonyms are used for each of the participants while quoting them in this study.

Participants and their affiliation

1. Ministry of Education (MOE) (One-on-one interview)

The MOE of Nepal, the apex body of all educational organizations, is responsible for overall development of education in the country. The main functions of the MOE include formulating educational policies and plans and managing, implementing and monitoring them across the country through the organizations or/and agencies (see Figure 2) under it. The central level agencies under the MOE are responsible for designing and monitoring programs and policies, whereas the local level agencies are responsible for implementing the same.

In regard to the assessment system reform mentioned in this study, the MOE has been playing a central coordination role. When the CDC (described below) submitted a proposal for the assessment system reform, the MOE instituted a committee (described below) for the necessary homework and preparation and additionally organized several meetings with the committee members and the representative of the central, regional and local agencies, together as

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well as separately. A participant, who played a key role in the assessment system reform from the conceptualization to implementation phase, was recruited from the MOE of Nepal for a one-on-one interview. The MOE authority is named as ‘MOE authority’ for the purpose of quoting.

2. Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) (One-on-one interview)

The CDC, an academic center, under the MOE has been established with an aim to develop curricula, textbooks along with other instructional materials for school education to achieve the national goals of education (CDC Official website). As mentioned on the website, CDC also conducts research-oriented programs to ensure that the school education remains relevant, practical and competitive. It also develops, pilots, updates, revises and implements school curricula as per the existing rules and regulations.

As indicated above, CDC has been playing a vital role in the process of assessment system reform from the conceptualization to implementation phase. It was the CDC which tabled the concept of the assessment reform (i.e. reform of the assessment system in the SLC exam) to the MOE, Nepal. However, the concept of the reform was not conceived by the CDC itself. As mentioned earlier, research teams led by Professor Dr. Kedar Bhakta Mathema recommended for the reform in 2005 and 2009. Anyway, CDC has played a key role, especially in concretizing the concept of reform into an operational/workable form. Two participants (named as ‘CDC authority-1’ and ‘CDC authority-2’ for the purpose of quoting) from CDC, who played key roles in the reform process, were recruited for a one-on-one interview.

3. Office of the Controller of Examination (one-on-one interview)

The Office of the Controller of the Examination (OCE), which manages and conducts SLC examinations, has been established under the MOE. Conducting SLC examination, publishing results and awarding certificates are the key functions of the OCE. In 2016, the MOE of Nepal decided to merge the Higher Secondary Education Board (HSEB) and the OCE into the National Examination Board (NEB). However, at the time of data collection, the NEB had not developed in its full shape nor started functioning.

The OCE not only played a central role in formatting and publishing the results of the SLC exam, but also excessively contributed in the initiation and implementation phase of the reform by sharing important ideas and information. A participant (named as ‘OCE authority’ for the purpose of quoting) from the OCE was recruited for a one-on-one interview, mainly, meaning to elicit information regarding opportunities and challenges faced by the OCE while

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preparing and publishing the results of the SLC exam in the reformed system.

4. Education Review Office (ERO) (One-on-one interview)

Education Review Office is another central agency that functions directly under the MOE in close consultation with the Education Policy Committee headed by the MOE (ERO website). According to ERO, its principal function is to develop and update item banks in various subjects of school education and develop standardized tests. It also carries out the National Assessment of Student Achievement (NASA) in various grades of school education in addition to designing frameworks and tools for the performance audit.

The ERO has been involved in the assessment reform process from the beginning to the implementation phase. A participant (named as 'ERO authority' for the purpose of quoting), who was involved in sharing his ideas in different meetings and seminars related to the reform, was recruited from ERO for a one-on-one interview with the purpose to elicit assessment system related information.

5. Department of Education (DOE) (One-on-one interview)

The Department of Education (DOE) was established in the year 1999 under the MOE to implement, supervise and monitor educational programs. It helps the MOE to institutionalize and regularize the programs and activities. The five Regional Education Directorates and 75 District Education Offices fall under the DOE.

Like other central agencies, the DOE has also played a significant role in the assessment reform process. The DOE representatives actively participated in the discussions organized by the MOE so as to prepare a necessary framework for the reformed. A participant (named as 'DOE authority' for the purpose of quoting), who actively participated in the assessment reform process from the beginning to the time of data collection, was recruited for a one-on-one interview from the DOE.

6. Regional Education Directorate (RED) (One-on-one interview)

The Regional Education Directorate (RED) is another implementing body of the MOE which works under the DOE. There are five regional education directorates: Eastern Education Directorate, Central Education Directorate, Western Education Directorate, Mid-Western Education Directorate, and Far Western Education Directorate. The REDs are responsible for bringing out uniformity in the district level programs, and for coordinating, monitoring and supervising teaching and learning at the school level.

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It was a bit challenging to recruit participants of this category (i.e., participants from RED) as none of the REDs were located in the location pertaining to data collection for study purposes (i.e., neither in Kathmandu nor Morang District). However, it was important to recruit at least a participant from the implementing body like RED. After several rigorous attempts, with the help of my friends, I was able to meet a deputy director of one of the REDs (out of five REDs) and interview him when I came back to Kathmandu from Morang district. Thus, a participant from one of the Regional Education Directorates (named as 'RED authority' for the purpose of quoting) was recruited for a one-on-one interview as a representative of local level authority (i.e., implementing body).

7. District Education Office (DEO) (One-on-one interview)

District Education Offices (DEOs) are established in each of the 75 districts of Nepal as district-level offices. The DEO is responsible for planning and implementing educational development activities. It supervises and monitors teaching-learning processes in the district as per the directives of the Ministry, Department of Education and the concerned REDs (MOE Official website). The DEOs have a direct link with the schools in their district as the MOE, and other central and regional agencies, such as DOE, COE, and RED implement new policies and programs via DEOs.

With regard to the assessment reform, the DEOs played a very significant role. As stated above, the DEO has access to detailed information about the schools in the district and is directed to deal with every issue raised by the school administrators. Thus, it had the sole responsibility of implementing the assessment reform. In other words, it was the DEO's responsibility and accountability to prepare a favorable environment at the local level (in district) in order to implement the reform. It had also to collect feedback (both positive and constructive) from the schools and circulate it to the upper-level authorities for necessary actions. Two District Education Officers from two different districts, who helped the MOE in the process of implementing the assessment reform, were recruited as the participants in the study. They were interviewed separately on a one-on-one basis. For the purpose of quoting, these participants are named DEO-1 and DEO-2.

8. Public Service Commission (MOE's Employer) (One-on-one interview)

Public Service Commission (PSC) is the central body of Government of Nepal which selects meritorious candidates required by the Government of Nepal. In other words, it is an

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independent constitutional body of Government of Nepal whose sole job is to select (by conducting exams) and supply qualified and capable personnel to the Government of Nepal. As PSC is the most significant body of selection of human resources for the Government of Nepal, it was imperative to recruit a participant from the PSC in order to understand their perspective and individual opinion about how they treat the low-grade holders in the SLC exams. One of the most appropriate participants (called 'PSC authority' for the purpose of quoting) from PSC was recruited for a one-on-one interview. In fact, the purpose of selection and subsequent interview was to know what strategies have been instituted by the PSC to treat the low grade-holders in the reformed assessment system of the SLC exam as an employer.

9. Letter Grading Working Procedure Committee (One-on-one interview)

The MOE of Nepal formed a nine-member committee comprising of assessment experts and higher-level MOE Officials, such as MOE, CDC, OCE Officials, to prepare the *Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015*. Out of nine, four members of the committee (excluding the MOE authority) were recruited as the participants in the study, and many of them were the head of the central agencies or departments. All the recruited participants, who were interviewed separately on a one-on-one basis, played key roles in the entire process of the reform. These participants' quotes are used in the finding sections through pseudonyms, such as Expert- 1, Expert-2, Expert-3 and Expert-4, numbered based on their interview dates.

10. Members of the Department of Curriculum (TU) (one focus group discussion)

I was fortunate to be able to form a focus group of five Professors (excluding the assessment expert) of Central Department of Curriculum and Evaluation, Tribhuvan University (TU) without any pre-plans. As our pre-plan, I went to the Department of Curriculum to interview one of the *Letter Grading Working Procedure Committee* members (mentioned earlier-Expert-4). When I reached there, a departmental meeting was in progress. Expert-4 also participated in the meeting as a guest. After that meeting with the help of Expert-4, I got an opportunity to brief my research study and then requested them to participate (if they are interested) in a focus group discussion. Surprisingly, all the five Professors agreed to participate in a focus group discussion for this study. Most of the Professors in the Department of Curriculum and Evaluation are the experts of curriculum and assessment and testing. Some of them have already served as the members of national commissions formed by the Government of Nepal at different times. The participation of the Professors from the Department of Curriculum and Evaluation increased the

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number of assessment experts, both in quantity and quality of data collected. For the purpose of quoting, I named them as Expert-4 (one of the members of the Letter Grading Working Procedure Committee), Professor-1, Professor-2, Professor-3, Professor-4, and Professor-5.

11. Educators (One-on-one interview)

Two well-known educators (Educator-1 and Educator-2) with expertise on assessment and testing, were interviewed separately as the participants in this study. Both of them were retired University Professors (one from Tribhuvan University and the other one from Kathmandu University) and were working as Visiting Professors at the time of data collection. To their credit, they have published several publications and research studies on educational issues and concerns.

12. Teachers' Union of Nepal and Teachers' Associations (one-on-one interview)

The Teachers' Union of Nepal (TUN), which is also called 'Federation of Teachers', a central organization of all the teachers' associations (existed in 2006) in public school system, is a federation of dozens of teachers' associations. The main five (there may be others as well) teachers' associations are: Nepal Teachers' Association (NTA), Nepal National Teachers' Association (NNTA), Nepal National Teachers' Council (NNTC), Nepal Teachers' Forum (NTF), and Nepal Revolutionary Teachers' Association (NRTA). The main aim of establishment of the union/federation is to work for the promotion and protection of the rights, morale, status, and concern of teachers in the public school system. All the other teachers' associations have also been established with the same aim as mentioned above. They only differ in terms of their ideological and political beliefs. In other words, each of the teachers' associations is inclined to a political party. For instance, NTA is the Well Wisher Organization of Nepali Congress Party of Nepal, NNTA is the Well Wisher Organization of Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist, NNTC is the Well Wisher Organization of Rashtriya Prajatantra Party Nepal, NTF is the Well Wisher Organization of Madheshi Forum Nepal, and NRTA is the Well Wisher Organization of Communist Party of Nepal- Maoist.

Also, another teachers' organization in the private school system, namely Institutional School Teachers' Union (*ISTU*) Nepal is functional in the Nepal educational system. It is a non-political professional union of teachers (as claimed by the organization) working from the pre-primary to higher secondary level in the private schools of Nepal (Official website).

These teachers' organizations are also the essential part of the assessment reform as

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teachers are the prominent stakeholders of the reform. Four participants, each of whom represents TUN, NTA, NNTA, and ISTU were recruited as the participants in the study. They were interviewed separately on a one-on-one basis. For the purpose of quoting, the representatives of the organizations are named as TUN representative, NTA representative, NNTA representative, and ISTU representative respectively.

13. School organizations (one-on-one interview)

Private schools (and higher secondary schools till now), which contribute a lot in the education sector in Nepal, have mainly three organizations namely *Higher Secondary Schools' Association Nepal* (HISSAN), Private and Boarding Schools' Organization Nepal (PABSON), and National Private and Boarding Schools Association of Nepal (N-PABSON). All of these organizations are the umbrella organizations of privately founded profit-oriented schools. These organizations have great roles to play in Government's policy and decision, such as the one mentioned in this study. It was also considered imperative to include these participants as these organizations are the umbrella organizations of the schools where a large number of principals, teachers, students, and parents were being affected by the reform. Three participants, representing each of HISSAN, PABSON, and N-PABSON were recruited separately for a one-on-one interview. Each of the participants recruited from the three organizations was an executive member (i.e., holding key positions) of the organizations. These participants are respectively named as HISSAN representative, PABSON representative and N-PABSON representative for the purpose of quoting.

14. University and college administrators (one focus group discussion)

After passing the SLC exam, the students mainly either enroll in a university (or to a campus-affiliated to the university) or a private/community college or a technical/vocational institution. It was essential to collect information from the main three types of institutions in order to understand how the students with different grades (as the MOE introduced a no pass-fail assessment system in SLC exam) were/would be treated at the time of admission in their institutions. Four participants, who deal with the students for the admission were recruited for a focus group discussion. One of them represented a university owned by the Government of Nepal, two of them represented the technical and vocational colleges, and the fourth participant represented the private colleges. The four participants, for the purpose of quoting, are named as Administrator-1 (for the university administrator), Administrator-2 (for the first technical and

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vocational administrator), Administrator-3 (for the second technical and vocational administrator), and Administrator-4 (for the private college administrator).

15. School principals (two focus group discussions)

In the first phase, five school principals representing the public, private and technical and vocational school, were recruited in Kathmandu Valley (which includes the Districts of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur) for a focus group discussion. All of them had more than ten years of administrative experience. One of them represented a public school, three of them represented private schools, and the fifth member of the focus group discussion represented a technical and vocational school. In this phase, one of the school principals was from the Himalaya region (as he was from Solukhumbu District) and the other four were from Hilly region as all of them worked in Kathmandu valley. In the second phase, four school principals representing public, private and technical and vocational schools from Morang District were recruited for the second focus group discussion. All the four school principals were from Terai region. The reason of making two focus groups of school principals from two places (i.e., from Hilly and Terai region) was to include participants in the study from all the three regions (i.e., Himalaya region, Hilly region, and Terai region, i.e., address the political division of Nepal based on geographical structure maximally possible). Thus, they represented all the three geographical regions- Himalaya, Hilly and Terai, and also public, private and technical and vocational schools. The school principals, for the quoting purpose, are named as Principal-1, Principal-2, Principal-3, Principal-4, Principal-5, Principal-6, Principal-7, Principal-8, and Principal-9 respectively.

16. School teachers (two focus group discussion and a one-on-one interview)

Just like the school principals (participants), two focus group discussions (i.e., one in Kathmandu Valley and the other one in Morang District) representing two geographical regions- Hilly and Terai, and three types of schools- public, private and technical and vocational, were recruited in the study. The number of participants in each of the focus groups was seven and six, respectively. As no participant represented the Himalaya region in the two focus group discussions, a couple of days later, I found a school teacher who taught in Rolpa District- a District which lies in Himalaya region. I interviewed him separately and made the teachers' focus groups inclusive of all three types of schools and the three geographical regions. The school teachers, for the quoting purpose, are named as Teacher-1, Teacher-2, Teacher-3, Teacher-4,

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Teacher-5, Teacher-6, Teacher-7, Teacher-8, Teacher-9, Teacher-10, Teacher-11, Teacher-12 and Teacher-13 (from Himalaya region), respectively.

17. Parents/Guardians (one focus group discussion)

Parents are other important stakeholders in the assessment system reform. A group of six parents/guardians from Morang District were recruited for a focus group discussion. They represented three types of schools, namely, public, private and technical and vocational. Three of them reported that their children wrote the SLC exam from private schools, two of them reported that their children wrote the SLC exam from public schools, and one of them reported that his child wrote the SLC exam from technical and vocational schools. By profession, two of them were teachers, three of them were social workers/farmers, and one of them was a businessman. For the quoting purpose, they are named as Parent-1, Parent-2, Parent-3, Parent-4, Parent-5, and Parent-6.

18. Student participants (three focus group discussions)

The key stakeholders in this study are the students because the students are the most prominent group being affected by the reform. To elicit their perspectives and first-hand experiences, three focus groups of student participants (N=21) were formed. The first, second and third focus group consisted of nine Grade 10 students (six boys and three girls), seven SLC graduates (four boys and three girls) and five SLC graduates (three girls and two boys), respectively. The current Grade 10 students shared their views about the upcoming SLC exam and their preparation. On the other hand, the other two focus groups of the SLC graduates shared their experiences of the SLC exam in the reformed system. The participants in the first and second focus group were recruited from Kathmandu Valley whereas the participants in the third focus group were recruited from Morang District. Similar to the school principal and teacher category mentioned above, recruitment of the student participants from two places (i.e., Kathmandu Valley and Morang District) allowed me to include the participants from the three different geographical regions and three types of schools. Moreover, the participants ranged from high to low performers. For the purpose of quoting, the students are names as Student-1, Student-2, Student-3, and up to Student-21.

In the following section, I am justifying the choice of participants in each of the categories mentioned above.

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Coverage of data

As Nepal is spread into three geological zones/regions, i.e., Mountains, Hilly and Terai (Plain) regions, participants from each of the regions were recruited in the possible categories, such as students, teachers, principals, and parents. In order to include participants from all the three geographic regions, the participants in the study were recruited from Kathmandu Valley (comprising of three Districts- Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur) and Morang District. Although the Kathmandu Valley lies in Hilly region, I was able to recruit participants from all the three regions in several categories. Since no participant from the Himalaya region was included (as mentioned above) in both focus group for school teachers, a teacher from Rolpa District (who represented the Himalaya region) was interviewed separately. The rationale behind this inclusion is that these three regions may vary in terms of several variables like the student performance in general and availability of teaching materials, access to new technology, and other necessary facilities relevant to academic performance. Collecting data in the two different places allowed me to include participants from Himalaya, Hilly and Terai regions.

The participants in the study included key stakeholders who are part of the assessment reform, either involved directly in the assessment reform and implementation process or being directly affected by the reform. I tried my best to recruit participants from as many categories of stakeholders as possible, aligned with the study need of a variety of information about the reform ranging from both theoretical foundation and policy related information to implementation and reform impact related information. As there are mainly three types of schools in Nepal (i.e., public, private and technical and vocational), the participants, in the possible categories, such as university and college administrators, school principals, teachers, parents, and students, represented all the three types, i.e., public, private and technical and vocational school. The following table presents a glimpse of the recruited participants.

Table 15

Participants in the study

Participant	Organization/Person	No. of Focus Group	No. of Interview
MOE Official	MOE Office	-	1
CDC Official	Central Agency	-	2
OCE Official	Central Agency	-	1
ERO Official	Central Agency	-	1
DOE Official	Central Agency	-	1

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RED Official	Regional Office	-	1
DEO Official	Local Office	-	2
Employer (PSC)	Public Service Commission	-	1
CTEVT Official	Technical and Vocational Council	-	1
Expert	Member of Grading Committee	-	3
Professor	Department of Curriculum	1	-
Educator	Tribhuvan University	-	1
Educator	Kathmandu University	-	1
Teachers' Associations			
TUN	Union of all Teachers' Associations		1
NTA	Government School (democratic)		1
NNT	Government School(progressive)		1
ISTU	Private School		1
Schools' Organizations			
HISSAN	Private College	-	1
PABSON	Private School	-	1
NPABSON	Private School	-	1
TU & College Admin	Public, Private & Technical	1	-
School Principal	Public, Private & Technical	2	-
School Teacher	Public, Private & Technical	2	1
Parents/Guardians	Public, Private & Technical	1	
Students	Public, Private & Technical	3	
Total		10	24

Table 15 shows that the study participants are categorized into 10 focus groups and 24 one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The participants in the focus groups included school and college administrators (n= 4), school principals from Kathmandu (n= 5) and Morang District (n=4), school teachers from Kathmandu (n= 7) and Morang District (n= 6), Professors of Curriculum Department (n=6), Grade 10 students from Kathmandu (n= 9), SLC graduate students from Kathmandu (n=7) and Morang District (n=5) and parents from Morang District (n=6). The highest and lowest number of participants in the focus group was nine and four, respectively. Thus, the average number of participants in the focus group was six, and the total number of participants in all the ten focus groups was 59. As far as the participants' background is concerned, naturally the participants were heterogeneous in terms of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, ethnicity, social class, and other socio-economic and cultural variables.

Similarly, the participants in the one-on-one interviews included an authority of Ministry of Education (MOE), an authority of Department of Education (DOE), authorities of Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) (n=2), an authority of the Office of Controller of Examination (OCE), an official of the Regional Education Directorate, local authorities (i.e., District

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Education Officer- DEO) (n=2), an authority of Public Service Commission, (an employer), an official of CTEVT, assessment experts who were involved in preparing Letter Grading Working Procedure (n= 4), educators (n=2), a representative of Teachers' Union Nepal, a representative of Nepal Teachers' Association (NTA), a representative of Nepal National Teachers' Association (NNTA), a representative of Institutional School Teachers' Union (*ISTU*), *Nepal*, a representative of college owners (Higher Secondary School Association Nepal- HISSAN), a representative of school owner (Private and Boarding Schools' Organization Nepal- PABSON)), a representative of school owner (National Private and Boarding Schools' Organization, Nepal-NPABSON)), and a teacher from a remote place (Himalaya region- Rolpa District).

Participant recruitment process

To recruit the participants in the study, I used a purposeful sampling method at the outset of the study, followed by a theoretical sampling method with the progression of the study.

Theoretical sampling is defined as the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses the data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them in order to develop his/her theory as it emerges (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.45). The idea of using the theoretical sampling method was to maximize the richness of the data by attempting to obtain an appropriate diverse sample of the population from all the three geographical regions of Nepal. The participants were only those of the stakeholders who were involved in the assessment reform process and were impacted by the reform. All the participants were recruited from Nepal, and they represented private, public and technical and vocational schools within the applicable categories as mentioned above. It means that the participants covered a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., representative of organizations to individuals) who, directly or indirectly, contributed towards the assessment system reform either by being involved in the process of forming the reform policy or being impacted by the reform as mentioned above.

Before my departure to Nepal, I made a list of possible participants and took their contact information with the help of my colleagues (via Skype, telephone, and e-mail) who were currently teaching and conducting research in Nepal. Although I wanted to communicate with all of the possible participants before I reached Nepal, I was able to communicate with only some of them due to unavailability of their contact information (i.e., e-mail address, phone number).

After obtaining necessary ethical approval from the Research Ethics Board, University of Ottawa, I went to Nepal to collect data. After I had reached there, I sent e-mails along with

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information (invitation) letters to the previously contacted and the listed MOE authorities, experts, educators, local authorities, university administrators, school owners, college owners, school principals, employers, etc. I also visited many of the offices and places, in person to hand in the letter of invitation as I did not have e-mail addresses of many study participants. The letter of invitation described the detailed procedure of the interview, research purposes and protection of participants' confidentiality including withdrawn options (see Appendix-4). In the letter of invitation, each of the participants was asked to contact me if they were interested in participating in the study. Following which, I visited the interested participants (who replied to me positively) in person, discussed with them my research study in detail and established a rapport with them. I met many of the participants, multiple times before focus group discussions and interviews. In the case of other participants, such as teachers, parents, and students, I recruited them using the same procedure as mentioned above with the help of the school principals. In addition to the school principals, students and teachers also assisted in recruiting the parents/guardians in the study. I contacted them and then visited them in person a couple of times before the focus group discussions, which excessively to establish a rapport with them. After all, an interview or/and focus group discussion dates were scheduled in their convenient date, time and venue.

Source of data, instrument development, and data collection process

Source of data

As the study requires in-depth knowledge, lived experiences of the participants, and wide-ranging perspectives and opinions on the issues, the study employed the variety of tools of focus group discussions, one-on-one semi-structured interviews, demographic survey, field notes, memos, and official documents as sources of data. Correspondingly, to elicit multiple meanings of individual experience in my grounded theory study, *focus group discussions* and *one-on-one interviews* were used as the main data collection tools. In the following sections, I am describing the data sources under the following three sub-headings: Focus group discussion, One-on-one semi-structured interview and Other sources of data.

Focus group discussion. "A focus group is a particular type of group interview where the moderator (researcher or evaluator) asks a set of targeted questions designed to elicit collective views about a specific topic" (Fontana & Frey, 2005, cited in Ryan et al., 2014). In other words, a focus group is one of the data collection tools used for qualitative research, wherein,

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information is gathered through interactive interviews in a group discussion setting. Focus group discussion is believed to be one of the excellent ways to gather qualitative data on the issues or problem being explored (Ryan et al., 2014; Hollander, 2004 & Fern, 2001).

According to Ryan et al., two focus group approaches- an *individualistic social psychological perspective (Type A)* and *social constructionist perspective (Type B)* are commonly used to collect information. The information gathered from a **Type A** focus group is primarily derived from opinions, based on an individual's thinking and reasoning that is prompted and elaborated in the focus group setting. On the other hand, a Type B perspective believes that opinions are "socially shared knowledge" or tacit (implicit) knowledge that is generated, maintained, and changed through social participation. It means that knowledge or information is constructed from shared ideas, opinions, beliefs, experiences, and actions. Given the nature and purpose of this study (i.e., as findings were derived from shared ideas, opinions, beliefs, experiences, and actions), Ryan et al.'s (2014) "social constructionist perspective (Type B) focus group approach" was used predominantly in this study. The shared ideas, opinions, and multiple beliefs created new wisdom. However, the Type A approach seemed to be useful in collecting theoretical and experiential information, specifically from the experts and educators. Learning from their knowledge and experiences, I modified the guiding questions for the succeeding focus group discussions. Comparatively, the Type B focus group discussion was a bit harder to conduct because the discussion, in many cases, swerved to the irrelevant area or political arena.

The other remarkable aspect of a focus group discussion is Hollander's (2004) notion of social contexts. Hollander (2004) contends that it is tough to collect trustworthy and honest data via focus group discussions because focus group discussions are shaped or detailed by multiple social contexts, i.e., associational context, status context, conversational context, and relational context. Associational context includes place of interview, the topic of the interview, occupation of the participants, stranger vs. acquaintance, etc. Similarly, the status context includes gender (most prevailing), race, ethnicity, linguistic background, authority/position, etc. Conversational context refers to the context where nature and characteristics of current conversation influence disclosure of opinions - who began, what issues raised first, power role, topic, tone, etc. And relational context refers to the degree of prior acquaintance, intimacy among participants or with the researcher. Hollander (2004) argues that these multiple and overlapping contexts promote

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two kinds of problems: *Problematic silences* and *problematic speech* in group discussions.

According to Hollander (2004), *problematic silences* occur when participants do not share their true thoughts and feelings in the discussions due to social contexts or other reasons. On the other hand, *problematic speech* occurs when participants' contributions/opinions may not represent their true underlying beliefs and thoughts due to conformity pressure or groupthink or social desirability pressure. Thus, if we fail to address those multiple social contexts illustrated by Hollander both at the time of instrument development and during focus group discussions, we cannot collect authentic and honest data. To address problematic silence mentioned above, I formed separate groups of participants, such as two groups of school principals, two groups of school teachers, a group of parents, and three groups of students (one SLC appearing and two SLC graduates). However, in each of these categories (in focus group discussion), there were male and female participants and experienced and novice participants, and as such, it was hard to solve the problem of problematic silence. So, I tried my best to minimize those social contexts in my study during the data collection process.

Utilization protocol and focus group composition. The utilization protocol is a flexibly structured set of rules incorporating a wide range of strategies believed to enhance the retrieval of information from the participants (Shahzad, 2015, EDU7397 course PP slide). The major components of the utilization protocol are: Environment, material, and people. The first component - the environmental component - refers to place, time, light, noise level, seat arrangements, etc. The second component - the material component - includes a video recorder, audio recorder, paper, pencil, computer, the Internet, software, documents, etc. Similarly, the third component - people - refers to the number of participants, the number of researchers, translator, interpreter, facilitator, etc. It is important to note that the type of focus group and the environment of discussion we generate significantly impact the retrieval of information. It is apparent that a supportive and comfortable environment helps participants disclose in-depth and trustworthy data.

To create a supportive and comfortable environment, four of the focus group discussions (out of 10) were conducted at Hotel Hana, Kathmandu; the other four focus group discussions were conducted in schools after school time, and the remaining two were conducted in private homes. The locations chosen for focus group discussions were free of distractions such as the movement of people, noise, toys, and incoming phone calls, etc. The audio-recorder worked

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properly. Before starting focus group discussions, I had informed the participants about the study details and gave assurance about ethical principles, such as anonymity and confidentiality via the "letter of invitation". Apart from these, I was also aware of my own role as a moderator during the focus group discussions. I adopted an open and emotionally neutral body language, such as nodding, smiling, looking enthusiastic, etc. to ensure that the participants would view me as a confident interviewer or moderator. I also familiarized myself with the focus group discussion convention in such a way that the process appeared more natural rather than rehearsed.

Group composition is one of the most important components in the focus group discussion process. As Fern (2001) said, group composition directly affects the group dynamic and outcome and is not under the researcher's direct control once the discussion is initiated. However, notably, the impact of those factors can partially be controlled by considering them at the planning stage in the research process. Considering the debates, discussions, and opinions on the focus group compositions, and critically reviewing Fern's (2001) conceptual framework, I composed the focus groups like the one depicted in Table 15 above (see *page 97*).

To sum, some of the advantages suggested by extant literature (Ryan et al., 2014; Hollander, 2004 & Fern, 2001) that encouraged me to use focus group discussion as a data collection tool are as follows: (1) Easy and time saving, (2) cost-effective technique for interviewing several people at once, (3) focus groups reduce experimental demand, (4) focus groups have high external validity, (5) focus groups elicit stories and in-depth explanations of people's thoughts and experiences, (6) focus groups promote knowledge mobilization, (7) non-verbal data can be recorded, etc.

Instrument development for focus group discussions: Guiding questions. Guiding questions are important in focus group discussions. Shedding light on the importance of guiding questions, McLafferty (2004) says, "The purpose of the interview and discussion guide is to direct group discussion and to stimulate conversation about the research topic, as well as to ensure that all the desired information is sought." The guiding questions for my study were designed following McLafferty's suggestions, which states that the questions should progress from general to specific, and non-threatening (i.e., easy) to more threatening (i.e., difficult). The purpose of this strategy has been to encourage active participation from all members of the group from the start.

And with this purpose, mainly seven separate sets of questions (e.g., set 1 for Grade 10

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students, set 2 for SLC graduates, set 3 for university and college administrators, set 4 for Professors of Curriculum Department, set 5 for school principals, set 6 for school teachers, and set 7 for parents) were developed for focus group discussions. Following Hungerland (2004, p. 42), the focus group discussion included three types of questions. First, '*background or information questions*' were asked at the initial phase of the focus group discussion in order to collect participants' foundational knowledge and experiences about assessment and testing in general and the assessment system reform in particular. Second, the participants were asked '*attitude and perceptions questions*' for their insights into different dimensions of the high-stakes assessment system reform: For example, how they analyzed the assessment system reform, if the government had done necessary preparation for the reform, etc. Third, '*cross-questions*' were asked during the discussion with the purpose to elicit further relevant information from the participants. A sample of initial guiding questions that were used in the semi-structured focus group discussions is presented in Appendix E.

One-on-one semi-structured interview. As stated above, the other important source of data for this study is a one-on-one semi-structured interview. Describing semi-structured interview, Dornyei (2007) states that the interviewer provides guidance and direction (hence the '-structured' part) but is also keen to follow up interesting developments and to let the interviewee elaborate on certain issues (hence the- 'semi' part). As it is a compromise between the structured and unstructured interview, this interview format has been very popular in applied linguistics as well as other fields. As a semi-structured interview does not limit/confine the interviewer from digging out further information (i.e., can ask other than the set questions basing on the emerging issues), the interviewer can collect unprecedented information by asking additional questions. Given the nature of the semi-structured interview, I chose it as one of the main data sources for this grounded theory study because it seems to fit into this study well. As was described earlier, it was extremely essential to collect exhaustive information to explicate the entire assessment reform process. I believe that a semi-structured interview could help collect the type of data required for this study. The details of the participants in the semi-structured interviews have already been presented in Table 10 above (see page 72).

Instrument development for interviews: Guiding questions. As shown in Table 10, a total of 24 one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted. At the outset of interview, I developed eight sets of fundamental interview questions (set 1 for MOE, CDC, OCE, ERO &

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DOE; set 2 for RED & DEO; set 3 for PSC; set 4 for CTEVT; set 5 for experts; set 6 for educators; set 7 for teachers' associations and set 8 for schools' organizations). These questionnaires, in many cases, varied slightly in composition (i.e., one-two or few different questions) from one set to another. As interviews proceeded, I kept on modifying and adding additional questions to the same category of participants. Guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews were also prepared by following McLafferty's (2004) idea of guiding question composition (i.e., simple to complex rule), and Hungerland's (2004) notions of types of guiding questions (i.e., background or information questions, attitude and perceptions questions, and cross-questions). A sample of initial guiding questions that were used in the semi-structured interviews is presented in Appendix F.

During the instrument development process, I ensured that the issues of ethics were always on top of the researcher's head. As a researcher, I was always aware of the ethical issues and tried my best to respect them during the whole process of data collection.

Other sources of data: Demographic survey, field notes, and official documents

A questionnaire (presented in Appendix G) for the demographic survey was prepared. The demographic survey was targeted specifically at the student participants because I thought that some of the student participants might not feel comfortable to share their background information with other strangers. The questionnaire included 19 background information questions to gather the student participants' demographic information. The demographic survey sought the participants' family, cultural, ethnic, linguistic or economic background. Honestly speaking, for all study purposes, the background information collected via a demographic survey was excluded in terms of any in-depth analysis as the focus of the study was to explicate the process of assessment system reform. However, the information collected from the survey was imperative for an overall context and background of the student participants. The questionnaire was translated into the Nepali language to facilitate comprehension of the questions by the respondents (see Appendix G). At the top of the questionnaire, it was clearly mentioned and also verbally explained that they were free not to answer any of the questions if they feel uncomfortable in answering them due to any reason.

In addition to focus group discussions, interviews and demographic survey, field notes, memos, and official documents were also used as sources of data. Field notes were the notes written during the focus group discussions and interviews whenever I felt that the idea or theme

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was important for the study. Memos were prepared following each of the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Some official documents, such as *Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015*, results of the SLC exam, admission criteria for Higher Secondary School, and Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT), were collected from the respective offices. These documents (details are presented elsewhere) helped to prepare a foundation for this study and contributed to the data analysis process.

Data collection process

Having recruited the participants for 10 focus groups and 24 one-on-one interviews, and prepared the guiding questions for them, the focus group discussions and interviews began on the schedules set in their convenience.

At the beginning of each of the focus group discussions for student participants, every participant was asked to complete a survey questionnaire for the purpose of collecting their demographic information and the questionnaire took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. As mentioned above, the background information of other participants (i.e., other than student participants) was collected subsequently by asking them background information questions at the beginning of focus group discussions and interviews. The shortest and longest focus group discussion lasted for 18 minutes and an hour and seven minutes, respectively. Similarly, the shortest one-on-one semi-structured interview lasted for 14 minutes and the longest one for 41 minutes.

The focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in the native language of the participants (i.e., Nepali) in quiet places as stated above. The audio-recorded focus group discussions and interviews were downloaded into a password protected computer/laptop and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Although the audio recorded focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews were originally transcribed in the native language of the participants (i.e., Nepali language), the study utilized English version (English translation) of codes, themes, theme categories, and quotations. It means that only the transcripts were in the Nepali language.

Theoretical sampling and modification of guiding questions

Unlike the conventional sampling method, where sampling is done before collecting data, the sampling in a grounded theory approach (termed as theoretical sampling) is concurrent with data collection and analysis process. According to Charmaz (2006), grounded theorists use two kinds of sampling. The first is the initial sampling, which is similar to other ordinary sampling,

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and the other is the theoretical sampling. In Glaser and Holton's (2004) words, 'theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory' whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses the data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, to develop the theory as it emerges. So, theoretical sampling is a part of the process of data collection, coding and analysis in a grounded theory study.

In the initial sampling, I was planning to form only four focus group discussions and 17 one-on-one interviews. As focus group discussion and interview progressed along with analysis, a number of unprecedented questions and dilemmas attached to the assessment system reform emerged. Thus, in order to get more and more themes and theme categories on the emerging properties and dimensions, I continued interviewing and discussing the subject with the participants. Thus, the targeted number of focus group discussions and interviews (stated in initial sampling) exceeded by six and eight, respectively. I continued conducting focus group discussions and interviews until all the possible theme categories were expounded. During theoretical sampling, I also kept on modifying the initial focus group discussion and interview guiding questions because I felt that every focus group discussion and interview was opening a new window of information. To sum up, theoretical sampling contributed extensively to collecting wealthy and in-depth data for this study.

Issues of ethical considerations, confidentiality, and participant consent

This study has sincerely attempted to address the issues related to participant consent, confidentiality, and ethical considerations. Before departing to Nepal for data collection, I submitted the application form along with other necessary documents mentioning the entire process of data collection to the Research Ethics Board of the University of Ottawa for approval. In response, I got an Ethics Approval Notice (see Appendix H) that clearly instructed me to collect data within the parameter of the promise committed in the application form. Due to this obligation and self-awareness, I ensured a strict adherence and compliance with the ethical protocols throughout the data collection process.

The other important issue addressed in this study was the participants' confidentiality. In addition to the promise committed in the letter of invitation, at the outset of the focus group discussions and interviews, I verbally repeated the promise that the information they provided would be strictly confidential within the exclusive access of the researcher and his supervisor. As promised to the members of the Research Ethics Board and the participants in the study, the

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audio recorded data, memos, field notes, and the completed survey questionnaires have been kept in a locked wooden box, and the electronic versions of the documents including the transcripts have also been saved on a password-protected computer/laptop. After downloading the audio recordings into my laptop, the data from the recording devices were deleted entirely.

The third issue related to ethical consideration was the consent of the participants. A consent form (presented in Appendix I) was developed to seek consent from each of the study participants. Every participant, both in the focus groups and interviews, was asked to fill up the form and sign on it before the commencement of the focus group discussions and interviews. They were then asked to retain a copy of the signed and dated form (signed by both the participant and me), and so did I. The consent forms, letter of invitations and the survey questionnaires were written in both Nepali and English language to ensure clarity and comprehensibility.

Data analysis procedure

“Data analysis is the ‘interplay’ between the researchers and their data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 13). In a grounded theory study, data analysis begins with coding. "Coding means categorizing segments of data with a short name or a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes and accounts for each piece of data (Charmaz, 2006)." Further, she says that coding is the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to perform analytic interpretations. Unlike other qualitative methods, data analysis (i.e., coding) in a grounded theory approach, begins on the first day of data collection. Thus, implying that both data collection and data analysis progress simultaneously in order to fill the gaps and holes in the data. In Strauss and Corbin’s words (2008), “Analysts should begin the coding soon after the first interview or observation/video is completed because the first data serve as a foundation for further data collection and analysis” (p. 7). A detail of how the data were analyzed in this study is presented below.

As the research methodology adopted in this study is the grounded theory approach, the data were analyzed by using its principles and procedures. However, a multiple version of the grounded theory and a variety of coding types mentioned in those theories and studies were confounding in terms of coding strategies and types of coding to use in order to analyze the focus group discussions and interviews. Evans (2013) states that various scholars have put forward a range of strategies and guidelines for the coding process (Charmaz, 2006; Goulding, 2005;

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Partington, 2002; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Further, he says that the coding process and methods have created the highest level of debate for users of grounded theory. Having gone through the multiple coding strategies and types, I decided to analyze the data by using a three-phase non-linear coding system- open/initial coding, axial coding and selective coding, commonly used in grounded theory studies (e.g., Charmaz, 1996, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; & Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The coding process in a grounded theory approach is called a non-linear process as there is a cyclical connection between the three phases (LaRossa, 2005, p. 840). This, thus implies that a researcher goes back and forth to data to data fields until new themes, concepts, and categories stop emerging. Figure 11 presents the process of data analysis (i.e., mainly interviews and focus group discussions).

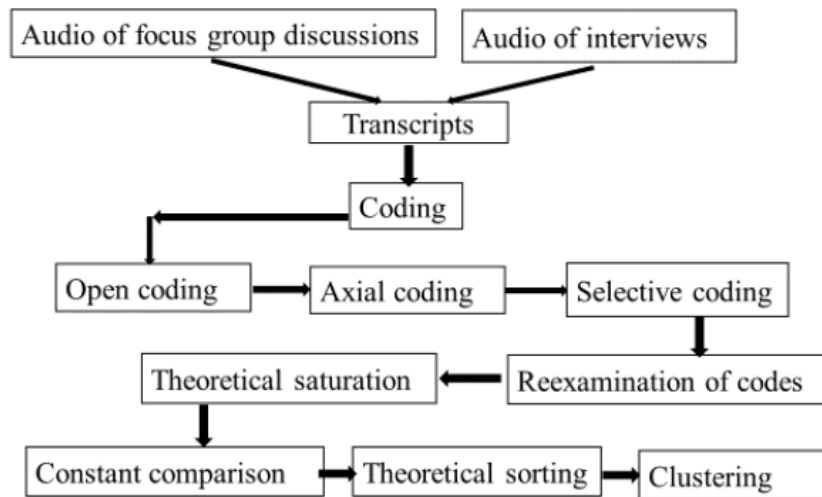


Figure 11. Data analysis process

In this study, in the initial phase of coding, the transcripts were coded from the beginning to the end, mainly using line-by-line and incident-by-incident (holistic coding) coding method. The rationale for not only sticking to the line-by-line coding method is that many of the lines in the transcripts were not coding worthy. In Charmaz's (2006) words, coding every line may seem like an arbitrary exercise because not every line contains a complete sentence and not every sentence may appear to be important. As suggested by several grounded theorists, gerunds form of verbs (as far as possible, but not exclusively) were used in coding the transcripts in conformity with the notion that we gain a strong sense of action and sequence with gerunds (Charmaz, 2006). In addition to gerunds, In Vivo (concepts using the actual words of research participants rather than being named by the analyst) codes were also used whenever it was found to be significant and meaningful. The three phases of coding are briefly presented in the following

sections.

Initial/Open coding

The initial coding process, which is termed as 'open coding,' begins with a microanalysis of the transcripts, wherein large amounts of data (transcripts) are reduced to short and precise pieces of information. Those pieces of information are accorded certain labels (which are termed as codes), either using participants' actual words (In Vivo codes) or other words or phrases, which reflect the essence of the data. The aim of initial coding in a grounded theory study is to open up an investigation and yield provisional codes for the upper level of analyses (Glaser, 1978, p.29). One of the important characteristics of open coding is openness. Many grounded theorists (Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) suggest that the analysts should remain open to seeing what they can learn while coding and where it can take them because the openness of initial coding should spark their thinking and allow emerging of new ideas. Conducting the semi-structured focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews and asking open-ended questions to the participants indicate that this study allowed enough room for new ideas to emerge.

During initial coding, the following four questions as suggested by (Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) significantly contributed in guiding the coding process, and more importantly in seeking meaningful and worthy codes/themes.

- (1) What is this data a study of?
- (2) What does the data suggest?
- (3) From whose point of view?
- (4) What theoretical category does this specific datum indicate?

The data analysis began with a line-by-line and a segment by segment coding method because it helped to establish a notion that initial coding should stick closely to the data. The second question allowed me to analyze the data from its depth to identify any implicit meaning of the data segment. Similarly, the third question frequently reminded me to assign a proper code considering the possible biases and beliefs the participants may have (or my own biases). Finally, the last question helped me identify the theoretical category into which the very codes/themes fit.

The initial coding in this study started immediately after completion of the two focus group discussions (Grade 10 students and School teachers) as both the discussions were held on the same date. All the 34 transcripts inclusive of 10 focus group discussions and 24 one-on-one

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interviews, which were written in the native language of the participants (i.e., Nepali language), were initially coded by following the guidelines and a basic principle of grounded theory approach. The length of the entire transcripts was 200 pages in the normal size (Font size 12 pt., Preeti Font, 1.5, line spacing), but it was reduced to 165 pages while formatting for coding. As mentioned above, all the codes from the initial to the final phase were assigned in the English language. In consideration of the role of a language in coding process and the possible translation related errors that might appear in translating words, segments or sentences from the Nepali language to English, a peer-checking method was applied. The translations were checked for correctness and accuracy with the help of a bilingual colleague who, at the time of working on this thesis, was working at the Institute of Population Health, Faculty of Medicine, and the University of Ottawa as a Senior Researcher. An example of open coding is included in Appendix J.

Axial coding

Axial coding relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data you have fractured during initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), axial coding is the process of aligning the reduced data (i.e., only codes emerged during initial coding rather than the entire data) back together again in a coherent whole. They contend that linking relationships between categories occurs on a conceptual rather than descriptive level. This is the phase of data analysis where the codes emerged in the initial coding phase are categorized and sub-categorized under different conceptual headings and sub-headings based on their semantic and hierarchical relation (see Results section for details). An example of axial coding is included in Appendix K.

Selective coding/Theoretical integration

Selective coding is the process of integration and refinement of categories and sub-categories that emerge from the previous coding phase (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 142). In this phase, the process of integration and refinement is performed by comparing and contrasting the core categories as identified in the previous phase for similarities and differences. The aims of selective coding were to develop a theoretical framework (i.e., the basis of theory) that depicts how each of the categories and sub-categories relates with each other and identifies the main conceptual categories that represent the data properly (see Figure 27 for details). Selective codes

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not only stipulate possible relationships between the categories that are developed in the axial coding but also lead to propel the analytic story in a theoretical direction (Charmaz, 2006). An example of selective coding is included in Appendix L

Reexamination of codes

Following the grounded theory framework, I paralleled data collection with data coding and analysis. Shedding light on why grounded theorists carry out data collection and analysis simultaneously, Strauss and Corbin (2008) contend that data collection never gets too far ahead of analysis because the focus of subsequent data collection; that is, the questions to be asked in the next interview or observation are based on what was discovered during the previous analysis (p. 4). This process, although a demanding task for me, provided me with an opportunity to reach the exact target sample (those who played vital roles in the reform process) in order to collect rich and in-depth data. As I conducted focus group discussions and interviews, new categories emerged and new ideas aroused. This, in fact, made me review the previous codes and reword/recode them, which led to the conceptualization of the framework of the grounded theory I was willing to develop. On the other hand, the demographics of the participants, field notes, and memos were also found to be helpful in the process of data analysis as they provided enough information about the participants.

Theoretical saturation

One of the main characteristics of grounded theory, although other qualitative research studies also apply it without using the same terminology, is the theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation is the point at which the researcher stops sampling, whereby categories and their properties are considered sufficiently dense, and data collection is sufficiently analyzed and exhausted to no longer generate new leads (Glaser & Strauss 1967). The coding process paralleled with data collection makes it easier to identify whether or not the data is theoretically saturated. In the case of this study, after conducting and coding about six focus group discussions and sixteen one-on-one interviews, codes started repeating immensely. I conducted further four focus group discussions and eight one-on-one interviews to make sure that the data were theoretically saturated. Arriving at the end of those discussions and interviews, I found no more new codes and concepts, which led me to terminate the data collection.

Constant comparative method

The constant comparative method constitutes the backbone of a grounded theory as this

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leads to the process of theory development. “The constant comparative method is a procedure in which two activities, naming data fragments and comparing data incidents and names, occur in tandem” (Locke, 2001, p. 25; cited in O’Reilly & Marx, 2012). According to Glaser and Horton (2008), this process involves three types of comparison: (1) Incidents are compared to other incidents, (2) concepts are compared to more incidents, and (3) concepts are compared to other concepts. According to the authors, the first type of comparison helps in identifying similarities and differences between variables that contribute to the formulation of concepts and hypotheses. The second type of comparison results in more theoretical concepts and hypotheses that contribute to establishing theoretical saturation, verify the theoretical concepts and hypotheses and densify the concepts. The final type of comparison helps to establish the best fit among many choices that contribute to integrating the concepts and hypotheses to form the grounded theory. I used this method continuously until the final constructs, conceptual categories and thematic sub-categories were finalized.

Sorting

Theoretical sorting is another important step in grounded theory in the process of theory development. Glaser and Holton (2004) state that once the researcher has achieved theoretical saturation of the categories, he/she proceeds to review, sort and integrate the numerous memos related to the core category, its properties, and related categories. Having achieved theoretical saturation and reviewed the memos, I started sorting out both the important portions of memos and categories/concepts from the code list to integrate the emerged themes into a conceptual framework for the emerging theory.

Clustering

Defining clustering, Charmaz (2006) contends that it is a shorthand prewriting technique to get started. As suggested by Charmaz, I produced several maps and charts combining codes and memos. First, I wrote the central idea; then circled it and drew spokes from it to smaller circles to highlight its defining properties, and their relationships and relative significance. Having compared those maps and charts, I modified the charts and tables and then finalized the clustering (see *Appendix N*).

Memo writing

In general term, memos are the notes (often theoretical) written by the researcher throughout the data collection and analysis process. Memo-writing constitutes a crucial method

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in grounded theory because it prompts data and codes analysis early in the research process (Charmaz, 2006). Memos are written for defining categories, justifying codes, showing relationships among codes, categories, and concepts, and keeping a record of the progressive integration of higher- and lower-level categories (Willing, 2001). From the beginning of data collection to the analysis phase, I kept on writing memos (see *Appendix M for a sample*). They differ in terms of their length and style, for instance, some of them are details, some of them are brief and other are just charts and tables with the gist. I extensively used the memos both in the data analysis and write-up phase.

Theoretical sensitivity and reflexivity

Theoretical sensitivity is considered to be an integral part of the grounded theory, which begins from the outset of data collection. Defining theoretical sensitivity, Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 44) state that it is a multidimensional concept that includes the researchers' level of insight into the research area; how attuned they are to the nuances and complexity of the participant's words and actions, their ability to reconstruct meaning from the data generated with the participant, and a capacity to "separate the pertinent from that which isn't". Grounded theorist like Glaser (1978) contends that the researcher must be a 'tabula rasa' (blank slate) when entering a field of inquiry to develop theoretical sensitivity legitimately. This notion has been criticized by many researchers (e.g., Mills, Bonners & Francis, 2006) raising some questions on its practicality: Would it be practically possible to start a study with zero knowledge on the very field? How could a researcher claim that his/her theory was the first grounded theory on that topic if the researcher is a 'tabula rasa'? The details have been presented above (see under *Literature Review in a Grounded Theory Study*).

Nevertheless, theoretical sensitivity is taken a bit seriously in a grounded theory study believing that the quality of the emerging grounded theory, to a great extent, depends on how the researcher uses his prior knowledge and experiences and interprets the words and actions of the participants in the study. In response to the issue raised above, Glaser (1978) contends that the researcher doesn't have to be too concerned with theoretical sensitivity when proceeding to data analysis. The process of constant comparison analysis (which is an integral part of the grounded theory) addresses the issues attached to theoretical sensitivity. Anyway, during data collection and analysis, I ensured a natural progression and emergence of the codes, categories, and concepts emerge entirely from the data without the influence of my personal pre-conceived

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knowledge, experience, and biases. But, it doesn't mean that the role of the researcher in a grounded theory study is to act as an active observer and a good reporter. The researcher has a dynamic and complex role to play in developing a theory. It is the researcher who, by using his/her insight, develops a grounded theory from the raw data collected from participants with varied beliefs and biases by actively engaging them in focus group discussions and interviews.

On the other hand, the quality of a study is also influenced by the impact of the researcher's personality and beliefs on the research relationship. In other words, it is significantly important how a researcher balances his beliefs and biases in the study. This aspect is widely explicated, especially in qualitative research studies as reflexivity. Reflexivity is defined as the manner and extent to which the researchers present themselves as embedded in the research situation and process (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 11).

In this study, the issue about reflexivity might not be as much a concern as in a critical grounded theory study, where, for example, a female researcher carrying out a study on 'gender and inequality' or a lesbian carrying out a study on 'LGBT community and social identity.' In these cases, the lens of analysis employed/used by the researcher significantly impacts the research outcome. However, this issue should be mentioned in relation to this study as I have been a part of the high-stakes assessment system for a long time, both as an examinee and examiner.

Validation of Findings by Literature

As per the grounded theorists' suggestions, however, no common agreement was found among grounded theorists in the literature review, and I have refrained from presenting a thorough review of extant literature in the literature review section. As stated earlier, the main purpose of conducting a literature review in this study was: (1) To situate the assessment system reform in Nepal within the extant literature, and (2) to justify and compare the findings of this study. To serve these two purposes, a superficial literature review was done in Chapter two under 'Situating the Study within the Literature' and an in-depth analysis of literature was done in Chapter five under "Discussion on Findings". The reviewed literature included book chapters, scholarly articles and journals, studies, and other reform-related publications, reports, and newspaper articles. Particularly, the literature review in Chapter two focused on the studies that are related to assessment reforms, whereas Chapter five, in addition to the relevant studies and reports, focused on the literature that talk about the theories and principles of educational and

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assessment reforms.

Trustworthiness

This study applied several techniques to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study findings. At the outset of this study, even before I went to Nepal from Canada for data collection, I began to contact some of the participants via Messenger, Viber, and phone. As stated earlier in the Participant Recruit Process section, after I reached there, I continued to establish a rapport with the participants by visiting them multiple times. As far as possible, I recruited the individuals who knew me well since a long time. Moreover, after the completion of the in-field data collection process, I continued to interact with few possible participants in order to update the reform-related information. The long-term friendship with the participants, rapport with them and the continuous follow up helped me collect rich and more accurate data that in turn, contributed to strengthen the trustworthiness of this study. The other strategy used to strengthen trustworthiness of this study is the triangulation of findings sourced from different information containers, such as extant literature, official documents, reports related to the reform and seminar papers. As stated earlier under Data Analysis Process, a peer checking technique was used to minimize translation-related errors and increase the trustworthiness of the findings of this study. The peer reviewer read the entire thesis and commented on many issues, followed by the incorporation of his constructive feedback and ideas. On top of these techniques, like other grounded theory users, I mainly used four techniques to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study findings. The four techniques, which are commonly used in grounded theory studies and are supposed to increase the trustworthiness of the findings of the study, include: Memo writing (see page for details), a re-examination of codes (see page), theoretical saturation (see page) and constant comparative method (see page). In addition to using these techniques, I consciously focused on the impact of the biases and my beliefs as well as the participants that may reduce trustworthiness of the study findings. This aspect, which is clearly mentioned earlier under *Theoretical Sensitivity and Reflexivity*, was carefully considered during both data analysis and write up phase.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter three has highlighted the philosophical assumptions (i.e., ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology) and interpretive frameworks that guided this study and presented a methodological framework and research method along with the description of

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data collection and data analysis processes. This study has applied a constructivist paradigm as an interpretative framework and a grounded theory approach as a research methodology. In the midst of multiple versions of grounded theory, such as, classical grounded theory by Strauss and Glaser (1967), modified grounded theory by Corbin and Strauss (1998, 2007), feminist grounded theory by Wuest (1995), constructivist grounded theory by Charmaz (2006) etc., this study has used a constructivist grounded theory approach as a research methodology. This is attributed to the fact that the methodological framework of the present study presents a high compatibility with several characteristics of Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory.

This chapter also presented demographics of participants, participant recruitment process, development of data collection instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis. A total of 10 focus groups and 24 one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted. The participants in the focus groups included school and college administrators, school principals, school teachers, Professors of Department of Curriculum and Evaluation, Grade 10 students, SLC graduates, and parents. Similarly, the participants in the one-on-one interviews included an authority of MOE, an authority of Department of Education, authorities of Curriculum Development Centre, an authority of the Office of Controller of Examination, an official of the Regional Education Directorate, local authorities (i.e., District Education Officer), an authority of Public Service Commission, (an employer), an official of CTEVT, assessment experts who were involved in preparing *Letter Grading Working Procedure*, educators, a representative of Teachers' Union Nepal, a representative of Nepal Teachers' Association, a representative of Nepal National Teachers' Association, a representative of Institutional School Teachers' Union, *Nepal*, a representative of college owners (Higher Secondary School Association Nepal), a representative of school owner (Private and Boarding Schools' Organization Nepal), a representative of school owner (National Private and Boarding Schools' Organization, Nepal), and a teacher from remote place (Himalaya region- Rolpa District). The data were analyzed using a three-phase non-linear coding system- open/initial coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This chapter concludes with a brief description of the re-examination of codes, the theoretical saturation method, the constant comparative method, the memo writing, the theoretical sensitivity and reflexivity, validation of findings, trustworthiness etc., which could strengthen the trustworthiness of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

As the main purpose of this study was to explicate the process of the assessment system reform of the SLC exam via a grounded theory study, the interview and focus group discussion transcripts were rigorously coded through a grounded theory method of analysis. Firstly, the 10 focus group discussions and 24 one-on-one interviews were broken into thematic codes, which further yielded separate 34 codebooks. The codes in each of the codebooks were filtered (i.e., selected the significant codes) and subsequently compiled to prepare a combined (a single) codebook. The combined codebook was finalized by going back and forth to each of the codebooks, transcripts, and the memos several times. The final codebook contains a total of 58 thematic sub-categories. The final 58 thematic sub-categories were grouped under 18 different conceptual categories based on their semantic relation and common features. Finally, the 18 larger conceptual categories were further grouped under three pivotal categories that can be termed as constructs.

The three pivotal constructs that emerged from the interviews and focus group discussions are: (1) conceptualization of the reform, (2) implementation of the reform and (3) reform effects. The first construct, *conceptualization of the reform*, comprises those conceptual categories and sub-categories, which revolve around or are mostly related to the conceptual phase of the assessment system reform. It covers those theme categories and sub-categories that state the nature of the reform, origin, and type of the reform, reform aims, framework for the reform, and preparation and homework for the reform. Similarly, the second construct, *implementation of the reform*, contains those conceptual categories and the thematic sub-categories, which revolve around the implementation phase of the reform. It includes those theme categories and sub-categories that inform how the reform-related information was disseminated, what strategic plan was used to implement the reform, and what factors could influence the reform process. The third construct, *reform effect*, comprises those categories and sub-categories emerged from implementing the reform as responses. It means that the conceptual categories and thematic sub-categories mentioned under the third construct are directly or indirectly related to both of the conceptual and implementation phases of the reform. The theme categories and sub-categories included under *reform effects* discuss the quandaries and condemnation attached to the reform, factors contributing to magnifying the quandaries,

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opportunities of the reform, reform impact, and step forward, etc.

The following sections describe all the constructs, conceptual categories, and thematic sub-categories in detail by grouping the thematic sub-categories under the related conceptual categories, and the conceptual categories under the related construct. The sensible combination of the constructs, conceptual categories, and thematic sub-categories describe the entire process of the assessment system reform. The first section presents different dimensions of the reform concept that emerged from the data. Likewise, the second section describes the issues/elements that influence the reform implementation process. Finally, before presenting the synopsis of the reform process, the third section discusses those issues and factors resulting from the implementation of the reform.

Conceptualization of the Reform

The results suggest five conceptual categories under the first principal construct- conceptualization of the reform as shown in Figure 12. These categories are described below under separate sub-headings.

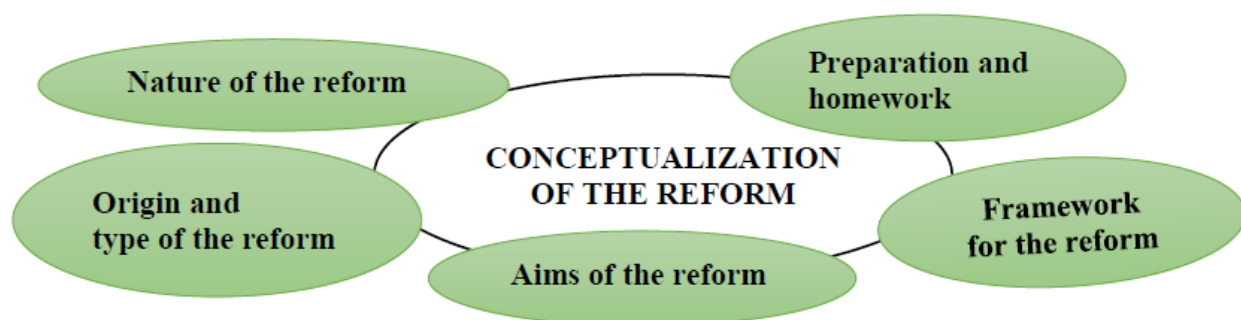


Figure 12. Conceptualization of the reform

1. Nature of the reform: A new phenomenon in Nepal

As indicated earlier, the MOE of Nepal endorsed the assessment system reform of the SLC exam by changing the existing numerical grading system (percentile) to the letter grading with GPA and descriptors, and a *pass-fail* system to a *no pass-fail* starting in 2015. Some participants expressed that the reform was a giant move in the school education system as it eliminated the *pass-fail* system in the SLC exam. Others view this reform as a tiny change (partial reform) in the existing assessment system of the SLC exam.

The findings suggest that both the provisions (i.e., the letter grading, and the provision of elimination of *pass* or *fail* in the grade sheet) are the new phenomena in the context of Nepal that have never been practiced before. Almost all of the participants expressed that many

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stakeholders including parents and students, in some cases even teachers were unfamiliar with such a grading system prior to the year 2015. Further, they discussed that the *no pass-fail* assessment system, which has been perceived as a great move in the assessment and testing system in Nepal, was a great puzzle to the stakeholders. Talking about the *no pass-fail* provision of the SLC exam, Teacher-1 says, *"It is a revolutionary change as it has broken down the eight-decade-long 'Iron Gate' in the school education system in Nepal."* The SLC exam was nicknamed as the *'Iron Gate'* because more than 50% of the examinees on an average could not pass the examination before the assessment reform (Administrator-2). Principal-1 contends that this huge wave of change in the educational sector has created a powerful national discourse. Many participants state that as it is a new phenomenon in Nepal, it has been a topic of national obsession. With this regard, Teacher-5 says, *"It has been a matter of quandary to many of the students and stakeholders."* He adds that, as the reform is a new practice in Nepal, many of the stakeholders including implementers might not have enough knowledge and experience to carry out the reform as aimed.

2. Origin and type of the reform

2.1 Origin of the reform. Despite the contradiction among opinions of the participants regarding the origin of the reform, most participants including the MOE official express that the main source of the assessment reform was the detailed research report prepared and submitted by a team of experts led by the Ex-vice chancellor of the Tribhuvan University, Professor Kedar Bhakta Mathema in 2006. Discussing the origin of the reform, the MOE official states that the major and minor research reports, interactions with the system and sub-system, and their experiences and insights constitute the source of the reform. Many participants' expressions have supported the MOE official's claim.

The MOE has formed several committees and research teams meaning to improve the school education in Nepal. Those committees and research teams have submitted their reports to the MOE at different times. Among those reports, many of them have recommended the MOE to commence a letter grading assessment system in the school education system. These instances indicate that the source of the present assessment reform is the research reports. (Educator-2).

On the contrary, some of the participants disagree with the MOE official. They argue that the assessment system was reformed under the duress of an international funding agency as the

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reform failed to incorporate the major recommendations of the research reports. They argue that the reports not only recommended the MOE to change the reporting system of the SLC exam but also advised to introduce fundamental changes (i.e., structural change, change in curriculum, change in pedagogy, etc.) in school education system. They claim that the reform was endorsed on the duress of the international funding agency (i.e., World Bank) which committed to provide 20% of the total budget required for the reform (e.g., ERO Official and Educator-2). In this regard, Educator-1 argues:

While the MOE officials claim that the origin of the assessment reform was the research reports, there is rare evidence to support this claim. Rather, there are plenty of instances that support that the source of research was an international donor agency. Some of such instances include implementation of the reform without completion of a detailed homework, lack of comprehensive framework and strategic plans, controversial issues in the reform documents, etc.

2.2 Type of the reform. The results suggest that the reform was carried out utilizing a top-down approach. A vast majority of the participants point out that the reform concept was conceptualized at the Ministry level based on the research reports, and the decision was made at the same level with subsequent implementation through its sub-systems. Citing some of the educational reforms in the world, such as 'No Child Left Behind Act' in the USA, Educator-2 states that most reforms follow a top-down approach, and so does the MOE of Nepal about this reform. Having said that few of the participants including local authorities and some of the teachers mention that the reform utilized a mixed approach, which is a combination of top-down and bottom-up. Justifying their claim, they argue that the reform concept emerged from the stakeholders and the MOE simply took the initiative to endorse the reform. Some of the participating school principals and teachers argue that they suggested the MOE should introduce a reform of the school education system. They believe that the MOE reformed the assessment system of the SLC exam based on their suggestions. What they disagree with the MOE is the process of the reform as it was implemented without their involvement.

...you know what? The reform agenda was conceived at the local level. By incorporating suggestions from the school principals, teachers, parents, school organizations, and experts, the MOE endorsed the assessment reform. Unfortunately, the MOE failed to involve the key stakeholders in the conceptual phase of the reform. ... I mean, the concept

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of the reform emerged at the local level and the MOE implemented it without involving the stakeholders in the initial phase of the reform. This indicates that the reform applied a mixed approach- a combination of top-down and bottom-up approach.

The data show that some of the participants express contradictory opinions regarding the origin and type of the reform.

3. Aims of the reform

As suggested by the study participants, the reform entails following four overarching aims: (i) Introducing a notion of one-subject certification, (ii) Minimizing the educational loss, (iii) Reducing distress on test-takers and (iv) Making compatible with the global practices. These aims are described thoroughly in the following section.

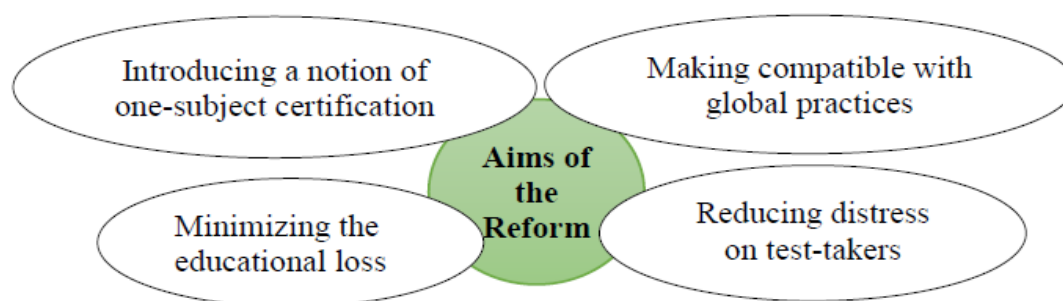


Figure 13. Aims of the reform

3.1 Introducing a notion of one-subject certification. The findings suggest that one of the important aims of the reform was to allow the students to go forward in the academic or vocational field by making the existent pass-fail provision in the previous assessment system for more than eight decades, little less stringent. The results indicate that in the reformed assessment system, students having GPA 1.6 (30-39 % marks), regardless of their lower grades in a couple of subjects, are allowed to enroll in the next level or vocational programs. It means that unlike the previous assessment system, there is a lesser stringent barrier (so-called 'iron gate') for a grade promotion. Many of the participants opine that the reform has broken the existing 'iron gate' in the assessment system of the SLC exam by creating a one-subject certification provision. By one-subject certification, they mean to say that the reform has provided students with an opportunity to proceed with their further studies in the subjects or area of their interest and strength, irrespective of lower grades in few subjects. They argue that as people are born with specific talents and skills, everyone cannot be equally talented in all subjects or area. They advocate that given this idiosyncratic nature of every human being, every individual should be

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provided with an opportunity to develop those specific talents and skills. They further contend that this is what the reform has aimed to do.

One of the remarkable aspects of the reform is the provision of one subject certification.

Unlike the previous assessment system, this allows students to proceed with their further studies even if they are considerably poor in one or two subjects. GPA 1.6 allows them to do so. (Principal-9).

To conclude, the reform has broken the existing obstacles (i.e., the provision in which one must score at least 32% marks in all the eight subjects in the SLC exam for grade promotion and further advancement) by allowing the SLC candidates to become eligible for grade promotion and further advancements in the subjects or area of their strength.

3.2 Minimizing the educational loss. The findings suggest that the reform has addressed one of the frequently raised questions regarding the pass percentage of the SLC exam appearing students. Presenting data from the previous years, many of the participants state that more than 50% of the SLC appearing students every year used to fail the SLC exam. In the reformed assessment system, there is no failing grade seemingly, which means that none fails the SLC exam once they write it. Shedding light on this issue, the DOE official states that it was an alarming situation that the MOE's investment in education was meaningless because of the high number of failures. Expressing a similar view, the MOE official states that failing more than 50% of the examinees in a high-stakes exam like the SLC was a great educational loss for the country. Further, he states that the first and foremost aim of the reform was to minimize the great educational loss and increase students' access to higher and vocational education. He argues that the provision of flexible grade promotion and one-subject certification, mentioned above, has achieved this purpose by minimizing the educational loss.

On the contrary, some participants do not believe that the reform would help in minimizing the educational loss significantly. They argue that the admission criteria set for Grade 11 and vocational programs may prevent several low-grade holders from joining higher education and vocational programs.

The MOE and under agencies have been claiming that this reform minimizes educational loss. This is stated in the MOE's official document as well. But I don't think that this reform would bring a revolutionary change for increasing the intake in Grade 11 and vocational programs. The admission criteria indicate that there is still hidden pass-fail

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system. ... if this is the case, how could it minimize the educational loss? ... yes, I agree that it could increase few percentage (around 5%) intake in Grade 11 and vocational programs if the reform is successfully implemented. But the tiny increase is futile as more than 50% students fail the SLC exam every year. (Teacher-13).

The participants argue that if the goal of the reform was to minimize the educational loss practically (i.e., in a large scale), either the MOE should manage some alternative programs (technical and skill-oriented programs) in order to cater to those who could not meet the admission criteria set for Grade 11 and vocational programs or remove the admission criteria by establishing a quality control mechanism.

3.3 Making compatible with global practices. Leaving some exceptions, all the participants in the study mention that many countries in the world including the South Asian Association for Regional Corporation (SAARC) countries have been using a Letter Grading Assessment System along with GPA and descriptors for student assessment. They state that one of the prominent aims of the reform was to make the assessment system compatible with the international practices, which further makes it easier for the students who want to proceed their study in the foreign countries. Educator-2 state:

Many counties in the world, including the SAARC countries, are practicing GPA system in their educational institutions. Every year, many students go to these countries for further studies. We have been witnessed that our students have been facing several problems due to the incompatibility of the assessment system. We use percentile system whereas other countries use a GPA system. Now, with this reform, we have been able to address the discrepancies created by the incompatible assessment systems.

Few of the participants also discussed that even if the letter grade system is widely used, passing marks/grades are still a part of the assessment system. Comparing the newly reformed letter grading system of Nepal with the other countries, Teacher-9 contends:

If you see the letter grading system around the world, you find cut off points, I mean passing marks/grades. Candidates must obtain certain marks or grades to pass the exam, otherwise, they are not awarded certificates. The pass marks, of course, may vary from one country to another. See our assessment system; there is no cut off score or failing grade. I do not understand how it would be compatible with the assessment system of the foreign countries.

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3.4 Reducing distress on test-takers. The other overarching aim of the reform, as suggested by the participants, was to minimize the SLC exam result-induced duress and distress on test-takers. Almost all the participants state that the reformed assessment system has dramatically reduced the number of SLC exam result-induced suicide cases. Discussing this issue, Teacher-3 states:

If you see the statistics of previous years, you find that not less than five SLC exam failures took their own life. Moreover, we do not have any official records of about how many students have left the SLC exam before its commencement due to fear of failure or fear of being stigmatized as a failure. However, this year, we heard a single case of suicide attached to the SLC exam results.

Many participants, including students, mention that the test-takers, especially low performers, seem to be happy with the reform because now the fear of being stigmatized as the SLC failure is eliminated. They also state that there is no fear of failing the SLC exam due to one or two subjects. Student-10 says:

It is good news for all; whether you are talented or weak. Sometimes what happens you know? A talented person cannot write some of the subjects nicely due to sickness or whatever the reasons. In the previous assessment system, unless having at least 32 marks in all the eight subjects, one used to be labeled as a failure and could not get admission to the next level. However, the newly reformed assessment system allows students go-ahead for further studies despite his/her low marks (below 32%) in a couple of subjects if they have GPA of 1.6 or above. It harms none, but benefits all.

The findings suggest that the reformed assessment system has liberated the test-takers from the fear of failure resulting from the unforeseen circumstances in terms of the exam result.

Contrary to the four aims of the reform mentioned above, the Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015 (i.e., the MOE's official document) states the aims of the reform a bit differently. The aims of the reform mentioned in the LGWP 2015 comprise (translated verbatim): (1) To verify/measure students' learning abilities exactly, (2) to introduce a nine-point letter grading system in measuring student achievement, and (3) to increase the quality of education by minimizing educational loss. The differences will be further discussed in the discussion section below.

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4. Framework for the reform

Many of the participants argue that the MOE used none of the theoretical frameworks for this reform; nor did it prepare a detailed conceptual framework to make the reform process clearer. Moreover, none of the official documents of the MOE mention what theoretical or conceptual framework was utilized for this reform. Talking about the framework for the reform, the MOE official states:

The present reform does not follow any pre-existing theory of assessment system reform nor does it follow any readymade theoretical framework for the assessment reform. We reformed the assessment system by analyzing our local and national circumstances; analyzing the subjective and objective reality of our country. However, we borrowed some of the useful ideas from the international practices; ...especially from the SAARC countries.

Talking on the theoretical and conceptual framework used in this reform, Teacher-7 states:

It is not necessary that every reform follows a theoretical framework- many reforms lack it. However, in the lack of a theoretical framework, a conceptual framework is a must. It is a roadmap that mirrors the entire process of the reform. How can you implement a reform without preparing a conceptual framework? How could you reach your destination without a roadmap? This reform did not seem to follow a theoretical framework. More importantly, the reformers did not seem to prepare a conceptual framework which was one of the essential prerequisites for a reform.

Many of the participants contend that the MOE failed to prepare a detailed conceptual framework, which is in fact, considered to be a milestone for a similar reform.

5. Preparation and homework for the reform

Regarding the necessary preparation and homework for the reform, the findings suggest a controversial result. The MOE official claims that the MOE and other central agencies, such as CDC, DOE did excessive preparation in designing a foundation and favorable environment for the reform. Contrary to this, the other participants including experts, educators, and local authorities deny this claim. Based on the findings, the preparation and homework can be described under two sub-titles as shown in the following figure.

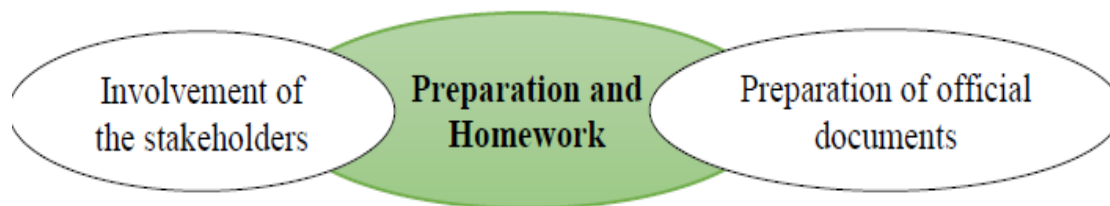


Figure 14. Preparation and homework for the reform

5.1 Involvement of the stakeholders. The involvement of stakeholders in the reform process, as suggested by the findings, can better be described in the following two phases: Involvement of the stakeholders in the conceptual phase, and involvement of the stakeholders in the implementation phase.

5.1.1 Involvement of the stakeholders in the conceptual and roadmap phase

5.1.1.1. Interaction with experts and educators. Talking about the involvement of experts and educators in the initial phase, the reformers argue that they interacted with experts and educators in the initial phase of the reform by organizing workshops. They claim that they were able to collect some relevant ideas from the interaction programs. In this regard, the MOE official states:

Due to time limit, we could not organize as many seminars and workshops as it needed in the conceptual phase of the reform. However, we have organized a couple of workshops to interact with experts and educators at the national level and tried our best to elicit good ideas from them about the reform. We also invited experts from abroad from whom we collected useful feedback.

The local implementers, such as the representative of the Office of the Controller of Examination, the District Education Officers, the DOE authority express that the MOE conducted a couple of workshops, wherein, a few educators and experts (both national and international) participated and expressed their views. However, they further argue that the workshops just proved to be superficial rituals as the deliberations did not consider any useful ideas for launching the reform. Talking about the interaction programs organized by the MOE, the DOE authority states:

...it is not true that the MOE and under agencies failed to involve experts and educators in the initial phase of the reform. They were involved. However, what is true is that the outcome of the workshops and seminars could not be reflected/seen...I mean, we could not prepare a detailed document and a conceptual framework by incorporating their

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feedback. In fact, the interaction program looked just like an information dissemination session.

A vast majority of the participants also deny that the experts and educators contributed in the initial phase of the reform. They argue that the MOE organized seminars in order to inform and communicate the forthcoming changes in the assessment system of the SLC exam.

Expressing his view in this regard, Principal-5 states:

We knew from the mass media that the MOE organized seminars to interact with experts and educators about the reform. We thought that the MOE would prepare a detailed official document and a roadmap by incorporating their ideas. But, it didn't happen so. No detailed official document was made. Later on, a committee of experts and educators was formed, but the committee prepared just a letter grading procedure; not a detailed official document and a framework. The seminar just proved to be an information session- a ritual.

5.1.1.2. Involvement of the key stakeholders in the conceptual and roadmap phase. The results indicate that the key stakeholders, such as the representatives of teacher's and school's organizations, school principals, teachers were not provided any explicit opportunity to share their knowledge, experiences, and expertise towards the conceptualization of the reform. Many of the participants express that the MOE officials (i.e., representatives from DOE, CDC, OCE, etc.) were solely involved in the conceptual phase of the reform. Talking about the involvement of the stakeholders in the conceptual phase, Expert-3 states:

CDC prepared a concept paper for the reform based on the research reports and presented it to the MOE officials. Then the combined meetings of the CDC and MOE officials decided on reforming the existing assessment system of the SLC exam. There is no wonder that the policy was made at the central level. It happens in other parts of the world too..., for instance, the 'No Child Left Behind' legislation in the USA. I do not think that the lower authorities involved at the policy level.

On the contrary, some of the participants argue that if the MOE had involved the key stakeholders, such as school principals and teachers, in the preparatory discussions during the conceptual phase, the implementation of the reform would have been easier for the MOE. Moreover, they argue that a better model of assessment could have emerged from the discussions. Educator-1 says:

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...unfortunately, no key stakeholders were involved in the conceptual phase of the reform. As a result, it lacks a comprehensive roadmap of the reform. If the thorough discussions with the key stakeholders including experts and educators had been conducted before deciding on implementation, that would have helped to minimize the number of problems and quandaries emerging today from its implementation.

5.1.2 Involvement of the stakeholders in the implementation phase. As regards the involvement of the stakeholders in the implementation of the reform, the participants do not seem to have similar opinions. The MOE officials and some of the local authorities claim that they tried their optimal best to involve all levels of stakeholders at the outset of the implementation of the reform. They substantiate this argument with the claim that the MOE and CDC conducted a couple of discussion sessions at the central level and the DEO at the local level to inform the school administrators and teachers. However, having said that, they admit that they could not reach a great mass of local stakeholders due to time constraints. In this regard, the MOE official state:

...it is hard to define the term 'preparation and homework, and equally difficult to say how much preparation and homework is required for implementing the reform. We did whatever we could do in the limited time frame. Certainly, there was an institutional representation of the stakeholders; you cannot involve all the educators, experts, and stakeholders in the discussions. Yes, I agree that it could have been better if we had been able to involve other more stakeholders associated with the reform.

Conversely, denying the institutional representation of the stakeholders, Educator-1 argues that the MOE authorities chose a couple of acquaintances as regards experts, educators, and other stakeholders to show the involvement of stakeholders. Further, he argues that the reform was imposed by the upper authority without any consultation with the targeted stakeholders, such as students, parents, school principals, and teachers. The NNTA, PABSON, N-PABSON representatives and college owner express analogous views as Educator-1. They contend that their voice was not heard; their recommendations were not considered, and they became outsiders in the reform process.

5.2 Preparation of official documents. According to the MOE official, the central authorities formed a nine-membered committee comprising of educators, assessment experts, and representatives of central agencies in preparing a formal official document called *Letter Grading*

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Working Procedure 2015 (LGWP 2015). The twelve-page LGWP 2015 prepared by the committee was the main official document of the MOE. The participants who were involved in implementing the reform claim that in addition to a couple of circulars (instructional letters) and summaries of meeting minutes, no other formal documents were dispatched to the reform implementers, such as District Education Offices and schools. Further, the findings suggest that the official document was too brief to provide necessary information to the implementers and stakeholders. Moreover, the document (i.e., LGWP 2015), according to the participants (except the MOE officials), was confusing in several ways. With this regard, Principal-3 states:

This was the first and formal official document circulated to the concerned stakeholders. When I got it and went through it; I was like what? It did not mention anything about the future of low graders, any admission criteria in the college and universities; ...totally not. The grade descriptors look exactly like copied and pasted from somewhere else; they were confusing.

Pointing out a need for involvement of the implementers in the documentation (i.e., conceptual) phase, Teacher-6 says:

... the MOE failed to organize a couple of meetings with the implementing bodies, such as representatives of Regional Education Directorates, District Education Officers, school principals, teachers, resource persons, etc. to collect feedback and modify the LGWP 2015 before dispatching it to the stakeholders. If it had been done, it could have been a bit better document and lead the stakeholders on the right track.

The majority of the participants express that the MOE failed to prepare the necessary documents, specifically in a capacity that could facilitate the reform process and guide the implementers.

Section Summary (Summary of the First Section- First Construct)

To sum up the first section, the issues and concerns attached to the first construct, *conceptualization of the reform*, include the perception of people to the assessment reform, origin and type of the reform, reform aims, and framework and preparation for the reform. The findings suggest that the transition from a numerical grading system to the letter grading along with GPA and descriptors was a new phenomenon in Nepal. The results also reveal that the primary source of the reform was the research reports submitted to the MOE over a period of time (see discussion section for details). However, few of the participants disagree with it and

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argue that the assessment system was reformed under the duress of the donor agency. Concerning the type of reform, a vast majority of the participants express that the MOE adopted a top-down approach to reform the existing assessment system. Likewise, as suggested by the LGWP 2015, the three main aims of the reform include: To verify/measure students' learning abilities exactly, to introduce a nine-point letter grading system in measuring student achievement, and to increase the quality of education by minimizing educational loss. However, the participants in the study mention the aims of the reform a bit differently. The aims mentioned by the participants include flexible grade promotion and one-subject certification, minimizing the educational loss, reducing distress on test-takers, and making the assessment system compatible with the global practices. Regarding the framework and preparation of the reform, while the MOE officials claim that they have done necessary preparation for the reform, almost all the other participants suggest that the MOE did minimal homework on preparing the foundation necessary for the reform. They argue that the MOE failed to involve the key stakeholders in the conceptual phase of the reform.

Implementation of the Reform

As mentioned above, this section (i.e., under *implementation of the reform*) describes the conceptual categories and thematic sub-categories that emerged from the data and present an association with the beginning of the implementation of the reform. The findings (i.e., interviews and focus group discussions) inform that after the ratification of the reform policy, with a little preparation, the MOE implemented the reform. The findings suggest the following three major conceptual categories and several thematic sub-categories associated with the implementation of the reform.

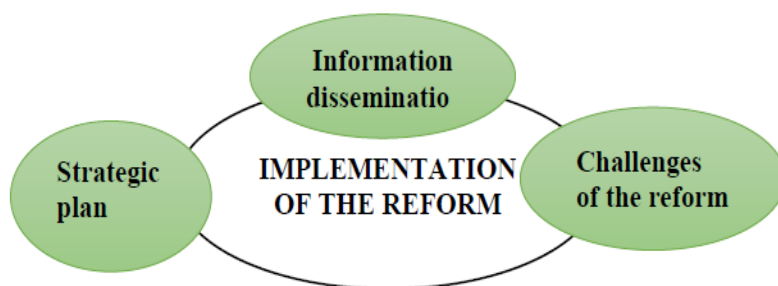


Figure 15. Implementation of the reform

1. Information dissemination

One of the themes that emerged in this category was the dissemination of implementation

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related information to the concerned stakeholders. Almost all the participants state that the MOE mainly used the following two means to disseminate the circulars and information to the under agencies and schools: (i) Use of mass media, and (ii) use of sub-system.

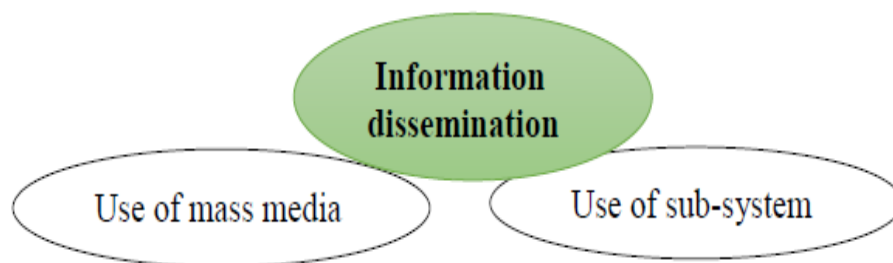


Figure 16: Information dissemination

1.1 Use of mass media. The MOE, having ratified the policy of the assessment system reform, primarily used the mass media to circulate the necessary information about the reform. Many participants, including the MOE official and other under agency representatives, discuss that the MOE posted the reform-related documents on its website, broadcasted the information on the television, radio, FM, and published on newspapers. Discussing this issue, the MOE official contends:

After making the decision, our first and foremost task was to inform the stakeholders about the reform. Actually, we did not have much time to do so. For this purpose, we used the mass media, national and local level newspapers, organized seminars and workshops.

Many other participants also report that they heard about the assessment system reform of the SLC exam via mass media. While many of the participants mention that the MOE used the mass media to disseminate the reform-related information, a few raise questions on the effectiveness of the use of the mass media. In this regard, Principal-3 contends:

You know the situation of Nepal. As many public schools do not have access to the Internet, the website of the MOE is useless for them. Moreover, the information posted on the MOE's website is also unclear and confusing. The information provided by the mass media cannot be clear and authentic. You cannot take it for granted.

While the participants express their views on the effectiveness of the way of information dissemination and its authenticity, the participants share a common opinion that the MOE used the mass media to disseminate the reform-related documents.

1.2 Use of sub-system. As indicated by the results, the MOE formally dispatched the

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reform-related formal documents, such as *Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015* (a booklet), official circulars and notices to the implementers through its under-agencies and sub-systems. The sub-system includes the OCE, five Regional Education Directorates, 75 District Education Offices, and Resource Centres. The MOE and under-agencies mention that they also organized national, regional and local level seminars to disseminate the information. Talking about how the information was disseminated, the MOE official states:

...we also had to disseminate the documents and circulars as soon as possible. We mobilized our sub-system to dispatch the documents and circulars officially. We did our best, but you know the efficiency of our sub-systems; there were some lapses.

The MOE authorities accept some weaknesses in disseminating the reform-related documents. In addition, several participants, especially school principals, teachers, and school owners report that they did not get the documents and circulars promptly. In this regard, Principal-4 states:

We did not get any circulars or documents officially, except the Letter Grading Working Procedure. We did not get the right information properly and timely. It created confusion everywhere. We are facing this problem in the capital; in an urban area; imagine the condition of the remote places, like Jumla, Humla, Rolpa or Mugu Districts.

The teacher representative of Himalaya region (Teacher-14 from Rolpa District) states that the MOE or the District Education Office did not organize any seminars or workshops to inform or instruct them about the reform. Further, he says that they learned about the reform via the mass media. *"In the lack of clear-cut official instructions and guidance, we could not convey the right message of the reform to the students and parents. We have still many confusions and misunderstanding (Teacher-14)."* Many participants mention that, although the MOE's under-agencies and sub-systems could not reach a great mass of stakeholders, the MOE used its sub-system to disseminate the reform-related information and official documents.

2. Strategic plan for implementing the reform

The second theme that emerged from the data was the strategy employed by the MOE to implement the reform. Although many of the participants including Educators and Professors discuss that the MOE implemented the reform without detailed preparation and necessary homework, the MOE official claims that implementing the reform without doing exhaustive preparation and much homework was part of a strategic plan of the government. The MOE uses

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two-point simple formula (a rule of thumb) as a framework for the reform: Implement with a basic preparation and improve it by feedback. In response to a question, "What necessary preparation and homework has the MOE done for implementing the reform," the MOE official states:

Basically, we had two options to choose from regarding the assessment reform. Option one- to implement the reform after the completion of a detailed preparation and necessary homework. It might take a couple of years more to commence the reform. Option two- to implement the reform with a basic and technical preparation and keep on improving the reform by incorporating constructive feedback and responses received from the stakeholders, experts, and educators. We chose the second option as we did not see any great harm in doing so. Rather, it minimizes the educational loss and the exam result-induced distress on test-takers. ...we follow a notion of 'improving by feedback' as said 'learning by doing.'

However, other participants including Expert-5 disagree with the MOE official's 'notion of improving through feedback.' In this regard, Expert-5 argues, "A general principle of reform or change is that you implement a reform only when you finish all the detailed preparation and necessary homework, but it did not happen for this reform." Further, he argues that the improvised reform caused confusion amongst the students and parents; and as a result of the quandaries, many of the test-takers became the victims of the reform.

Although Educator-2 did not say anything as to whether or not the implementation of the reform before doing exhaustive preparation was a strategic plan of the government, he supports the MOE's decision to implement the reform in a short period. He argues that if the MOE had waited to implement the reform until finishing all the preparation and necessary homework, the reform would have rarely been materialized.

3. Challenges: Conditional factors for successful implementation of the reform

The findings suggest a number of conditional factors that might affect the successful implementation of the reform and further its institutionalization. Most of the participants, except the MOE official and local authorities, seem to be skeptical as to whether or not the reform would be successful regarding meeting its goals. They express that the success or failure of the reform depends on several conditional factors. They mention mainly the following two conditional factors upon which success or failure of the reform resides: (i) Role of the

stakeholders and (ii) regular monitoring and evaluation system.



Figure 17. Challenges: Conditional factors

3.1 Role of the stakeholders. Many of the participants' the most prevailing concern was the role, which the central authority, local implementers and teachers play in the implementation process of the reform. The majority of the participants express that success or failure of the reform, to a great extent, depends on the role of the key stakeholders, i.e., central authority, local implementers (i.e., district education officers), principal, teachers, and parents. Expressing his view on this issue, Professor-6 states:

It is hard to predict whether or not any of a large-scale reform, such as this, would be successful. It has been harder in our case because of a couple of reasons. First, it is a reform endorsed based on a top-down approach; without consulting the key stakeholders. Second, a large mass of stakeholders has been the outsider, not only in the conceptual phase but also at the outset of the implementation of the reform. Third, it seems that there is not a harmonious relation between the reformers and the local implementers. Such list goes on and on. In my opinion, success or failure of the reform largely depends on the roles of the stakeholders- from central to local level.

As stated above, the following section presents how the roles of the central authority, district education officers, school principals, teachers, and parents, would impact the reform process.

3.1.1 Roles of the central authority. Many participants express that the role of the central authority could be one of the determining factors for the success of the reform. They discuss that if the MOE and under agencies took the reform seriously and established a harmonious relation with the implementing bodies, the reform would be successful. In this regard, Professor-3 states:

As the MOE and CDC are the leading bodies for this reform, their roles seem to be crucial in making the reform success or failure. A number of questions are raised. What relation would they establish with the local implementers? How would they treat the stakeholders who are opposing the reform? How would they collect feedback? Would

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they indeed incorporate the constructive feedback? What would be the MOE's immediate action plan to address the quandaries and condemnation resulting from the implementation of the reform? Such questions go on and on. If the MOE addressed such questions wisely, the reform would be successful. Otherwise, it would not.

3.1.2 Roles of the district education officers. The results also indicate that the local implementers, especially, district education officers are the true implementers. In congruence, many participants express that the district education officers are the ones who directly deal with the school administrators and teachers for implementing the reform. According to Expert-2, success or failure of the reform, in large part, is in the hands of district education officers. He further attests that positive and supportive roles of the local implementers lead to success whereas non-supportive roles of the local implementers hinder the reform process. Highlighting the roles of the district education officers, Principal-7 contends:

The MOE does not seem to discuss with the district education officers about the reform aims and objectives in depth. You know, they are the principal implementers. They have to have in-depth knowledge and clear understanding of the reform. ...only circulars and instructions cannot be sufficient to make this reform happens. However, it has not been too late to involve them in the reform process. The MOE should create such an environment in which the district education officers could work with the feeling that they are part of the process; not only implementers. If this happens, the reform process proceeds to the right direction.

3.1.3 Roles of the principal, teachers, and parents. Pointing out the shortcoming of the MOE regarding the involvement of the stakeholders in the reform process, many participants contend of a possibility (though it is not high) that some of the key stakeholders could become reform-unfriendly. The findings suggest that if the school principal, teachers and parents did not support the reform with an earnest intent and could not be part of the reform process, the reform would fail to introduce fundamental changes in the existing assessment system. Further, they argue that it is the principal who takes charge of administration, it is the teachers who implement the reform in the classroom, and it is the parents who support their children both emotionally and financially. Educator-2 contends that if the MOE succeeded in involving all the stakeholders in the reform process (i.e., yet, it has not been too late to do so), and making them feel part of the reform process, there is no doubt that the reform would be successful.

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Talking about the roles of teachers and parents, Expert-4 says:

School principals, teachers, and parents are a very important part of this process. The school principals and teachers explained the reform based on their understanding and more importantly based on their perception of the reform and reform issues. Imagine yourself. What message would they convey to their students if they were themselves unsatisfied with the reform process. ... parents are also equally important to support their children. There are many cases that some of the parents withdrew their children from the additional and tuition classes thinking that their children would not need pass mark to get promoted to the next level. Many forced their children to help them in their household work instead of studying.

The results, concerning the roles of the stakeholders, divulge that if the stakeholders, especially teachers, took the ownership of the reform, the reform would no sooner take a great leap. In this regard, the NNTA representative contends:

The nation has been neglecting the teachers for years not only in this case (assessment reform) but also in other several cases. I do not understand why the nation does so? Why doesn't it recognize the enormous power and potentials of the teachers? Can you imagine a successful educational reform without teachers' support and effort? It is the teachers who can bring a revolutionary change in education sectors.

3.2 Regular monitoring and evaluation system. The other important, influential factor for the successful implementation of the reform as suggested by the results is the regular monitoring and evaluation system. Many participants argue that if the MOE and under agencies form a committee of experts, educators, and bureaucrats to evaluate the implementation process (i.e., to find out the weaknesses and problems about the reform process) and take a necessary action to address the weaknesses and problems identified by the monitoring and evaluation committee, the reform will definitely be successful. The results suggest a need for an effective monitoring and evaluation system, which could help regulate and facilitate the implementation process. Expert-4 states the importance of monitoring and evaluation system for the reform process thusly:

If the MOE and the concerned authorities could not make the monitoring and evaluation system effective, the reform would not happen. We have witnessed that there have been several attempts of innovations and reforms in the past, but most of them did not become

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successful or did not work as hoped in the lack of effective monitoring and support system. I sense the same risk about this reform too.

Many of the other participants' responses support Expert-4's view. They express that the MOE is unlikely to form any monitoring and evaluation system to track the reform.

Section Summary (Summary of the Second Section- Second Construct)

To conclude this section, the second construct, *implementation of the reform*, consists of these three conceptual categories- information dissemination, strategic plan and challenges of the reform. The findings suggest that the MOE used the mass media and its sub-systems to disseminate the reform-related information, such as instructions, official circulars, documents, etc. Contrary to the MOE's claim, many of the participants express that both of the information dissemination means (i.e., use of mass media and use of sub-system) could not be effective. Similarly, as suggested by the findings, the MOE utilized a strategic plan called '*implement and improve by feedback*' (in MOE official's words). This too was severely criticized by a large number of participants stating that the MOE implemented the reform without any preparation and constituting any strategic plan and roadmap. Finally, the findings reveal mainly two conditional factors (challenges) upon which success or failure of the reform resides. Put differently; the results indicate that the success or failure of the reform, to a great extent, depends on the role of the key stakeholders and the regular monitoring and evaluation system. The participants discuss that the strong willpower of the reformers and positive and supportive role of the local implementers could make the reform successful (however, not necessarily). And alternatively, they argue that the opposite role of the stakeholders could lead the reform to failure. The other conditional factor suggested by the data that could play a crucial role in making the reform success or failure is a regular monitoring and evaluation system by the MOE. They argue that if the MOE wants to make the reform successful, a robust monitoring and evaluation system, which does not exist now, should be established.

Reform Effects: Misconception, Condemnation, Opportunities, and Impact

As stated earlier, *reform effect* covers a variety of factors that resulted from the period of concept formation to early implementation of the reform. The findings inform a bunch of challenges, quandaries, and opportunity resulting from the reform. The results also indicate some of the positive and negative impacts of the reform and suggest some steps, which the concerned authorities should undertake to address the quandaries and challenges. The reform effects are: (i)

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Misconception on the key reform issues, (ii) Controversial and paradoxical issues, (iii) Factors contributing to magnifying quandaries, (iv) Condemnation, (v) Opportunities, (vi) Reform impact, (vii) Impact variation, (viii) Limitation, (ix) Demand of the time, and (x) Step forward

The following figure presents some of the major issues resulting from the reform.

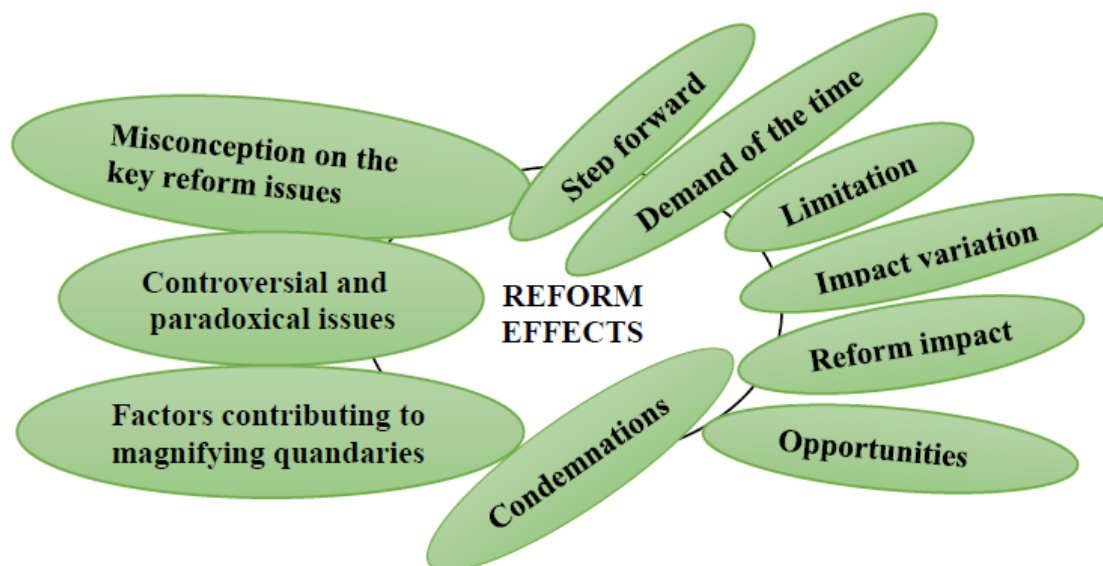


Figure 18. Reform effect

1. Misconception on the key reform issues

A vast majority of the participants express that due to the lack of clear guidelines and timely instructions from the concerned authorities, the key reform issues- *no pass-fail provision* and *value of letter grading*, were misinterpreted and misunderstood. These two issues (shown in the following figure) are briefly described below.

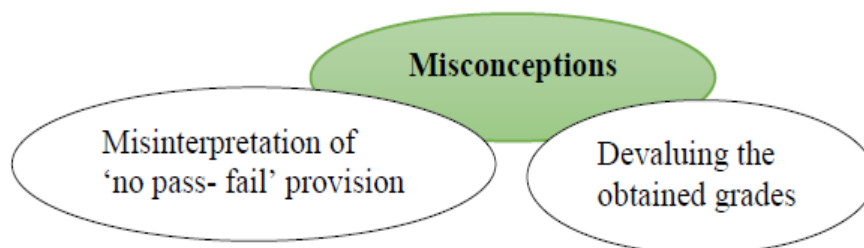


Figure 19. Misconception on the key reform issues

1.1 Misinterpretation of ‘no pass-fail’ provision. A large number of the participants report that the reform resulted in several quandaries and misunderstanding. In some cases, some of the aspects of the reform were grossly misinterpreted that increased quandaries among stakeholders. As expressed by the participants, one of the misunderstandings resulted from the

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reform is the provision of no pass-fail system in the SLC exam. With regard to the misunderstanding and misinterpretation, Professor-2 contends:

The MOE implemented the reform with a little preparation and homework; without interacting with the key stakeholders, such as teachers, students and parents. It was the root cause of the confusion and misunderstanding. When the reform began, it was said that the pass-fail system of the SLC exam was eliminated. This news was widely spread- the major newspapers and electronic media covered this news with a high priority. This phenomenon was misunderstood- no fail means no barrier to grade promotion. As a result, many students stop working hard. But this was not the case in practice. Practically, Grade D in some cases, and particularly Grade E is the failing grade.

Expressing his view on the *no pass-fail* provision, Educator-2 contends that “no fail” system is not universally accepted. Educator-2 states:

While preparing the Letter Grading Working Procedure, few of the other experts and myself proposed the MOE officials to set up a cut off line for failing grade. But, the MOE officials removed this provision later in the final document, may be due to political pressure. If there were a cut off line, none would be confused. No pass-fail system is a rare and not universally accepted phenomenon. We must come out of this obscure provision and should make it clearer to all the stakeholders.

Many participants express that the MOE should have taken appropriate efforts to disseminate information regarding the *no pass-fail* provision before its implementation. Further, they state that the misunderstanding attached to the reform made many of the students, especially low performers, the victim. The NNTA representative argues that this reform has paralyzed this generation and seemingly would affect the future generations. Indicating the confusion created by the reform, Educator-1 contends:

Now, we are providing Grade D and E to many of the students and saying that you have not failed the SLC exam. We are conveying, directly or indirectly, a wrong message to the students and parents. Sooner or later they would understand the reality that Grade D and E are failing grades because they could not get admission in the upper level with these grades. Many of the students have been the victim of misinterpretation. This situation would be more serious than the previous one.

To sum up, the elimination of the existing pass or fail system in the grade sheet of the

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SLC exam was misinterpreted and misunderstood. Practically, as there have been admission criteria for grade promotion, it is not the absolute abolition of the pass-fail system.

1.2 Devaluing the obtained grades. The second misconception regarding the reform revealed from the data is the misunderstanding of the value of the obtained grades. There is an agreement among the participants that many of the students and parents could not understand the value of the grades. Their understanding was that irrespective of the grade secured by the students, it would not prevent them from grade promotion. The participants expressed that after implementing the reform, the MOE set admission criteria in Grade 11 and vocational programs, which prevented the low-grade holders from getting admission in the subject or area of their interest. The situation mentioned above indicates that the reformers seem to be the failure in making the stakeholders understand the value of grades students of Grade 10 received. Teacher-8 says:

... specifically, the medium and low performers became the victim of the misunderstanding. They thought that regardless of their grade- either they got grade D or E, they would get admission in the upper level. So, they didn't see the difference between Grade D or E or Grade D or C. But, in reality, it makes a huge difference. Many of the parents of the low performers stopped sending their children to tuition and extra classes thinking that their children don't fail the SLC exam...but, they only realized the importance of good grades when their children did not get admission in the desired subject due to low grades in the core subjects. (Student-7).

As indicated by the findings, several test-takers might have missed the grade increment exam that could help them get admission in the upper level in the subject or area of their interest and strength.

2. Controversial and paradoxical issues in the reform

A number of paradoxical constructs and controversies also emerged in association with the reform as identified through the data analysis. The participants argue that the unplanned, unprepared and hurriedly implemented reform (in participants' words) created multiple controversies and paradoxes that not only confused students and parents but also some of the implementers including teachers. Some of the prominent paradoxes and controversies suggested by the findings are: (i) Commencement of reform in Grade 10, (ii) interval of 10 in the grading system, (iii) announcement of accommodation programs for the low-grade holders, (iv)

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admission criteria in Grade 11 and vocational programs, and (v) contradicting reform aim.

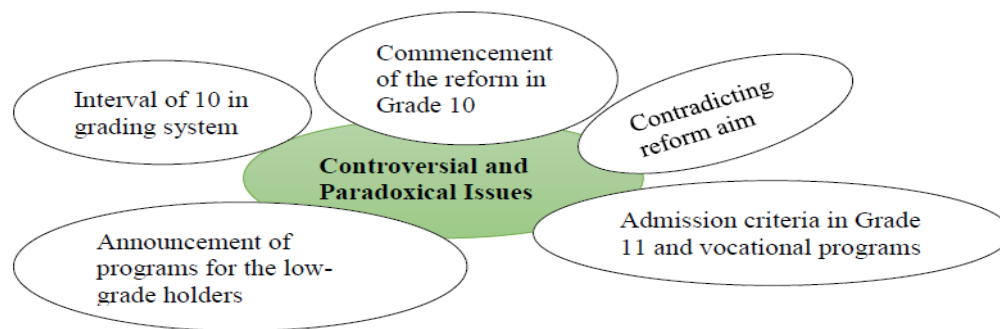


Figure 20. Controversial and paradoxical issues

2.1 Commencement of the reform in Grade 10. One of the controversial issues suggested by many participants is the commencement of the reform in Grade 10. The majority of the participants argue that such a new type of reform should not be commenced in Grade 10. Almost all the participants (except MOE official and Educator-2) argue that it should have been introduced from the primary level and continued up to Grade 12. Many of them state that there is hardly evidence and strong logic that justify why the reform suddenly, without proper consultation with the key stakeholders and detailed preparation, commenced in Grade 10.

Educator-1 states:

If this type of reform started at the primary level and continued throughout the school education, it would be apparent to all and would not affect hundreds of students negatively. If the MOE did so, it would cost the nation less. The justification given by the government authorities as to why they commenced this reform in the middle of the school system (i.e., Grade 10) rather than starting from the beginning is groundless-unjustifiable.

Some of the other participants contend that the Continuous Assessment System (CAS), which has been used up to Grade seven in public school system, could be continued throughout high school as an alternative to this reform. But others disagree with this notion stating that the CAS construct demonstrates a huge variation from this reform in many ways, such as objectives, aims, procedures, etc. and it has been proved to be just a ritual.

On the contrary, the MOE official argues that starting suddenly in Grade 10 was the demand of the day. Justifying the commencement of the reform in Grade 10, the MOE official contends:

We could start such reform from the primary level and continue up to Grade 12. We knew

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that if we had started such a reform from the primary level and continued up to high school, it could have been a more natural and convenient, and a less controversial issue. But, the situation made us take a risk. On the one hand, the government has been facing a significant loss that more than 50% of the Grade 10 students fail the SLC exam every year. Failing more than half of the examinees is a tremendous educational loss for the nation. We wanted to minimize such damage as soon as possible. On the other hand, as you know, many of the SLC failures commit suicide every year. We wanted to save their life without wasting a single day. These were the two main reasons why we implemented the reform in the middle of the school system.

The other rationale presented by the MOE official, DEO official, few of the experts and implementers is that implementing such a reform in Grade 10 could create more national discourses than others that could help to improve the reform. They also argue that the government is committed to extend the new assessment system to Grade 11 and 12 and also continue to downward up to primary level.

2.2 Interval of 10 in the grading system. The other debated issue revealed by the results is the interval of 10 set in the grading system from one performance level to another. Some of the participants argue that the interval is considerably large as there is a danger of grouping two different levels of students in the same cognitive category. They suggest minimizing the interval from 10 to 3-5 to make it compatible with the commonly practiced interval around the world.

PABSON representative states:

If you set a huge interval from one grade level to another, how can you exactly evaluate student performance? How can you justify your evaluation by providing the same grade; for instance, Grade A to two different students who secure 80% and 89% respectively? If you see general practices around the world, however, there might be some exceptions, most of the countries are using smaller interval than 10. So, this grading system is defective and unjustifiable.

However, few of the participants, mainly Educator-2, who proposed this interval (interval of 10) claims that the interval of 10 is appropriate and justifiable in the context of Nepal. Educator-2 argues the interval of 10, although many of the stakeholders and educators seem to be critical of it, is appropriate and practical in the context of Nepal because the cognitive level of the students belonging to the range of ten interval does not seem to be different.

2.3 Announcement of programs for the low-grade holders. The results specify an evident discrepancy between the reform policy and the announcement of accommodation programs for the low-grade holders. The findings reveal that the MOE announced that it would provide vocational training/education to twenty thousand low-grade holders. Despite the explicit commitment, the majority of the participants express that the MOE and concerned authorities have not materialized the announced vocational programs to the low-grade holders. They argue that the quota (twenty thousand quotas for vocational education) restricted to the low-grade holders (so far only planned, not implemented) is still insufficient (even if managed) as the number of such students is very high. The CTEVT representative states:

The government has promised to provide twenty thousand quotas for vocational education targeting to the low-grade holders. The number of quotas is far less than the required number. I see some problems in our management system. On the one hand, we are saying that now onwards none fails the SLC exam. And, on the other hand, neither we are allowing them to go to the university without obstacles (i.e., there are restrictions for admission in the upper level) nor are we managing vocational education and training programs sufficiently to the students who really need it. I wonder where the remaining students should go. Practically it seems to be a paradox.

On the other hand, the findings suggest that the vocational education institutions are mainly centralized to the urban area, and moreover they are costly for the middle class and low-income families. Many of the participants argue that a large number of the targeted population resides in remote places and as such, many of them cannot afford the expensive programs. In this regard, Professor-4 states:

The quota announced by the government may be useless to many of the students who need it. The data show that among the low-grade holders, a vast majority is from a low social and economic background for whom the vocational education is out of reach. They can't rent a room in the city and pay the expensive tuition fees.

Expressing the same view, Educator-1 argues that the quota set by the MOE can accommodate about twenty thousand low grader-holders; but the number of students who need the vocational programs as alternatives seems to exceed by several folds. Further, he argues that the program was brought simply to convey a message that the government has done something for the low-grade holders. In essence, it gives no sense at all.

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2.4 Admission criteria in Grade 11 and vocational programs. As suggested by the findings, the admission criteria set by the National Examination Board (NEB) for Grade 11 and Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT) programs have been a debated issue. Some of the participants argue that if the government sets barriers to enter both the streams (i.e., academic and vocational) without managing any alternative programs for the low-grade holders, and as such how could the reform minimize the educational loss? Further, they question the meaning of eliminating the pass-fail system from the grade sheet. Expressing his view on this issue, Principal-5 says:

You can notice lots of mismatches in this reform- between the policy documents and practices or let's say between the policy documents. For instance, on the one hand, the Letter Grading Working Procedure states that the main aim of the reform was to minimize the educational loss. On the other hand, the NEB and CTEVT set admission criteria that prevent many of the low-grade holders from joining in Grade 11 and vocational programs. And also, there are not any alternative programs designed for them. This created a number of questions: How could it minimize the educational loss? Practically, the low-grade holders seem to be the failure if you see descriptors behind the grade sheet. How could this quandary be explained?

Some of the participants suggest the MOE should not set any admission criteria. Rather, they suggest that the government should manage the entrance exam for certain courses and programs to ensure a high level of knowledge and understanding. And for the entrance failure and other remaining low-grade holders, the MOE should manage different skill-based programs to assure their better future.

2.5 Contradicting reform aim: Enhancement of student learning. The findings indicate that one of the aims of the reform (i.e., to enhance student learning) mentioned in the official document of the MOE is paradoxical in content and context. Most of the participants contend that the reform solely can never enhance student learning. They also argue that the abolition of the pass-fail system in the grade sheet without any supportive measures cannot enhance student learning; rather it may confuse the test-takers. Expressing his opinion, Professor-2 argues:

There are several absurdities in this reform. One of them is the aim of the reform. One of the official documents publicized by the MOE called Letter Grading Working Procedure

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mentions that one of the reform aims is to enhance student learning via this reform. Even a layperson cannot believe that this reform enhances student learning. How can you improve student learning by replacing a numerical grading system with a letter grading and solely removing a pass-fail system? It happens just the opposite. It demotivates students for hard work that diminishes student learning.

Discussing the aim mentioned above, the MOE official and the other MOE authorities accept that this reform cannot enhance student learning. They point out a need for additional measures and special programs to enhance student learning.

3. Factors contributing to magnifying confusion among stakeholders

The results suggest mainly the following two factors that contributed to increasing confusion among many of the stakeholders. The two factors are: (i) Frequently amended admission criteria, (ii) uncertainty of eligibility criteria for government jobs.

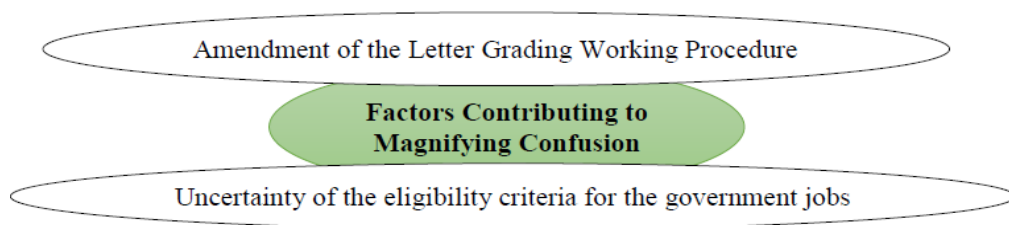


Figure 21. Factors contributing to magnifying confusion

3.1 Amendment of the Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015 (LGWP). Mainly the key stakeholders, such as school owners, principals, and teachers express that their confusion could be attributed to the amendment of the LGWP 2015, in which the MOE frequently changed the admission criteria for grade 11 and vocational programs. They state that as a result of the unprepared reform, the government had to change its decisions several times over, at the outset of implementation of the reform and even during the academic session. They attest that they kept on receiving amended circulars frequently from the top authorities that obstructed them from conveying the proper information to the students and parents. They report that in some cases, they received the information very late. Principal-3, in this regard, states:

Due to frequently changed regulations, many students and parents got confused. When we received information about the amendments, mainly via MOE's websites, we communicated the information to our students. Imagine the situation in rural areas where there is no access to the internet, takes days to receive circulars, in some cases, they don't receive any circulars.

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Talking about the reason for frequent amendments, Teacher-8 states that the MOE kept on changing the reform-related regulations under the pressure of different organizations, such as teachers' and students' organizations. Further, he says that the changes caused multiple layers of understandings, wherein the people understood the reform differently.

3.2 The uncertainty of the eligibility criteria for the government jobs. The other notable quandary revealed by the results is the question of how the low-grade holders would be treated by the government employers, such as the Public Service Commission. Many of the participants express that the government has not introduced any regulations regarding any provision to apply for the government vacancies. Expressing his doubt, NNTA representative states:

I think the government would restrict the low-grade holders from applying for the government jobs. It has already indicated by setting criteria for admission in the higher level. That's the reason why I call this reform a camouflagic change. In fact, it is full of paradox- you restrict them from joining in Grade 11, taking vocational education and applying for the government jobs; and still, you try to advocate this reform as a no pass-fail system.

Talking on this issue, the MOE official states that the MOE is working with the Public Service Commission and Curriculum Development Centre in order to prepare eligibility criteria for the government jobs. With this regard, the PSC authority attests that as the students have to be at least 18 years of age to apply for a job posted by the Public Service Commission, they still have enough time to meet the criteria for applying to the government jobs. He goes on to say that as the reform started in 2015 and the average age of the SLC graduates is 16/17; the MOE should finish setting the job criteria by the end of 2017.

Many participants express that implementing the reform before establishing the eligibility criteria for the government jobs is one of the apparent weaknesses of the government and a most confusing aspect of the reform.

4. Condemnation attached to the reform

The results reveal some criticisms attached to the reform. Given the controversial opinions of the participants on this issue, I am presenting only the salient criticisms that present strong logical grounds. The salient criticisms include: Lack of clarity in official documents, putting students into limbo, lack of study on the suitability and sustainability of the reform, and

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the irrational relation between the subject and the discipline of study. The criticisms attached to the reform are presented in the following figure and then described below.

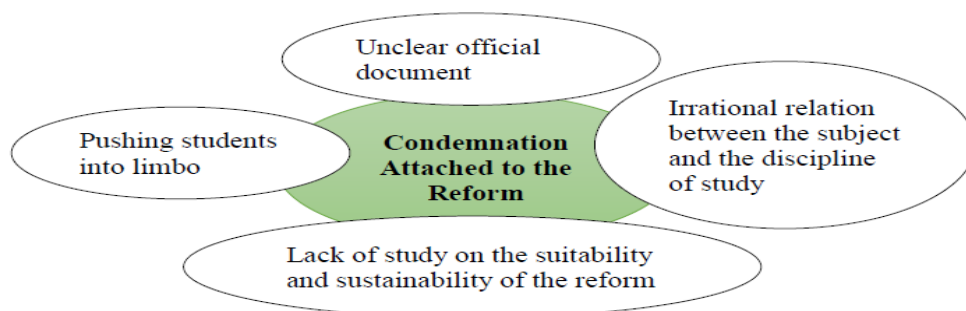


Figure 22. Condemnation attached to the reform

4.1 Unclear official document. Many of the participants, especially school principals, teachers, school and college owners report that the official document prepared by the reformers (i.e., Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015) was vague and confusing. They express that it is too brief in order to optimally provide sufficient information to the implementers and the other stakeholders. In this regard, Principal-8 states:

Letter Grading Working Procedure is the single MOE's official document about the assessment reform. I have not seen any other documents. This document is too brief to provide enough information to the stakeholders about the reform. Moreover, this is so confusing and vague. This seems to be prepared hurriedly without giving much effort. It is because the reform aims are not clear- some are unattainable. For instance, one of the aims of the reform is: to increase the quality of education by minimizing educational loss. Do you think that this reform can increase the quality of education? Never...

Many other participants also raise the question on the clarity of the MOE's official document, particularly about the aims of the reform.

Before commencement of the reform, a sound reform document had to be published- which lacked in the case of this reform. The available document is unclear. This document even fails to state reform aims/targets properly. I mean, the reform aims do not seem to be practical, realistic and attainable (Teacher-14)....What could be more confusing than this?

4.2 Pushing students into limbo. Some of the participants argue that this reform has put many of the students at a juncture in terms of their educational and job employment path, from where neither can they go further ahead for further advancement nor can they attempt to improve

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their performance. Stating his view, Educator-2 states:

If you see the provisions of the reform deeply, that will surprise you. There is no pass-fail system; it looks like a great system, a beneficial system for the students. But, the reality is a bit different. There are admission criteria. Low-grade holders cannot get admission in Grade 11 and vocational programs. Apparently, the MOE is planning to manage alternative vocational and technical programs for the low-grade holders, but that has not been materialized yet. You know what? The doors for further advancement are indirectly blocked. Seemingly, there is no failing grade. Every grade looks like a passing grade. The wrong message (i.e., no failing grade) we have provided the students prevents them from rewriting the exam. I mean, many students seem to be reluctant to rewrite the grade increment exam to improve their grades.... this system is pushing students into limbo. It has made low-grade holders' future vague and uncertain.

Expressing the same idea, the representative of the NNTA states that the reform has pushed students into such a deep ditch that it's been hard for them to come out of it. Further, he says:

Due to misunderstanding- due to no pass-fail provision, students did not think that they need specific grades to study the subject of their interest. It confuses almost all the stakeholders. They thought that regardless of their grades, they would be admitted to the upper level. But, it didn't happen so. Barriers were set up for admission. Today, many low graders are questioning why there is the barrier to grade promotion. They also question why the low-grade holders should rewrite the exam if there is no failing grade. This situation has created confusion.

While the reformers do not accept that the reform has put many of the students into limbo, they admit that due to misunderstanding, it has negatively impacted few students. They express that once the students understand the reform properly, none of the test-takers would be confused and victim of it.

4.3 Lack of study on the suitability and sustainability of the reform. Pointing out the lack of study on suitability and sustainability of the reform, many participants suggest that such reforms should have been made based on an in-depth empirical study that could help to prepare a comprehensive framework for the reform. They argue that the comprehensive framework should explicate what kind of assessment reform is suitable for the student of Nepal in the 21st century.

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Further, they contend that, during conceptual phase, it should have been analyzed deeply whether or not the resources (human, technical and financial, and infrastructures) could support the reform. Some of them argue that the reform was made based on a decade-old study, which had recommended to reform the existing assessment system along with the entire educational reform. They argue that it was not a comprehensive study that focused on assessment reform. Many participants criticize this aspect.

See the basis of this reform. Some people claim that the reform was made based on a decade-old report prepared and submitted by the Mathema commission. The focus of the study was the educational reform, not the assessment reform solely. One of the recommendations of the report was to change the assessment system. The government claims that the reform was made based on the report of the Mathema commission. The report had not presented any framework or roadmap of the assessment reform. Instead of asking the experts to prepare a comprehensive framework for the reform, the government implemented the reform on a trial basis without any in-depth preparation; without carrying out any research. (Principal-6).

I should not tell you what a global trend of educational reform is. The reformers carry out research studies focusing on the reform agendas: discuss further on the research findings inviting key stakeholders; incorporate their feedback; prepare a comprehensive framework; make necessary preparation and do homework and manage essential resources. And then the reform takes place. Did it happen here in Nepal? Not.... (Professor-3).

Contrary to such opinions of the experts and educators, the MOE representatives argue that the reform's base is the research reports which were submitted to the MOE over a period of time.

It is obvious that the reform has been made based on the research reports prepared and submitted by the team of experts and educators at different times. There have been a number of studies that recommended the MOE to reform the school education system, including the assessment system of the major examinations like the SLC exam. For instance, studies such as School Sector Reform Plan (2009-2015) and Student Performance in SLC: Determinants of Student Performance in the SLC exam (2005) have recommended the MOE to reform the assessment of the SLC exam. (MOE official).

4.4 The irrational relation between the subject and the discipline of study. The findings indicate that the relation between the subject and the discipline of the study mentioned in the admission criteria set by the National Examination Board for Grade 11, and by CTEVT for its programs are irrational and incompatible. They argue that the subject-discipline relation was set/established without conducting any research and in-depth analysis. Many participants including MOE authorities argue that this improper association might mislead many of the students. In this regard, DOE authority states:

There are many issues to clarify and resolve within this reform. One of them is the admission criteria in which the subject-discipline relation has not been established well. I think that an in-depth research study that could explicitly state the relationship of the subject with the particular field of study/discipline is essential. In this reform, for instance, it is not clear why a student who has had a grade D or below (i.e., one must have to have D+ in Math to study Mass Communication) in Math cannot study Mass Communication. And, it's not also clearly stated why a student who wants to study science has to have a Grade D+ in Nepali. There are several issues like this in the admission criteria. Before making such provisions, a reasonable explanation is essential. I don't understand why one has to have a grade D+ in the Nepali language to study Mathematics or Computer Science in Grade 11. There are a number of illogical and irrational combination of subject and the area of study (Professor-4).

Following the DOE representative, several other participants, such as Professors, experts, school principals, and teachers state that the admission criteria were made without any concrete research and in-depth analysis of the relation between the subject and the discipline of study.

5. Opportunities

The results divulge some salient features resulting from the implementation of the reform. The salient features of the reform suggested by the results include: The end of 'Iron Gate,' end of a stigma attached to failure, the conception of collaborative learning, minimizing unfair competition and grade increment exam. These features are shown in the following figure and subsequently illustrated briefly below.

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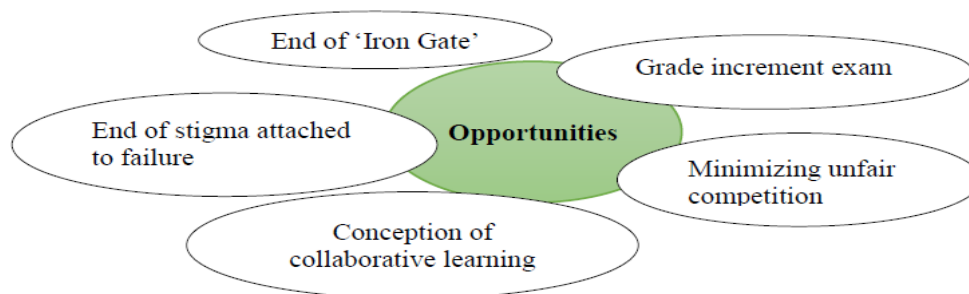


Figure 23. Salient features of the reform

5.1 End of 'Iron Gate': A giant leap. The findings suggest that the transition from a *pass-fail* to a *no pass-fail* system (i.e., grade sheet contains no concluding remarks, such as pass or fail) is a giant leap in the assessment system in Nepal although it has some absurdities (i.e., controversial issues as mentioned above) within it. The results show that the reform has seemingly ended an eight-decade-long *pass-fail* system of the SLC exam. Discussing this issue, Expert-3 argues:

Some people take this reform as a tiny change in the assessment system. I think this is a very superficial analysis. Ending of a pass-fail assessment system in an Asian country like Nepal where a high-stakes assessment system has been a part of the education system; a part of education culture, was a significant challenge. The government did it with enormous courage. This is a historical decision of the MOE of Nepal as it has directly or indirectly impacted every sector.

Other several participants share almost the same opinion as stated above. Educator-2, who contributed to preparing the LGWP by sharing his ideas with the other committee members, states:

This type of reform is an enormous move in an assessment system. It is a unique change in Nepal; even this kind of reform rarely takes place in the world. This reform has broken an eight-decade-long 'Iron Gate'- a gate which used to end the academic career of hundreds of students every year. Don't take it superficially. It has provided an opportunity to all the examinees to proceed with their further studies in the area of their interest and strength regardless of their very poor marks in a subject or two.

There has been an enormous consensus among the participants that, despite some entangled quandaries that have to be addressed, the transition from a *pass-fail* assessment system to a *no pass-fail* is a gigantic and historical phenomenon in the context of Nepal.

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5.2 End of the stigma attached to the SLC exam failure. The other important feature of the reform suggested by the results is the end of the stigma attached to the SLC exam failure. Sharing a common view, almost all the participants state that now onwards, none of the examinees is declared as the SLC exam failure, which is one of the significant aspects of the reform. It means that the OCE (or the NEB) starting from 2015 for the technical stream and 2016 for all the streams decided to provide a grade sheet to each of the examinees without mentioning pass or fail. The data suggest that along with this reform, an eight-decade-long assessment system, in which the unsuccessful SLC candidates used to be stigmatized as ‘*an SLC failure*’ has come to an end. Remembering the dark side of the SLC exam in the past, MOE official contends:

In the past, the SLC exam was associated with prestige and face. It was assumed that success in the SLC exam could help to increase their prestige and face in the society. Similarly, failing in the SLC exam was likened with failing in life. The failure used to be stigmatized as the SLC failure in the society. That was the reason why many of the SLC failures used to commit suicide. I believe that this reform has ended such a dreadful situation.

The findings indicate that the reform has ended the stressful situation in which the SLC failures used to feel guilty after being unable to save his/her prestige. Discussing this issue, Student-13 states that with the eradication of the pass-fail system, none of the students has to feel ashamed and be a victim of self-humiliation.

5.3 The conception of collaborative learning. The majority of the participants state that the high-stakes SLC exam in the past created a competitive learning environment. They believe that this reform would help to establish a co-operative learning environment as it has ended the convention of publication of exam results in a merit base. In this regard, Teacher-6 contends:

I believe that the reform encourages a co-operative learning environment. Now onwards, students don't know who stood first, second or third, etc. in the SLC exam. Many students can get the same grade. They don't see any meaning to compete with their colleagues. They start learning to share each other's idea. It benefits all of them. When they realize it, it will be developed as a learning culture.

Similarly, Expert-3 contends:

In the past, we were using a percentile system while assessing students' performance. In such a system, naturally one wants to get the highest marks in the class or the district or

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the nation. It created competition among colleagues because one wanted to be better than other; wanted to get the first position in the class. This prevented the competitors from sharing their knowledge. But the newly implemented grading system has ended such unseen competition among colleagues as hundreds of students can get a Grade A+ or A etc. I believe that this reform would gradually establish a co-operative learning environment.

Many participants point out a need for a co-operative learning environment as it not only enhances student learning through sharing knowledge but also helps students to socialize and develop co-operation among them. Having said that some of the participants disagree with the opinion mentioned above, and advocate that a competitive learning environment is essential for the student learning enhancement. This aspect will be explained in detail in the following section under the sub-title, *negative impact*.

5.4 Minimizing unfair competition among schools and colleges. The findings indicate an unfair competition between the private schools and colleges. Many participants, including experts and educators, contend that the private schools have been competing for the best exam scores. They argue that competing for the best results is not a bad thing, but the problem is that centered on this idea, these schools entirely focus on exam preparation rather than teaching and learning. Further, they state that most private schools from the beginning of Grade 10, start preparing their Grade 10 students for the SLC exam so that their students can compete for the first position in the SLC board exam. Expert-1 states that the administrators of the board topper school print a huge picture of the board topper student and advertise across the country claiming that their school is the best educational institute in the country. This advertisement helps them enroll as many students as they need. The participants argue that this reform has ended such type of unfair and unhealthy competition among the private schools and express their hope that the schools change their focus from exam preparation to teaching and learning. In this regard, Educator-2 expresses that the reform will minimize the unhealthy competition among private schools as now they are limited formally claiming who became the board first, second or third. He adds that the end of unhealthy competition among schools transforms the private schools from exam preparation machines to educational institutions.

Similarly, the results also indicate that there has been worse competition among private colleges. The competition tends to attract the best performers (highest mark holders) to their

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colleges by offering an excellent package of incentive. In Expert-3's words: "The package of incentive includes a sum of money in addition to scholarship and grant." Further, he argues:

...if you analyze it outwardly, you don't see any harm in providing incentives to the talented students. A profitable college offers a talented student for admission by providing a reasonable sum of money along with other facilities; it's a good opportunity for the talented students. But we need to see its consequences from different perspectives too. This kind of education culture promotes exam-centered teaching. It creates enormous pressure on students to get the highest marks; students feel unnecessary pressure from parents and teachers for getting good marks; the marks of the exam become everything; it creates competitive learning environment than co-operative....

Many of the participants argue that the unnecessary, unfair and unhealthy competition among schools and colleges regarding admitting the highest marks holders in their institutions with the use of advertisements is a wrong strategy employed by the schools and colleges. Expressing their belief, the participants contend that the reform would minimize such wrong educational practices.

5.5 Grade increment exam. The majority of the participants state that the reform recently taking place in Nepal constitutes a giant shift in an assessment and testing field. The findings suggest that the beauty of the reform is the abolition of the pass-fail (grade sheet contains no remarks like pass or fail) system and the provision of a 'grade increment exam.' The grade increment exam, in which the low-grade holders can get an opportunity to increase their grades, generally takes places immediately after results publication of the regular exam (i.e., within two months of the date of publication of the result).

Talking about the provision of the grade increment exam, Educator-2 argue that the stipulation of grade increment exam is one of the unique phenomena that has rarely existed in other parts of the worlds; it is one of the greatest strengths of the reform. Further, he argues:

If any of the students are dissatisfied with his grades, the student should be provided with an opportunity to rewrite the exam to increase his grades. Providing an opportunity to challenge his grade is a justifiable deed. The grade increment exam should not be limited by the number of subjects (only two subjects) or by the obtained grades. It should be opened to all the subjects regardless of their previous grades if the students are dissatisfied with the obtained grades. I proposed the MOE to make this provision, but the

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OCE denied it, stating that it would be an enormous burden to the OCE financially (NB: the second amendment seemed to incorporate his recommendation).

Regarding the grade increment exam, the OCE authority states that it would be one of the important and unique steps in the field of assessment and testing if the MOE could manage a grade increment exam for all the interested students. Further, he contends, "*But, it is out of our capacity at the present moment due to lack of human resources and financial support.*"

6. Reform impact

It is, indeed, quite early to explore the impact of the reform as it just began in 2015 as a pilot project and was implemented fully in 2016. However, in response to the research question, regarding the possible positive and negative impacts of the reform, the participants indicated some of the impacts based on the preliminary indications seen after implementation of the reform and their knowledge, experience, and expertise. Mainly two themes emerged from the data under this construct, which are described below under different sub-title: Positive and negative impact.

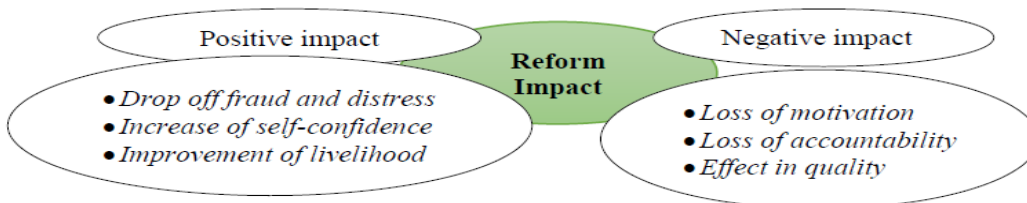


Figure 24. Reform impact

6.1 Positive impact. The findings suggest three primary positive impacts of the reform: Curtailing the SLC exam related fraud and distress on examinees, increase in self-confidence of low performers, and improvement of livelihood of people. These impacts are briefly described below.

6.1.1 Curtailing the SLC exam related fraud and distress on examinees. Majority of the participants attest that the reform, despite some shortcomings, seems to have significantly contributed to minimizing both the SLC exam related fraud and distress on test-takers. Almost all the participants mention that as the SLC exam was a high-stakes exam, the exam frauds, such as cheating, hiring exam writer, helping the test-takers by supplying answers, etc. had prospered as a sub-culture in the past. They claim that the reform has minimized these exam frauds.

Discussing this issue, the DOE official states:

This year, we heard very few cases of exam related fraud compared with the past years. Apparently, the crowd of parents and relatives of the examinees at the exam centers was

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far less than in the past. Although we have no empirical evidence to make an official claim, the fewer number of chaos taken place during the exam justifies that the reform has minimized the exam fraud.

Similarly, many of the participants contend that this reform has drastically reduced distress on the test-takers. As an evidence of their claim, they present the data of the SLC result-induced suicides that took place in 2016.

One of the principal objectives of the reform was to minimize the SLC exam result-induced suicide. You know, every year many SLC failures used to commit suicide. Not only the SLC failures, sometimes even successful students, who got lower marks than they had expected used to take their life. The good news for this year is that we did not hear such tragic incidents. Apparently, there was a single case of suicide associated with the SLC exam results. (Expert-2).

All the participants accept that, despite their reservation on other issues of the reform, the reform has reduced distress on examinees, especially for the low performers, and minimized exam related frauds and chaos.

6.1.2 Increase in self-confidence of low performers. The other important finding suggested by the data is the increase in self-confidence of low performers. Many participants (however, not all), especially almost all the student participants, express that the provision of no pass-fail system has increased self-confidence amongst the low performers as the danger of being stigmatized as the SLC failure is eradicated. They argue that this reform has provisioned to proceed their further study on the area of their interest or/and strength, which helps to increase hope of a better life and develop a sense of who they are. Several student participants believe that the low performers have greatly benefitted from the reform.

This reform has been proven to be a great surprise for the weak students. You know, it's a gift for the low performers. If you are weak in any of the subjects, it's okay; you can go ahead without wasting your time (i., e., academic year). This was not the case in the past. We have seen several cases in which one had to quit their study due to failing in a subject. But, the no pass-fail system has ended this situation and increased the level of their confidence. (Student-11).

Surely, it has increased self-confidence in the weak students. The reason is that there is no failing grade in the reformed system. If there is no danger of failing, there is no

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danger of being stigmatized as the SLC failure and no danger of stopping at Grade 10. You can go ahead in any case. (Student-12).

However, a few participants think that the happiness of the students is temporary due to the hidden barriers, which later come to light. Teacher-10 states:

Mainly the low performers seem to be happy with the provision of no pass-fail system thinking that there is no 'iron gate' any longer; which is not true in essence. You can imagine a scenario. What would be self-confidence of the low graders when they did not get admission in Grade 11 and cannot do any vocational courses in CTEVT due to poor grades? Certainly, their self-esteem goes down.

6.1.3 Improvement of livelihood of people. Many participants, not all, believe that the newly reformed assessment system would contribute to increasing the livelihood of people. Presenting a rationale for their argument, they attest that the reform has opened doors for the low performers to proceed in their further studies pertaining to the field of their strength or to join vocational education. Further, they state that university education and vocational training increase the gross income of people and help them make their life better.

There is no doubt that an educated person earns more money and live a better life than ordinary people on average. Research studies have also shown it. With regard to this reform, it would help to improve the livelihood of people. But there are still many nuts and bolts to be fixed yet. (Educator-2).

People still have the wrong concept about vocational education- it is taken as a second-class education. I believe that this reform would change this concept and more and more people would be attracted by the vocational education. This definitely would change the livelihood of people. (MOE official).

Conversely, expressing a slightly different opinion, some of the participants state that by introducing a tiny change, such as a change in an assessment system in Grade 10, this reform does not propose any great and/or surprising achievement. In this regard, Educator-1 contends:

I never believe that it would bring a great change in one's lifestyle because it is not a drastic change. Just a little change, and more importantly we have already witnessed such changes and their fall. Making policy is not a great thing, but its successful implementation is the key to success. Such changes come and go but bring no fundamental changes to one's livelihood. To make a real difference, a visionary master

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plan, a firm determination of effective implementation, and an efficient monitoring system should be part of the reform process.

6.2 Negative impact. The results show the following three negative impacts of the reform: Decrease in student motivation and hard-working trend, loss of responsibility and accountability of the schools and teachers, and fear of decreasing the quality of education. However, all the participants do not accept that the reform has resulted or would result in the negative impacts mentioned above.

6.2.1 Decrease in student motivation and hard-working trend. The other concern widely raised in the data is student motivation for learning. A vast majority of the participants contend that the no pass-fail provision in the reformed assessment system has dramatically minimized student motivation for learning. They argue that once the students knew (i.e., actually misunderstood) that the reform has abolished the pass-fail system, many of the low performers (low-grade holders) stopped working hard and quit the additional classes. Further, they argue that the reform not only impacted a decrease in the motivation of the low performers but also of the high performers. They add that the high performers used to work hard to secure the first position in the SLC exam in school, district or in the country. The reform has ended this situation as the numerical grading system has been replaced by the letter grading in which a huge number of students can get the same grades due to an interval of ten from one grade to another.

Discussing how student's motivation is negatively impacted by the reform, Principal-5 states:

The reform has badly affected student motivation for learning. Both the high and low performers' motivation for learning has been dropped down. Low performers stopped working hard by losing their motivation thinking that they would be promoted to the upper level regardless of their low grades. On the other hand, the high performers lost their motivation for learning in the lack of a competitive learning environment.

However, as mentioned somewhere else above, a few respondents also expressed counter-arguments that the end of a competitive learning environment does not contribute to minimizing student motivation for learning. In this regard, Educator-2 argues:

This system would affect student motivation negatively for a short period until they understand the real essence of the reform. Once they know it, they start working at the same pace, or harder than they used to do. When the students are accustomed to learning in a cooperative learning environment, student motivation hikes unbelievably. But, for

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this, as I said above, it takes time. In the transition period, you can't expect perfection. There are always valleys of despair. If the valley of despair is not so deep, I think it is not; the reform will take the leap soon.

Although some of the participants disagree that the reform would decrease student motivation for learning in the long run, they admit that the reform has temporarily minimized student motivation. They also contend that this happened due to misunderstanding and misinterpretation, and cannot be attributed to reform.

6.2.2 Loss of responsibility and accountability of the schools and teachers. Majority of the participants express that the misunderstanding of the reform as the abolition of the pass-fail system could negatively affect the responsibility and accountability of the schools and teachers. Further, they argue that now onwards, no school administrators and teachers would be sanctioned for the low performance of the students. In this regard, Expert-3 states:

This system has provisioned not to mention pass or fail in the grade sheet of the students. Neither the schools nor the teachers are sanctioned due to low performance of the test-takers- no fail, no sanction. In the past, teachers used to work harder to increase pass percentage, as they had to be accountable for the low pass percentage. The schools used to conduct coaching/extra classes for increasing pass percentage in the SLC exam. Now, they don't have to do anything to improve pass percentage because none fails the exam. The no pass-fail provision will make teachers and schools less responsible and accountable for student performance.

Expressing his view, Educator-2 contends:

...yes, I have heard plenty of concerns that the stakeholders and educators are raising regarding the responsibility and accountability of the teachers and schools. They are expressing their doubt that this reform makes teachers and schools irresponsible and unaccountable. But I disagree with them. It may happen for a short period. When they understand the reform properly, they understand that good grades are essential for a student's better future. On the other hand, if this situation arises, I mean, if the teachers and schools start moving in the wrong direction; the social pressure corrects them. ...I am confident that the social pressure brings the schools and teachers on the right track. So, the teachers and schools cannot be irresponsible and unaccountable.

However, all the participants accept that the reform will temporarily affect the

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responsibility and accountability of the teachers and schools negatively. Consequently, they attest that this situation could contribute to decreasing the quality of education.

6.2.3 Fear of decreasing the quality of education. Many of the participants argue that as a result of the loss of student motivation and decrease in the accountability and responsibility of teachers and school administrators, the quality of education will decrease. Further, they question how they could expect the quality of education without motivating students for learning and developing any quality control mechanism. In this regard, Educator-1 states, *“It does not enhance student learning nor does it make the stakeholders responsible and accountable for the quality of education. It’s just like garbage in and garbage out”*. Some other participants also express such fear. One of them is Professor-1, who questions:

How can you expect the quality of education by breaking a system of accountability and responsibility? Students are not motivated; teachers should not be accountable for the quality, and you expect the quality of education...definitely, it will decrease the quality of education.

Some of the participating experts and Professors argue that this kind of no pass-fail assessment system rarely exists in the world. They contend that if the no pass-fail system without any supportive measures, such as a quality measurement and quality control mechanism, continues, it may lead to questions of the quality of education.

The MOE official and some of the MOE authorities deny the fact that it decreases the quality of education. However, they agree that this reform does not enhance student learning and increases the quality of education.

7. Impact variation

The other conceptual category, which emerged from the data is the impact variation. Few of the participants mention that the reform impacted the key stakeholders differently depending on the type of school, the location of the school and the performance level of the students, which can be termed as *system-wise*, *location-wise* and *group-wise* impact, respectively.

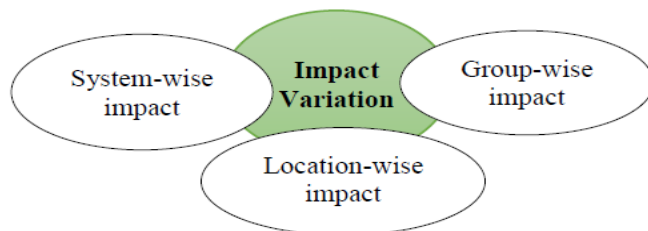


Figure 25. Impact variation

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7.1 System-wise impact. A few participants expressed that the reform was made targeting the public schools as a large number of students in the public schools had been struggling to secure pass marks for years. They argue that the reform benefitted the public schools much more than the private ones. Regarding this issue, the PABSON representative argues:

This reform is a bumper gift for the teachers and students of public schools. In the past, there was an enormous amount of pressure on teachers and students in public schools as students had to secure at least 32% in each of the eight subjects to be promoted to Grade 11, and the teachers had to teach students to increase their pass percentage. Now, both are free of such tension and responsibility. But the story of private school is a bit different. We have been surviving with the quality of education. We were above the dichotomy of pass or fail. This reform is not a bumper gift for us because we were struggling for the quality of education before this reform and are still struggling for the same after the reform.

7.2 Location-wise impact. Some of the participants indicate that the reform impacted the rural area much more than the urban. They express that the school administrators, teachers, students, and parents got timely information in the urban areas via multiple means of information, whereas the school administrators, teachers, students, and parents either got the information days later or in some cases, were deprived of the necessary information. These instances indicate that the reform impacted the stakeholders differently depending on the location of the schools. The teacher representative of Himalaya region (Teacher-14) states:

The reform has not impacted the stakeholders equally in the remote and urban areas. It impacted the students of the rural area much more than urban. I mean the number of reform victim in a rural area is higher than in urban. The reason is that the stakeholders did not get necessary information and circulars in time to inform the students. It created confusion among teachers, students, and parents about the reform. The reform agendas, in the lack of full understanding, were perceived and interpreted differently, in many cases wrongly. As a result, many students stop working hard.

Supporting this argument, Principal-8 states that they were able to clarify students' misunderstanding and misconception about the reform because they live in the capital city. Further, he states that a huge number of stakeholders in the rural area got confused due to lack of

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interaction with the reformers for clarification.

7.3 Group-wise impact. Many participants mentioned that the low performers (weak students) are benefitted much more than the high performers (academically strong). They contend that the abolition of the pass-fail system in the reformed assessment system has increased the self-confidence of the low performers. Regarding this issue, Student-19 contends:

This reform is not great news for talented students. Instead of getting a higher percentage, they work harder for getting A+. This change does not matter them a lot. But, this is good news for the weak students. There is no danger of failing the exam. It increases their confidence.

Many of the student participants also express the same opinion. They contend that this reform is much more beneficial to the low performers than the talented ones. Discussing the impact variation, Teacher-11 argues:

This reform has a negligible effect on the talented students as their pace of working is the same before and after the reform; they work for the excellent results. Not only for a pass or fail. The people who are adversely impacted are the low-grade holders. Many of them, however, not all, work for getting a pass mark. It has impacted the test-takers both positively and negatively. Some students have dropped off their effort of learning due to misunderstanding- thinking that there are no failing grades. For others, this reform contributed to boosting up their confidence. They focus on learning rather than exam preparation.

The concept of impact variation (system-wise, location-wise and group-wise) is one of the commonly shared, however not by all, phenomena in this study.

8. Limitation of the reform

Mainly the MOE official and the other representatives of the implementing agencies, such as CDC, OCE, DOE, REDs, and DEO admit to some lapses and lacking in the reform. In response to the question of 'what the weakness of the reform are', the MOE official states, "*Let's term it as the issues/aspects to be improved rather than weaknesses.*" It means that the MOE official and some other representatives of the implementing agencies do not directly agree that there are any remarkable weaknesses attached to the reform. They contend that they implemented the reform irrespective of some hurdles and limitations because the reform had been a demand of the day, and it had already been too late to be commenced. They express that

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some of the quandaries and challenges resulting from the reform are the part of the reform process. They mention two limitations of the reform as shown in the following figure.

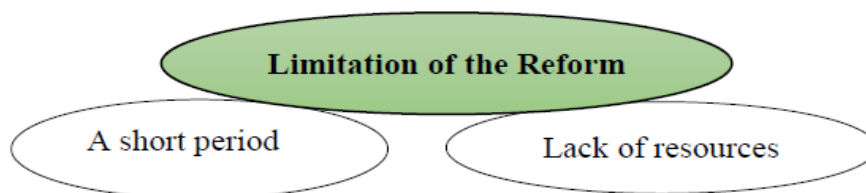


Figure 26. Limitation of the reform

8.1 A short period. The MOE official, some of the experts and the representatives of the implementing agencies express that the government was only allocated a short period to implement the reform. They argue that as the MOE had to implement the reform in a short period, many aspects and issues remained unaddressed. Discussing this point, the CDC official contends that due to a short period, they could not do as much preparation and homework as they could and ought to. Rationalizing why they had to implement the reform so shortly, the MOE official argues:

The research reports, including Mathema's report, recommended making such changes years ago. Due to lack of firm commitment and courage to implement such a drastic change, the reform agenda had been pended for years. We decided not to let it be pended furthermore in the excuse of preparation and homework. So, we decided to implement the reform in a short period with a strategic plan- implement and improve it with feedback.

Discussing this issue, Expert-4 explains:

...international funding was one of the reasons why the reform was implemented in a short timeframe. The government decided to implement the reform without doing full preparation because it did not want to lose the 20% funding that the World Bank committed to granting the MOE of Nepal.

Irrespective the rationales for implementing the reform in a short period, it is widely shared by the MOE official and representative of under authorities that short timeframe is one of the limitations of the reform.

8.2 Lack of resources. The other limitation mentioned by the MOE official and representatives of under agencies is the lack of human, financial and technical resources. They argue that even if they had a very short period for implementing the reform, they could have done a lot in preparing the necessary foundation for the reform if they had had enough human,

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financial and technical resources. Highlighting on the lack of resources, the MOE official states:

It is easier to point out fingers for weakness; it is easier to say this was not right; that was not right, that should have been done, or that should not have been done. I understand that there were many things to do before implementing the reform. But, we had a number of limitations. We did not have enough human resources to provide training to all the stakeholders; nor did we have easily available and effective technology to disseminate the information to the key stakeholders timely. On top of these, we did not have sufficient fund to found a strong base and make sufficient preparation for the reform. These limitations resulted in a few issues that need to be addressed in the days to come.

The other participants also agree that some of the problems and quandaries resulting from implementation of the reform are the by-product of the lack of resources mentioned above.

Discussing the limitations of the reform, Educator-2 contends:

Some people are overreacting the reform as if something is crashing on the head....., before criticizing, one needs to think twice about whether there were any limitations for implementing the reform effectively. It is not surprising that a developing country like Nepal still lacks human resources. We needed and even need qualified, innovative and experienced personals to implement such reform successfully. But, unfortunately, we lack them. Funding was another problem in implementing the reform. It is a backbone of any reform. And lack of technology, which could play great roles in this process, was another limitation. For, instance, if there were internet services across the country, the dissemination of information could have been effective and easier.

In addition to the MOE officials, almost all the participants admit that these two limitations- a short period and lack of resources, have contributed to weakening the foundation of the reform.

9. Demand for the change/Time

A vast majority of the participants express that the assessment reform mentioned in this study is not the type of reform, which Nepal was seeking. They contend that the reform, in which a numerical grading system was replaced by a letter grading and a pass-fail system by a no pass-fail system (only seemingly as mentioned earlier), cannot be the 21st-century model assessment. Further, they discuss that the 21st-century model assessment should address a number of

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emerging issues through an entire holistic assessment reform. They express that the assessment model should be developed in such a way that it could be able to assess multi-abilities and skills of human beings. The other alternative they present is an internal formative assessment with remedial classes. The findings suggest mainly the following three themes under the category 'Demand for the Change.'

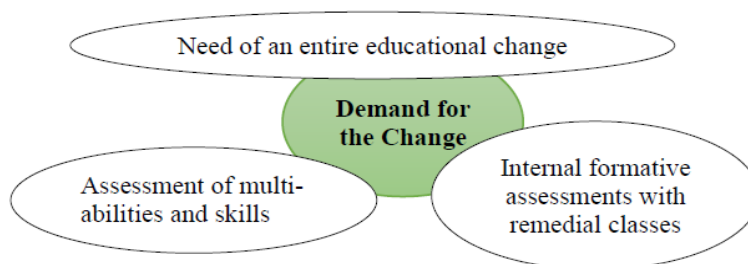


Figure 27. Demand for the change

9.1 Need for an entire educational change. A vast majority of the participants discuss that the reform that took place recently in the assessment system of the SLC exam is an incomplete and partial change in the context of Nepal's educational system. They state that Nepal has not gone through a significant reform, especially in the school education system, for decades that has brought about a number of problems in the education sector. They point out a need for a comprehensive reform in school education that includes curricula change, a complete assessment system reform from Grade 1 to 12 and a change of methodology. They recommend the MOE and its under agencies to introduce drastic changes, especially focusing on the local and global issues. Discussion on this issue, Expert-4 states:

We were not anticipating this kind of partial change in our school education. ...if the government wanted to make a real change; the MOE should start the reform from the curriculum. And then, the assessment system should be reformed based on the changed curriculum; and finally, the methodology should be changed based on the curriculum and the assessment system.

Expressing a similar view, Professor-5 states:

This reform is not the demand of the day. We were seeking a total reform- an entire reform of the education system including curriculum and pedagogy changes. There have not been major changes in our school education system for years. Many countries in the world have been using formative assessment successfully. We need to replace summative assessment by formative assessment. Formative assessment should be made part of our

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teaching and learning. But it did not happen.

There are several other participants, mainly experts, educators, Professors, and even the MOE local authorities, who advocate in favor of an entire educational reform. They express that such reform could address the local and global problems piled up in school education for years.

... if we keep on using decades-long education system without making fundamental changes, we cannot compete in the global market. So, a drastic change in our traditional education system is the cry of the day. (Expert-2).

If you cannot change yourself with the changed environment, your extinction is inevitable. If you want to survive in the competitive global market, go on making fundamental changes in the education system; change curriculum, change pedagogy, change assessment system. (Principal-8).

9.2 Assessment of multi-abilities and skills. Many participants in the study, especially educators, experts, Professors, representatives of organizations including school principals and teachers discuss that this reform is incomplete and futile as it is limited in assessing multi-abilities and skills that an individual student possesses. They envision such a 21st-century model assessment system that could assess an individual's ability and skill following a concept of whole person assessment. They argue that equating a zero-score obtained by a student in a course with zero knowledge is a wrong concept. Regarding this issue, Educator-1 asserts:

...if somebody gets zero marks in an exam; it does not mean that the person possesses zero knowledge. ...um, zero marks may mean, either you are using wrong assessment tools, or you are assessing the knowledge and skills which the person does not possess. You rarely find a person having zero knowledge. We need to understand that people possess different talents and skills; they might be entirely different from each other. So, we have to develop such assessment tools and measures that could assess those diverse talents, skills and knowledge field.

Expressing similar thoughts, Professor-1 states:

Our education system is defective as we are not providing the right education to our students. Our education system seems to be a failure in providing need-based, interest-based and prior knowledge and skill-based education to the individuals. We are incapable of understanding the fact that every individual is different from each other, and their needs might be different. Let's see an analogy. You are preparing the same size of

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shoes for a large group of people; asking every individual to wear them regardless of their foot size. And then blowing a whistle to start a marathon. Finally, you are judging their running abilities based on how fast the individuals cross the final line. This is exactly what we are doing in our education system. ...so, we need such an education system that could help further develop their talents and skills that every individual possesses and assess what it is supposed to assess.

Expert-3 states:

Now is the time to stop teaching unwanted things, labeling one as a failure by using wrong assessment tools and measures. It makes real sense when you teach what one wants to learn and assess them for improvement.

Educator-2 argues:

We have to come out of the traditional concept of education. In the 21st century, education should guide every individual to identify their area of interest and expertise, and the skills one possesses. If you educate the individual in the field of their interest and expertise and assess the knowledge and skills one possesses by using multiple assessment tools, the individual never fails the exam. You need to use a concept of whole person assessment whenever you want to assess an individual.

9.3 Internal formative assessment with remedial classes. Many of the participants, especially educators, experts, professors, the MOE authorities, suggest a complete reform that could bring fundamental changes in the school education in Nepal. They advocate an internal formative assessment (i.e., teacher-based formative assessment) rather than just making some changes in the existing assessment system. They contend that assessing student performance using a single summative assessment cannot reflect students' real talents, skills, and potentials. They argue that it is the formative assessment that can integrate assessment with teaching and learning. Almost all the educators, experts, professors suggest the MOE and concerned authorities bring such a drastic change in the school education system from the primary level to secondary, and from curriculum to the assessment system that could make student assessment part of the teaching and learning process. Presenting her view in this regard, Professor-1 contends:

We have been too late to practice a formative assessment extensively in the classroom. No need to hesitate to use it. Many countries in the world are using it successfully. I don't

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think that we need to do any in-depth research and analysis for using it-there are dozens of studies out there; which has justified that formative assessment can enhance student learning; far better than summative one in many ways.

Educator-2 states that if the teachers become sincere, accountable and responsible, there is no need for any summative assessment. Further, he contends:

I personally recommend the elimination of summative assessment in school education. Many stakeholders including experts and educators think that it would affect the quality of education. It makes no difference in the quality of education. There are several countries which use only formative assessment. They are doing well, competing with the people from any part of the globe. They have been to space; they have invented new things; leading the world.

As indicated by the results, the teacher-made formative assessment can only replace the summative assessment meaningfully when the teachers are sincerely accountable and responsible. But, the participants express their doubts in this regard. *"In the context of Nepal, we still need to do a lot, and we seem to wait a few more years to observe professionalism in teaching sector."* (Expert-4).

The participants also point out a need for remedial classes for those who need assistance in getting the curriculum target. They argue that due to socio-economic condition, geographical variation (urban vs. rural), and linguistic barrier, the number of marginalized students (i.e., students with special-needs) in Nepal is considerably high. The concerned authorities seem to manage remedial classes to bring them into the mainstream of education. They state that it is a formative assessment that can help identify where the students were in their learning, where they are at present, and what should be done to get them to the target. Many of the participants express that after identifying where the students are at present in their learning and what they need to get to the target, remedial classes (in addition to their regular classes) should be managed throughout the country. The participants discuss that without remedial classes for the low performers, even the formative assessment could not be effective in the enhancement of student learning. They conclude that a formative assessment accompanying with effective remedial classes for the marginalized students could be one of the ideal 21st-century model assessment systems.

10. Step forward for successful implementation of the reform

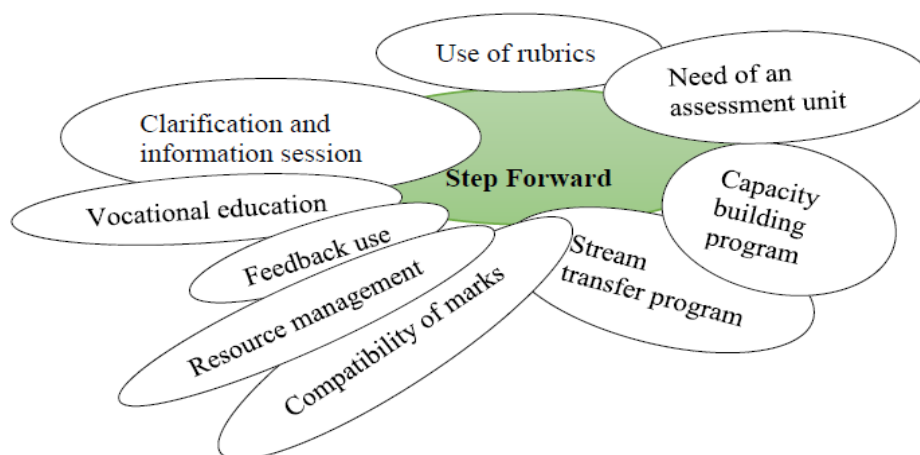


Figure 28. Step forward

The results suggest several issues that need to be addressed immediately for the effective and successful implementation of the reform. Some of the salient issues include: (i) Clarification and information session, (ii) vocational and technical education, (iii) use of feedback, (iv) resource management, (v) compatibility of the practical and theoretical marks, (vi) stream transfer program, (vii) capacity building program, (viii) need of an evaluation and assessment unit, (ix) use of rubrics. These issues are briefly described below with relevant quotes wherever applicable.

10.1 Clarification and information session. The results indicate that as the letter grading and no pass-fail provisions are new to Nepal, a large number of stakeholders, especially students and parents are still not well literate about the reform. A vast majority of participants expresses that the reform has not only confused students and parents but also teachers, school administrators and many of the local authorities in many ways. Further, they question if the implementers were not clear about the core reform concept, how could they circulate the right message of the reform to the students and parents? The results suggest the MOE and under agencies conduct an effective elucidation campaign, such as seminars, workshops, training, etc. to clarify the quandaries attached to the reform. Professor-3 suggests that the first and foremost task of the concerned authority is to clarify the fundamental concept of the reform including its objectives, aims, and procedures. Likewise, Expert-1 argues that many stakeholders, especially students and parents have misunderstood and misinterpreted the "no pass-fail" provision. He suggests that the concerned authorities have to clarify the ground reality that a low grade does matter the students for their academic career. In this regard, NTA representative contends:

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There are many confusions and misunderstanding attached to this reform. Due to the limited timeframe, the MOE was unable to make the reform agenda clear to all the stakeholders. The students have to understand that they have to work harder for their better future. Now, the MOE has to clarify that 'no pass-fail' does not mean 'do not work hard.'

The findings also strongly suggest the MOE indoctrinate the key stakeholders, such as personals of District Education Office, school administrators, teachers, students and parents as they have been accustomed to using the high-stakes assessment system for years. Majority of participants express that such a huge shift (i.e., a shift from a high-stakes assessment system to a low-stakes) would not take place as envisioned if the MOE failed to indoctrinate the teachers. Focusing on this issue, Expert-3 states:

Teachers are the key stakeholders in this process. They instruct, guide, facilitate and work with the students on a regular basis. I mean, it is the teachers who bring the reform in the classroom. So, the concerned authorities have to interact with the teachers and provide the necessary support and assistance they required to operationalize the reform into a meaningful practice.

Educator-2 has the same view as mentioned above. He suggests that the concerned authorities have to organize specific programs to train the teachers. The findings suggest that many teachers need brainwashing programs as they are accustomed to using a great amount of time for test preparation. They also point out a need for a specific training program for teachers to train them on how to evaluate the student performance in the reformed assessment system accurately.

10.2 Vocational and technical education. The results suggest that there is an urgent need for vocational and technical education to those SLC appeared students who have secured lower grades or GPA. The reason is that the students having lower grades (i.e., GPA below 1.6 on average) are not permitted to join the university for higher education. The only option for them is to either improve their grades or GPA by rewriting the exam or join the vocational and technical institutions for a profession of their interest or strength (i.e., skill-based). However, there are also some criteria (i.e., certain GPA is required) in entering the vocational and technical institutions. Many participants suggest that a large number of students having lower GPA seem to be reluctant to rewrite the grade increment exam due to financial problem and family-related

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reasons, and sometimes due to misunderstanding the value of obtained grades. They contend that this situation has forced the government to establish more vocational and technical institutions throughout the country and make them accessible and affordable to the target population.

Expressing his view on the importance of vocational and technical education, Educator-2 states:

There are very few vocational and technical institutions throughout the country, and both economically and geographically, they are out of reach of a large number of the target population. I recommend the MOE establish enough vocational and technical institutions based on the local needs, and more importantly, make them cheaper and accessible to the target population.

Many of the participants seem to be a bit serious about the future of the low-grade holders. Talking about the low-grade holders, Professor-3 contends that the MOE should immediately take action for preparing infrastructures and managing other resources required for the reform. More importantly, he suggests that the MOE should bring a practical, affordable and accessible special package programs for the low-grade holders.

The other important issue revealed by the results is that vocational education in Nepal is taken as the 'second-class education' (i.e., education for academically weak students). Talking about vocational and technical education in Nepal, the MOE official states that students seem to be uninterested in vocational courses. Further, he contends that there are rare cases where vocational education becomes the first choice of one's career.

Regardless of the traditional concept towards vocational education, the findings suggest that the assessment reform has increased the scope of vocational education in Nepal. Educator-2 argues that the assessment reform could contribute to change the perception of people to vocational and technical education. Further, he states that the MOE should modify the modality and form of the existing vocational and technical education so that people could see their better and secure future in the vocational and technical field.

10.3 Collection and use of feedback. One of the commonly raised issues in the data is the collection and use of feedback. Almost all the participants express that as the reform was implemented without completing the necessary preparation and homework, the collection of feedback from the stakeholders, experts, and educators for its further improvement is a must. They suggest the concerned authorities collect constructive feedback from the stakeholders and experts and incorporate them for further improvement as there have been a number of unresolved

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issues. Talking about the MOE's plan, DEO-1 states that the reformers have been receiving constructive feedback from educators, experts, school administrators, teachers, and parents. Further, he states that the feedback and suggestions should be incorporated for making the reform successful. In this regard, Principal-1 contends:

Although the MOE has reformed the assessment system without consulting the key stakeholders, such as school owners, school administrators, teachers, and parents, still, it has not been too late to address some of the key issues that might affect the reform process negatively. The MOE, via its sub-systems or by forming a separate committee, should immediately start collecting feedback from the key stakeholders. In fact, the key stakeholders are the school administrators and the teachers who know where the problems lie and what the causes of the problems are. If the feedback and suggestions are taken seriously and incorporated honestly, the reform objectives and aims could easily be achieved.

As mentioned elsewhere, implementing the reform before completing intensive preparation was a strategic plan of the MOE (MOE official). The MOE official contends:

The reform has already been implemented. Now is the time to collect feedback from its stakeholders including experts and educators as per our strategic plan (i.e., implement a reform with a basic preparation and improve by collecting feedback). The MOE under agencies will collect feedback for making the reform successful. We, as a higher authority, provide the necessary assistance and support they needed.

In sum, the findings strongly suggest that the first and foremost task of the concerned authorities is to collect feedback and suggestions (by forming a committee of experts) from the stakeholders and incorporate them to make necessary changes and modification to the reform.

10.4 Resource management. The other important, influential factor for the successful implementation of the reform as suggested by the results is the management of necessary resources. Many participants believe that the success or failure of the reform immensely depends on the prospective programs and strategies the MOE brings into action. They argue that the unprepared and hurriedly implemented reform has resulted in a number of problems and challenges that have to be addressed before being too late. The findings suggest that until and unless the MOE organizes a sufficient number of seminars and workshops across the country to answer the questions of the stakeholders and manages trained human resources and financial

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resources to the implementing agencies and schools, the reform could not meet its goals.

Indicating this issue, Educator-2 states:

Although the reform was implemented without thorough preparation, it was implemented with a good intention. And it is not a bad reform per se. However, there are a number of “ifs, ands, or buts” for the successful implementation of the reform. We have been an eyewitness of some unsuccessful educational reform in Nepal. They become unsuccessful in the lack of infrastructure, proper management system, and more importantly necessary funding. One of such reforms was the implementation of Semester system at Tribhuvan University, which was declared as an unfit program in the Nepalese context and was removed after practicing for a few semesters.

10.5 Compatibility of the practical and theoretical marks. The SLC appeared students in some subjects get assessed in two ways- via practical and theory exams. The scores for theory exams are provided by the external markers (i.e., other than their teachers), whereas the scores for practical exams are provided by their subject teachers. The letter grades are assigned in the grade sheet separately for the scores of theory and practical exams. And the final GPA is assigned by averaging both the theory and practical exam grades. Especially for the low performers, the findings show that there is a huge gap between the grades provided in the theory and practical exam. For instance, Pretty Johnson (name changed) got A+ in practical exams in three subjects, whereas he got grade D, D, and E in all the three subjects in theory exams (see Appendix-15). The findings suggest that such incompatibilities raise questions on the fairness of student assessment and evaluation and validity and reliability of the obtained grades. Focusing on the problem of fairness and the MOE's step ahead, the DOE authority states:

You can easily find such examples if you see a couple of grade sheets of low performers; students having 1.6 GPA or below. How can you justify the case in which a student gets A+ in practical portion and E (which is indirectly failing grade) in theoretical portion? What's wrong with the assessment system? Such a discrepancy should be addressed to increase the quality of education.

The findings further suggest that the school teachers, those who teach practical subjects, should be provided training focusing on the possible marking criteria for the practical subjects.

“If the teachers make certain criteria before providing grades for practical subjects, considering what the competency level of a student should be to get A+, A, B+, etc., they

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can accurately assess their students, and the grade provided by the teachers could be justifiable and accurate.” (Expert-2).

The other issue raised by many of the participants is the unclear grade sheet. They contend that the grade sheet does not show what percentages of worth is allocated to the theory and practical exam. They recommend the MOE and concerned authorities mention the percentage of the worth of the practical and theory exams so that anybody who is not familiar with the curriculum can understand the worth of the practical and theory exam without consulting the curriculum.

10.6 Stream transfer program. Some of the participants, including experts, educators, and CTEVT representative recommend the MOE and concerned authorities to make a two-way track for transferring the students from vocational to academic stream and vice versa. The results show that the reform has opened doors to all the eligible (if they fulfill admission criteria) students for further studies either in the academic stream or the vocational field. As per the present provision, the low-grade holders (i.e., having GPA below 1.6 in average) are not allowed to join the universities. The CTEVT representative states that this reform would contribute to rising charm/attraction of vocational education in the days to come. *“As the number of students increases in the vocational education, a two-way track for transferring from one stream to another is essential.” (CTEVT representative).*

Talking on this issue, Educator-2 states:

After implementing this reform, it has been imperative that the number of vocational institutions should be increased. When a large number of the population enrolled in the vocational field, the concerned authority should think about different possibilities. How to bridge the vocational and academic stream? What pre-requisites should one fulfill to jump from a vocational course to the academic one and vice versa? The pre-requisites greatly vary depending on the courses they have completed in the existing program. These are some of the questions that need to be addressed by the government. There is a lot to be done. Now the government should take both the issues- establishing vocational institutions and making a bridge between the academic and vocational stream simultaneously.

10.7 Capacity building program. Some of the participants, such as educators, experts, professors and representative of organizations express that the MOE and concerned authorities

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should immediately start capacity building program targeting teachers and personnel. Further, they contend that as the reform has already begun and resulted in a number of quandaries among stakeholders, all the personnel who involved and are going to involve in the reform process, and the teachers who are the true implementers of the reform should be trained intensively. In this regard, Educator-1 states:

One of the important tasks of the government is to focus on capacity building as the reform is a new concept in Nepal. Resource persons, school teachers, and personnel are the key implementers in this reform process. So, it is the responsibility of the reformers (i.e., MOE and CDC) to make them capable of implementing the reform; make them able to handle the upcoming situations and challenges efficiently. For this, the MOE should provide orientation and necessary training.

Discussing this issue, Expert-4 suggests the MOE start a meaningful discourse with the key stakeholders to prepare a roadmap for the further step. He adds that the MOE should begin orientation and training programs (basing on the received feedback) with a commitment to involve all the teachers, resource persons, and personnel who directly participate in implementing the reform.

10.8 Need for an evaluation and assessment unit. The need for an evaluation and assessment unit is another theme emerged from the data. Some of the experts, educators, professors, school principals, teachers, and the other participants express that for the reform to successfully happen, and for further improvement of the assessment system, a separate unit of evaluation and assessment should be established. They contend that the National Examination Board (NEB) and Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) are the bodies currently working under the MOE for the assessment reform. Further, they discuss that these agencies have several other roles and responsibilities to fulfill apart from the assessment system reform. Also, the findings suggest that the people appointed in NEB and CDC might not be assessment experts. Given this scenario, the participants argue that the MOE should establish a separate and powerful unit or department for evaluation and assessment. On the one hand, the department or unit could give its whole efforts, as they don't have any other responsibilities to perform, for making the reform successful and meaningful. On the other hand, the appointed experts in the unit could contribute a lot to implement and improve the reform by using their knowledge, experience, and expertise in the evaluation and assessment field. Pointing out a need for a separate unit of

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evaluation and assessment, Teacher-6 states:

If the MOE wants to develop a 21st-century assessment model suitable for Nepal, the MOE should establish a separate unit of assessment and testing. And the unit has to be provided not only with the necessary resources but also the power of decision making.

10.9 Use of rubrics. Some of the experts and representative of school and teacher's organizations recommend the MOE and concerned authorities develop and use rubrics for assessing the answer papers, both for the theory and practical exams. They argue that rubrics, which are widely used in many parts of the world, can help, to a great extent, bringing consistency in assessing student work as the rubrics provide scoring guidelines. Further, they state that rubrics can also help to increase intra-rater and inter-rater reliability. Recommending the reformers to endorse a mandatory regulation to use rubrics in assessing student work, Educator-2 states:

We have a single summative assessment in grade 10, and the nature of most of the exam questions is subjective. In such an educational environment, I think, rubrics should be made mandatory for assessing student performance. How do you make sure that you assess student work accurately and fairly without using rubrics? I recommend the MOE and under agencies to ratify a mandatory regulation to use rubrics in the reformed assessment system.

The DOE official also points out a need for the use of rubrics in assessing student performance. He argues that rubrics not only provide guidelines to the teachers to assess student performance accurately and fairly but also minimize the huge gap seen between the grades in the theory and practical exams.

Section Summary (Summary of the Third Section- Third Construct)

'Reform effect' is the final (i.e., third) core construct emerged from the data. The results show that the final construct consists of ten conceptual categories and several other thematic sub-categories. As revealed by the results, the conceptual categories grouped under reform effects include misconception on the core aspect of the reform, controversial and paradoxical issues, factors contributing to magnifying confusion, condemnation, opportunities, the demand of the time, reform impact, impact variation, limitation of the reform and step forward.

The study explored that in the lack of clear guidelines and timely instructions from the concerned authorities, the key reform agendas- no pass-fail provision and value of letter grading-

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, were misinterpreted and misunderstood that misled the stakeholders, and in some cases, jeopardized the career of many of the students. The results also indicate that the commencement of the reform (i.e., letter grading and no pass-fail provision) in Grade 10, the interval of ten in the grading system, the announcement of the program for low-grade holders, admission criteria, and contradicting reform aims are some of the major paradoxes attached to this reform. The results also indicate that the following two factors: amendment of the *Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015* (LGWP), and the uncertainty of the eligibility criteria for the government jobs contributed a lot in magnifying confusion among stakeholders. Similarly, the results show three major condemnations attached to this reform. First, the reform has put students (i.e., especially the low-grade holders) into limbo as neither they rewrote the exam assuming that none fails the exam, nor did they get admission in Grade 11. Second, the reform was endorsed without doing any empirical studies on the type of assessment reform Nepal was seeking. Third, the admission criteria for Grade 11 were made without any in-depth analysis of the relationship between the subject and field of study.

Providing their overall remarks on the assessment reform, the participants express five major opportunities (i.e., salient features) of the assessment reform. The opportunities (i.e., salient features) include the end of the pass-fail assessment system, end of the stigma attached to the SLC exam failure, the conception of collaborative learning, minimizing unfair competition among students and private college owners, and an opportunity of grade increment exam. The findings indicate that the reform has both positive and negative impacts. Positive impact includes, drop off the SLC exam related fraud and distress on examinees, an increase of self-confidence of low performers, and improvement of livelihood of people. Similarly, the negative impact includes loss of motivation for learning, loss of accountability of schools and teachers, and fear of decreasing the quality of education. The findings also indicate that the reform impacted the key stakeholders differently depending on the type of school, the location of the school and the performance level of the students, which can be termed as system-wise, location-wise and group-wise impact respectively.

As expressed by many of the participants, the assessment reform mentioned in this study is not the type of reform Nepal was seeking. Instead, they recommend the MOE to make a total educational reform including the changes of curricula and pedagogy. They also recommend the MOE to introduce such a formative assessment that could assess multi-abilities and skills of

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every individual and also provide remedial classes for the needy ones. The results present some of the suggestions provided by the participants to make the reform successful. Those recommendations include a need of clarification campaign, vocational and technical education, collection and use of feedback, resource management, minimizing the big gap between the practical and theoretical marks, stream transfer program, capacity building program, evaluation and assessment unit, and use of rubrics. Finally, the results report two limitations of the reform. Mainly, the reformers state that the government had a very short period to implement the reform, and there was a lack of human, financial and technical resources.

SYNOPSIS OF THE FINDINGS

As mentioned earlier, a total of 58 thematic categories, 18 larger conceptual categories and three principal categories (i.e., constructs) emerged from the data analysis. The interactive analysis and interpretation of the constructs, categories, and sub-categories is the basis of the emergent theory of the assessment reform of the SLC exam (i.e., one of the high-stakes assessment systems). The emergent grounded theory has explicated how the reform was conceptualized, what was done as a foundational preparation, how it was implemented, and what the preliminary responses of the implementation of the reform were. As the details of the findings have been presented above, a synopsis of the process of the reform in a graphic form (in a big circle) is presented in Figure 23 below, before starting the discussion on these findings.

Figure 23 (see next page), shows that the three pivotal constructs- *conceptualization of the reform*, *implementation of the reform*, and *reform effects*, presented in the middle of the figure in two different circles, are the key constructs emerged from the data analysis. The first construct, *conceptualization of the reform*, comprises the conceptual categories and thematic sub-categories that explain how people perceive the reform (i.e., as a new phenomenon), the origin of the reform, aims of the reform, the framework for the reform, and necessary homework and preparation done before implementing the reform. The second construct- *implementation of the reform* contains information dissemination, strategic plan, and challenges attached to the implementation of the reform. Finally, the third construct- *reform effect* includes the key reform issues that resulted from the endorsement of the reform. The major issues revealed under this category are misunderstandings, controversial and paradoxical issues, factors contributing to magnifying confusion, opportunities, condemnations attached to the reform, reform impact, impact variation, limitation of the reform, the demand of the change/time, and step forward.

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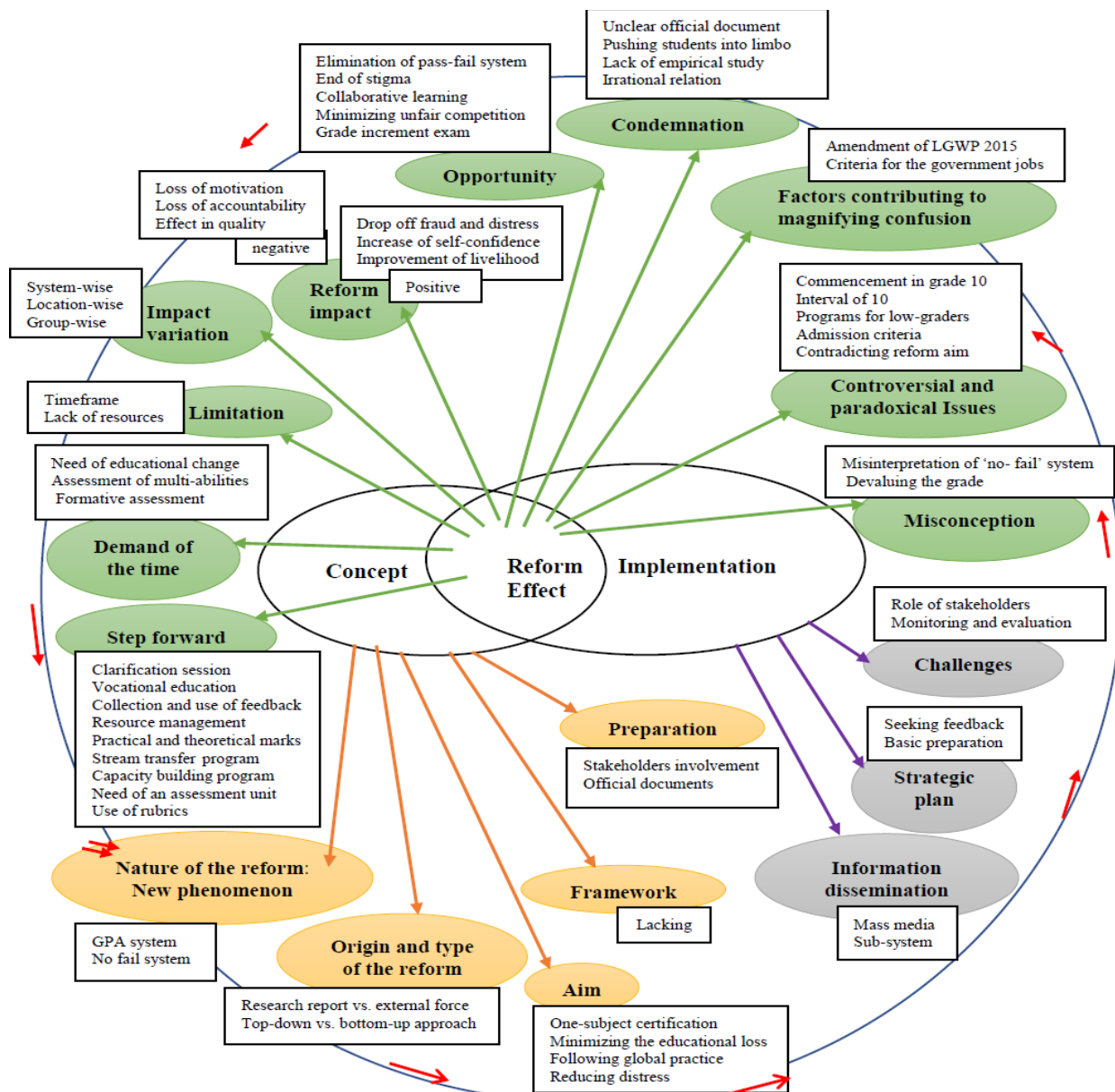


Figure 29: Synopsis of the findings

Although the three constructs seem to have a linear relation (i.e., concept, implementation, and reform effects), the third construct, more or less, is the by-product of both the concept and implementation of the reform. In other words, the ten conceptual categories mentioned under the third construct (i.e., reform effects) seem to overlap between the first and second construct (i.e., conceptualization and implementation of the reform). The basis for categorization of the conceptual categories is the phase of the reform in which the very category originated or had a closer relation.

Out of the three focal constructs, two of them are presented in two circles in the center of

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the figure; and the third one is presented in the overlapped portion of the two circles. Altogether 18 conceptual categories were identified in the data. Out of which, five were categorized under the concept of the reform, three under implementation of the reform and remaining ten under reform effects. Given the fact that the ten resulting conceptual categories are directly or indirectly linked with both the concept and implementation of the reform, the ten conceptual categories are presented in the overlapped portion of the first and second circle in the middle of Figure 23. Under the 18 conceptual categories mentioned above, which are presented in the shadowed circles, there are a total of 58 thematic sub-categories, which are presented in small boxes beside their respective conceptual categories.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter four has explicated the results of this study by grouping the emergent conceptual and thematic categories and sub-categories into three pivotal constructs. Conceptualization of the reform, implementation of the reform and reform effects are the three pivotal constructs emerged from the interviews and focus group discussions. The first construct, *conceptualization of the reform*, includes those conceptual and thematic categories and sub-categories, which are mostly related to the conceptual phase of the assessment system reform. The conceptual categories categorized under *conceptualization of the reform* are: Origin and type of the reform, reform aims, framework for the reform, and preparation and homework for the reform. Likewise, the second construct, *implementation of the reform*, comprises those conceptual and thematic categories and sub-categories which revolve around the implementation phase of the reform. It includes those conceptual categories that inform how the reform-related information was disseminated, what strategic plan the reformers used to implement the reform, and what factors could influence the reform process. The third construct, *reform effect*, includes those categories and sub-categories that emerged as responses of the implementation of the reform. In other words, the conceptual categories and thematic sub-categories mentioned under reform effect are directly or indirectly related to both of the conceptual and implementation phases of the reform. The conceptual categories included under *reform effects* discuss quandaries and condemnation attached to the reform, factors contributing to magnifying the quandaries, opportunities of the reform, reform impact, and step forward, etc. This chapter concludes by presenting a synopsis of the assessment system reform of the SLC exam in Nepal.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS THE PROCESS OF ASSESSMENT SYSTEM REFORM

As stated earlier, the main purpose of this study entailed explicating the process of the assessment system reform of the SLC exam in Nepal via a grounded theory approach. The study describes how the reform concept was conceived, what was done as a foundational preparation, how it was implemented, and what the preliminary responses of the implementation of the reform were. The findings highlight several issues and aspects in the form of constructs (i.e., higher categories), conceptual categories and sub-categories that explicate the entire process of the assessment system reform. In this chapter, the resulting components (constructs, categories, and sub-categories) will be organized based on the research questions and discussed in relation to the available resources, such as supportive official documents, articles and seminar reports on the reform and relevant literature. Moreover, some of the book chapters, articles, and studies on the principles of educational reform (change) will also be utilized in order to relate and validate the study findings.

Berman and McLaughlin (1977), Huberman and Miles (1984), and Fullan (2006, 2007, 2008, 2015) mention that the process of educational change passes through three phases: Initiation, implementation, and institutionalization/continuation phase. Considering the widely accepted phase-wise description of a change process, in the present study, the conceptual categories and sub-categories grouped under *conceptualization of the reform* and *implementation of the reform* (i.e., in the results section) will be discussed under the *initiation phase* and *implementation phase*, respectively. However, the conceptual categories and sub-categories grouped under *reform effects* (i.e., in the results section), do not seem to align perfectly with the third phase of the reform (i.e., institutionalization/continuation of reform) attributed to several mismatches. The reform implementation, especially without detailed preparation (as expressed by the participants), has raised many issues and concerns, which appear more like resulting issues rather than the factors that characterize the continuation phase of the reform. It should also be noted that as the reform has just begun in 2015 as a pilot project in the technical stream, and was subsequently extended nation-wide in 2016 in all streams, the reform process is still in the implementation phase. According to Fullan (2015), the implementation phase of a change may go up to three years, or in some cases up to five years. For this reason, the continuation phase of reform has not been highlighted in this study. However, some of the conceptual categories and

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sub-categories that characterize the continuation phase of the reform might have been included under *resulting issues and concerns*.

The discussion of findings has been organized on the basis of the research questions that guided this study. In other words, the constructs, conceptual categories, and sub-categories that emerged from the data are discussed in relation to the research questions identified for this study. The overarching research questions set for this study were as follows:

- (1) What theoretical and practical considerations were raised to explicate the reform (i.e., assessment reform of the SLC exam) process from conceptualization to its implementation?
- (2) What are the remarkable resulting issues of the reform, and how have they been addressed for its successful implementation?

The first research question covers the issues and concerns related to both initiation and implementation phase of the reform. Likewise, the second research question covers the issues and concerns that emerged as responses to the reform (i.e., resulting issues). In order to better organize this chapter, those issues and concerns are described under the following sections. The first and second section under the first research question present discussions on the issues and concerns that fall under the initiation phase and implementation phase of the reform, respectively. Similarly, the first and second section under the second research question present discussions on the resulting issues and the remarkable recommendations (i.e., step forward) suggested by the knowledgeable participants respectively. Thus, the discussion is structured in altogether four sections: Two sections under the first research question and two under the second one. The following sections present question-wise discussions on the findings.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

In response to the first research question, '*What theoretical and practical considerations were raised to explicate the reform process from conceptualization to its implementation?*' the results suggest a number of issues and concerns (i.e., constructs, conceptual categories, and thematic sub-categories) relevant to the initiation and implementation phase of the reform. As stated above, Section one below discusses those crucial issues and concerns that incline considerably to initiation phase of the reform, whereas Section two discusses those important issues and concerns that lean significantly towards the implementation phase of reform.

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SECTION ONE: INITIATION PHASE

DISCUSSION ON THE IMPORTANT ASPECTS IN THE INITIATION PHASE

The initiation phase presents an account of how the reform was conceived, explains who made the reform decision and why, presents what frameworks and roadmaps were prepared, states what necessary homework and preparation were done, and informs what requirements were managed in order to implement the reform (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977; Huberman & Miles, 1984; and Fullan, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2015). However, the literature evidence that none of the reforms follow the same principle and process due to the diverse nature and context of the reform. Indicating this diversity, Fullan (2015) attests that the uniqueness of the individual setting is a critical factor, i.e., what works in one situation may or may not work in another (p. 32).

In the present study, *the conceptualization of the reform* is the first construct emerging from the data analysis, which is similar to Fullan's (2015) initiation of change. This construct includes the issues and concerns which primarily were emergent during the phase, however not exclusively as there are plenty of phase-wise overlaps (Fullan, 2016), before the commencement of implementation of the reform. The issues and concerns related to the initiation of reform will be discussed thoroughly under the following five titles.

- (1) Justification of the reform
- (2) Reform aims and purposes
- (3) The theoretical and conceptual framework
- (4) Stockholder involvement
- (5) Preparation and homework

1. Justification of the Reform: Was the Reform Necessary?

Research literature widely states that the first step of a reform or a change is the need analysis (Fullan, 2016; Aho, Pitkanen & Sahlberg, 2006). Whether or not the key stakeholders, especially implementers have felt a need for reform or change, the analysis accords excellent sense to a reform process. For a top-down approach-based reform like the one depicted in this study, the reformers should justify why the reform was necessary. Moreover, for a successful implementation of the reform, the reformers should ensure the stakeholders including key implementers understand the need of the reform, and ensure their allegiance (i. e., if not all, at least to a vast majority) in favor of the reform.

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With regard to this study, as suggested by the findings, the origin of the reform was primarily the research reports submitted to the MOE at different times. The findings indicate that, based on the previous research reports and suggestions from other experts and educators, the CDC prepared conceptual frameworks (e.g., National Curriculum Framework for School Education, MOE, 2005 & School Sector Reform Plan, MOE, 2009-2015) with the purpose to endorse educational reform. The frameworks focused on introducing structural reform in the existing school education system. The major research reports that recommended the MOE to initiate educational changes within the existing assessment system of the SLC exam include Study on Student Performance in SLC Exam (Mathema & Bista, 2006) and Crisis in Education and Future Challenges for Nepal (Mathema, 2007). In congruence, Sharma¹ (2016, July 15) has also mentioned this fact in a paper presented at a seminar organized by the CDC. Specifically, Sharma¹ (2016, July 15) states that the assessment system reform was proposed primarily by the two studies: Study on Student Performance in SLC Exam (Mathema & Bista, 2006) and School Sector Reform Plan (MOE, 2009-2015). In addition, plenty of instances support the idea that the concept of the assessment reform originated from the research reports. Having said that neither any of the research reports nor the conceptual frameworks of the school education reform (mentioned above) presented a detailed framework for the assessment system reform of the SLC exam.

Presenting causes of educational change, Masters (2013) states four forces motivating the change: The demand for better information for decision-making, evolving understanding of human learning, an emphasis on broader life skills and attributes, and the transformational potential of new technology. The findings of this study also indicate almost the same causes for the reform. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE- 2005, p. 4) and School Sector Reform Project (SSRP- 2009) have mentioned that with the changing knowledge and perspective of human being, rapid advances in technology, and changing pattern of teaching-learning and student assessment, educational reform has been an inevitable urgent need for Nepal. Many participants express that the assessment system reform of the SLC exam is a part of the school sector reform project.

To sum up, the research reports submitted to the MOE at different times and the opinions of experts and educators expressed in the mass media indicate an impending need for the assessment system reform. All the participants also express the same view, which implies that

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the expressions of all the participants validate the need for assessment system reform. The disagreement expressed by some of the participants in this study was on the reform process and the choice of the Grade to commence the reform (i.e., the reform commenced suddenly in Grade 10).

2. Reform Aims and Purposes: Were the Reform Aims and Purposes Stated Clearly in the Reform Documents?

There have been plenty of studies and theories on educational or assessment reform that advocate the importance of clarity of reform aims. The extant literature informs that the clearly and explicitly stated reform aims and purposes, in fact, help the implementers understand the intention of the reform properly that ease the implementation process (Philips, 2000, Berry, 2011, Aho, Pitkanen & Sahlberg, 2006). Regarding this study, one of the prevalent issues raised by almost all the participants, except the MOE official and few of the other participants, is the vagueness apparent in aims of the reform mentioned in the LGWP 2015. Criticizing the aims of the reform, the participants argue that the lack of the detailed information in the reform aims (i.e., presented point-wise without any explanation), resulted in breeding confusion amongst the key stakeholders including some of the implementers. The point-wise reform aims presented in the LGWP 2015/2016 have provided a flexible ground to interpret the principal aim of the reform differently. The participants contend that the stakeholders interpreted and understood the reform aims using their analytical lenses and insights. Such interpretation and understanding introduced several quandaries among stakeholders, which has made the implementation of the reform more problematic and challenging.

The study findings strongly suggest that for a successful reform such as this, the first and foremost task of the reformers is to properly communicate the reform aims and purposes to the concerned stakeholders. This finding is supported by Ely and Atkinson's (1978) notion of change, in which they state that the lack of clearly expressed purpose or reason for innovation or change may constitute a significant condition for a failure of reform. Shaukat's (2013) study on an educational reform in Pakistan has explicated a number of aspects of educational change. Highlighting on what the goals of educational change should look like, Shaukat (2013) states:

The administrative leadership must have a clear shared vision of the goal of the required change. In many cases, change initiatives fall through due to loss of focus on the actual goal and due to misperceptions about the vision and goals. It is the leader who must keep

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the ultimate goal at the forefront of the plan for all the participants (p. 181)

A vast majority of the participants expresses that the reformers present limitations as regards clarifying the research aims to the stakeholders. The difference between the reform aims mentioned in the official document prepared by the MOE and the reform aims expressed by the participants in the study justifies this response of the study participants that the reform aims set in the MOE's documents were inexplicit. Put differently, the reform aims specified in the *Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015* (translated verbatim) do not seem to be compatible, although there are some commonalities, with the aims of the reform that emerged from the data. The following table presents both the aims mentioned above.

Table 16

Comparison of Aims of the Reform between the Stated in the LGWP and the Emergent One

The reform aims mentioned in the LGWP 2015	The reform aims emerged from the data
To exactly verify/measure students' learning abilities	Introducing a notion of one-subject certification
To introduce a nine-point letter grading system for measuring student achievement	Reducing stress on test-takers
To increase the quality of education by minimizing educational loss	Minimizing the educational loss
	Ensuring compatibility with the global practices

Table 16 shows that the aims mentioned by the participants seem to be more explicit, realistic and practical compared to the ones set by the MOE officials in the official document. The difference between the aims stated in the LGWP, and the emergent aims might also mean that the implementation of the reform has broadened the understanding of stakeholders and other people. Irrespective the attributing reasons to the difference of two types of reform aims (see Table 16 above), none of the reform-related documents have stated how the reform achieves an exact measurement of the student's learning abilities. It has not been made clear how the newly reformed assessment system is better than the previous system in terms of measuring the student's learning abilities. Neither has it been explicated on how the reform increases the quality of education. More importantly, the second reform aim mentioned in Table 16 (i.e., to introduce a nine-point letter grading system for measuring student achievement) seems to be more confusing. It is not clear whether or not the 'introduction of the nine-point letter grading system for measuring student achievement' is the reform aim. The 'introduction of the nine-point

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letter grading system' seems more like a measurement tool rather than an implication or action step stemming the reform aim.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework: What Framework was Used for the Reform?

Literature review highlighted a dearth or an exceptional study or theory, which presented a generic theoretical framework for any of the educational or assessment reforms. The reason might be that none of the educational or assessment reforms can be made based exactly on a ready-made framework due to the unique nature of every reform regarding research purpose, research context, and several other affecting variables. However, almost all the reformers seem to prepare a detailed conceptual framework based on the nature of the reform (i.e., purpose, context, available resources, etc.) before implementing the reform. It is one of the essential prerequisites of reform. For instance, on the matter of successful educational reforms, considering the reform in Finland, Aho, Pitkanen, and Sahlberg (2006) state that the parliament launched the reform by issuing a School System Act that included all of the major elements of the new basic school system as well as the action plan for implementation. They add that, in addition to the action plan, the government also prepared a framework for future reform or further plan.

Thus, as stated above, a fundamental prerequisite for educational reform is the conceptual framework that helps the implementers prepare an action plan to implement the reform successfully. The extant literature informs that the reforms, in which all the stakeholders from policymakers/reformers to implementers (i.e., government, local implementers, school administrators, and teachers) involve in preparing the conceptual framework, seem to be successful (Aho, Pitkanen & Sahlberg, 2006). It can also be safely inferred that such integral involvement allows all the stakeholders to take the ownership of the reform that intrinsically motivates them to work harder to make the reform successful.

Concerning this study, the findings indicate that the reformers did not follow any theoretical framework nor did they prepare a detailed and explicit conceptual framework for the reform. The results show that with the exception of the 12-page long official document, which briefly presents what grades and GPAs are awarded to students, and what each of the grades means (i.e., grade descriptors), the MOE has not (until the time of the study) prepared any detailed document to frame the reform. Many participants including experts and educators, citing this lacuna, express that this reform has been a riddle to many stakeholders, due to a lack of a

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clear roadmap or conceptual framework. They raised questions as to how the MOE could ensure a successful reform if the reform is implemented without making a roadmap. Further, they question how the stakeholders and reformers could guide themselves in absence of any detailed action plan or a framework for the further actions.

4. Stakeholder Involvement: Did the key Stakeholders Get an Opportunity to Involve in the Initiation Phase of the Reform?

Giving an account of one of the successful educational reforms in Finland, Aho, Pitkanen, and Sahlberg (2006) argue that one of the main reasons behind successful implementation of the reform is the broader participation of the stakeholders, educators, experts and representative of political parties that helped to develop a harmonious relationship between the reformers and the other stakeholders. Talking about the participation of stakeholders and other people in the policy-making phase, Aho, Pitkanen, and Sahlberg (2006) state:

Involving all relevant stakeholders in the reform process is essential. There are always opposing opinions and attitudes on any reform proposal. By establishing committees where professionals and other stakeholders could hash out their differences, Finnish policymakers were able to win consensus and tap valuable and varied expertise. When the government appointed members to the reform committees, for instance, it took pains to select a balanced mix of people with different political ideologies, professions, experience, and areas of expertise- including scientists and teachers (p. 40).

Other scholars have also expressed similar views with regard to the involvement of the stakeholders. Discussing the stakeholders' roles in the reform process, Fullan (2015) states that one of the basic reasons why planning fails is that planners or decision makers of change are unaware of the situations faced by potential implementers (p. 65). He argues that the potential implementers can help the reformers by providing important information that could contribute to making the reform successful. The reviewed literature informs that the inclusion of maximal individuals relevant to the reform process, from its beginning, prepares a solid foundation for the change.

In the case of this reform, the results indicate that the reformers seem to fail in incorporating the experts', educators' and stakeholders' input, especially in the conceptual phase. This, thus, implies, that the reformers still have to negotiate with the stakeholders, incorporate their useful input if there is still room to do so and establish a harmonious relationship with them

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to make the reform successful. Input from the stakeholders and open communication with those who must implement the reform will help to ensure a successful outcome (Shaukat, 2013).

Many participants express that the key stakeholders were not only excluded in the conceptual phase of the reform but also at the outset of reform implementation. Few stakeholders were accorded the opportunities to participate in the seminars organized by the MOE under agencies, however, this participation was only superficial and ceremonious as the number of participants was considerably low (Principal-5). The reformers thus apparently introduced a scope of failure in instating a practical action plan and a package program that could contribute to making the stakeholders feel part of the reform.

Having said that, as expressed in the mass and electronic media, many educators and experts admit that the reform began with a good intention and the MOE and under agencies have been doing as much as they could to make the reform successful.

5. Necessary Preparation and Homework: Have the Reformers Done Adequate Preparation for Launching the Reform?

It has been evident from the literature that a crucial but tough task for the reformers upon which the success or failure of the reform, to a great extent, relies is the required preparation and homework for the reform. Many change theorists including Ely (1999) and Aho, Pitkanen, and Sahlberg (2006) have also pointed out the importance of preparation before launching a reform. Discussing the foundational preparation of educational reform in Finland, Aho, Pitkanen, and Sahlberg (2006) state:

From 1974 to 1978, planning for the new infrastructure of upper-secondary vocational education was well underway and to some extent already bearing fruit. The machinery to implement the reforms had started to fall into place, and new curricula and content standards were in the draft phase. Thus, it was time for the Parliament to write the goals and reform principles into law (p.77).

The indented excerpt above indicates that the Finish government did a comprehensive preparation and long-term planning before implementing the educational reform, which ultimately resulted towards making the reform successful.

As suggested by the results of this study, the MOE with the coordination of CDC, confined the reform to only fundamental preparation, especially basic/technical preparation to launch the reform. The basic preparation includes preparation of the *Letter Grading Working Procedure*

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(2015), organizing seminars to discuss and disseminate information about the reform, and writing necessary circulars to the implementers. The reformers claim that the seminars they conducted to inform the stakeholders and local implementers, to some extent, proved to be beneficial towards reducing the gap between the reformers and the key stakeholders.

On the contrary, a vast majority of the participants attest that the MOE and under agencies failed to conduct fundamental preparation and necessary homework that was essential for achieving the reform goals. Wherein, by fundamental preparation and necessary homework they imply an inclusion of a detailed framework for the reform, involvement of the key stakeholders in the reform process, teacher training programs for increasing reform literacy and clarity, alternative package programs for the low grade-holders, management of human and technical resources, effective communication system to disseminate circulars and information etc. In this regard, Sharma¹ (2016, July 15) attests that the reform was implemented without conducting an in-depth analysis of what overall condition of the teachers, school, and parents is; what possible problems and challenges the implementation of reform would result in, and how those problems and challenges could be addressed (p. 2).

In one of the articles published in 'The Kathmandu Post' in December 2014, Shanta Dixit, a founder, and director of Rato Bangala School expresses her views about the preparation of the reform like this:

A closer look at the government's decision sadly shows that it might have arrived without preparation. For a watershed decision, such as this, with such potential to bring quality and energy to the school education sector, policymakers in education seem to have done a little homework. This is made evident by the fact that this decision was sprung on the education community with little consultation with stakeholders, including those in the school system or independent researchers who have an advantage on the challenges facing Nepal's school education.

Although the reformers claim that they made basic preparation before implementing the reform, the data fails to support their claim strongly. Sharma²'s (2016, July 15) account also supports the opponents' view. On a paper presented at a seminar organized by Curriculum Development Centre, Sharma² (2016, July 15) argues that despite the basic preparation and involvement of some stakeholders before implementing the reform, the MOE failed to perform a wide-ranging preparation and required homework.

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Going beyond the description of basic preparation necessary for launching a reform, Ely (1999) state that specific necessary prerequisites need to be examined thoroughly and managed properly before implementing any reforms or changes. Ely (1999) has presented eight prerequisites (i., e., dissatisfaction with the status quo, the existence of knowledge and skills, availability of resources, availability of time, rewards and incentives offer, participation, commitment, and leadership) that play significant roles in the implementation of educational changes. The findings of the present study also indicate these prerequisites, which have been discussed in this study in different sections under different sub-titles. For instance, *dissatisfaction with the status quo* has been discussed under the **justification of reform**, *availability of resources* under **resource management**, *availability of time* under the **timeframe**, *participation* under **stakeholder involvement**, etc.

To sum up this section, the discussion above explicitly clarifies that the reform was necessary as is corroboratively justified in both the research reports and the participants' expressions. With regard to whether the reform aims and purposes were stated clearly in the MOE's official documents, the answers to this question are controversial, i.e., both yes and no. However, the participants and the available resources do not seem to support the reformers strongly. Nor did I find any documents and literature that help falsify the opponents' claim that the MOE failed to prepare a comprehensive conceptual framework for the reform, involve the key stakeholders in the initiation phase of the reform and do necessary preparation and required homework. The emergent underlying truth from the discussion highlights that there have been a number of unaddressed issues and concerns, which have made the reform process challenging.

SECTION TWO: IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

DISCUSSION ON THE KEY ASPECTS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION PHASE OF THE REFORM

The second step of a change process is the implementation of the change. The implementation defines the process of putting into practice an idea, program, or a set of activities and structures, which are new to the people attempting or expected to change (Fullan, 2016, p. 45). The extant literature evidence that no two educational reforms rarely have the identical (exception may apply) short-term and long-term reform objectives, reform procedures, challenges associated with the reform, affecting factors and reform impacts. Regarding this study, a couple of important conceptual categories that present the possibility of fitting into the

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implementation of reform emerged from the data. These conceptual categories are defined below under the following titles:

- (1) Need of the strategic plan
- (2) Need for information dissemination
- (3) Factors influencing the implementation of the reform

1. Need of Strategic Plan: What Strategic Plan was Used to Implement the Reform?

Depending upon the nature and purpose of the reform, reform context, affecting factors, and several other internal and external variables, apparently the reformers demonstrate the use of a variety of strategies for implementing the reform. Common to all is the implementation of reform with a detailed preparation by involving the key stakeholders at the outset of the reform. Discussing what strategy, the reformers used during educational reform in Finland, Aho, Pitkanen, and Sahlberg (2006) state that the reformers in Finland created a 'pressure and support' environment, which helped to make the reform successful. Further, they contend that, on one hand, the local implementers, especially teachers were feeling sort of pressure because a new reform had to be implemented, which, in fact, was a government mandate. On the other hand, the local implementers were also motivated to implement the reform because the government not only imposed the reform, but also announced a salary increase and other attractive incentives including in-service teacher training, and promotion. The incentive, thus made every stakeholder including teachers feel a part of the reform process. As a result, the reform was implemented successfully.

Other reform theorists like Fullan (2001, 2006, 2015), Ely (1990), Berry (2011) and Masters (2013) have emphasized the involvement of the stakeholders in preparing the framework for the reform. Put differently, it can be safely inferred that it is imperative to make the stakeholders, especially local implementers, a part of the reform process. To sum up, one of the widely used, and probably the most effective strategies of implementation of a large-scale reform is the creation of such an environment, wherein, the key stakeholders can take ownership of the reform.

Regarding this study, the MOE official expresses that the MOE employed the reform by using a simple strategy- *implement the reform with basic preparation and improve it by collecting feedback*. The MOE official argues that implementing the reform before conducting an in-depth preparation was, in fact, a strategic plan. He argues that the implementation was

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deliberately conducted with basic preparation within a long-term plan of improving the reform by collecting feedback from the experts, educators and other stakeholders. He argues that reform is a non-linear process that progresses with a series of modifications. As per their plan, they implemented the reform and are currently in the course of incorporating the constructive feedback received from the experts, educators and other stakeholders for its progressive improvement. Further, the MOE official argues that amendment of the LGWP (2015) and admission criteria for Grade 11 and diploma programs for CTEVT constitutes the evidence of the strategic plan.

A vast majority of the participants (leaving few exceptions) express that implementing the reform without required preparation and homework was an immature decision of the MOE that has rather opened a Pandora's Box. They opine that the lack of preparedness for the reform has jeopardized not only the success of the reform but also future of several test-takers. In congruence, no studies and theory of change were found (if any) that support such strategic plans. However, it is, indeed, widely shared is that reform is a non-linear process, which does not end at implementation (Fullan, 2015, Ely, 1999 & Atkinson, 1978). Fullan (2015) states that implementation is just a beginning of an action or a change that may result in a number of issues and challenges that need to be fixed by collecting feedback from the stakeholders, experts, and educators.

2. The Need for Effective Information Dissemination System: How was the Information Disseminated?

As discussed by Shaukat (2013), in the implementation stage of the reform, adequate information must be given to all stakeholders to ensure that their efforts are focused on the needed change. Regarding this reform, the MOE used the mass media and its sub-system (i.e., under agencies) to disseminate the reform-related information including the official documents, circulars, and instructions to the local implementers. However, the accounts of the reformers and other implementers with regard to its effectiveness do not seem to be in alignment. The following section briefly discusses these issues.

2.1 Use of mass media. The reformers contend that one of the effective means of disseminating the reform-related information was the use of the mass media. They claim that it not only helped them with an expedited dissemination of information to the concerned stakeholders but also contributed to clarifying the reform purpose and process by introducing the

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reform issues into the national discourse. Contrary to this view, other stakeholders including some of the local implementers argue that the mass media could not serve as a useful tool to disseminate the reform-related information because they are not an authentic source of information. Further, they claim that the opinion-based information, which was broadcasted and published in the mass media resulted in confusion amongst the stakeholders.

2.2 Use of sub-system. Circulating information related to the reform by utilizing MOE's sub-system is the formal and authentic way of information dissemination. Moreover, it can address all the stakeholders including the ones who are deprived of the internet services. The MOE official claims that they circulated the MOE's formal documents and circulars via its sub-system. However, a vast majority of the participant, especially principals, teachers, and school owners disagree with him claiming that the school administrators did not receive the official documents and circulars in time. They claim that they got the documents too late or in many cases, they did not receive any detailed information. The participants attributed this to geographical variations, working culture of the government personnel (i.e., working at a low pace) and lack of accountability. Irrespective of the reasons, the data strongly support that the information dissemination process could not be effective.

3. Factors that Influence the Implementation of the Reform

Research studies demonstrate that the success or failure of an educational reform is subject to several reforms associated factors or conditions. The supportive roles of the factors could facilitate the reform process and direct the reform to succeed, whereas non-supportive roles of the factors hinder the reform process and consequently direct the reform to failure. In Fullan's (2015) words:

If anyone or more factors are working against implementation, the process will be less effective. To put it positively, the more factors supporting implementation, the more change in practice will be accomplished.

Ely and Atkinson (1978) have mentioned seven conditions that hinder change. These seven conditions include (i) lack of trust among stakeholders regarding the intended results of the change, (ii) unclear purpose and reason for the change, (iii) overloaded change, (iv) institutional hyperactivity, (v) lack of collective memory, (vi) personal relationships, (vii) the discrepancy between the change and (viii) client's need.

A close review reveals that only a few of these conditions are compatible with the findings

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of this study. The reason, as mentioned earlier, is that the nature of this reform is different from others. Regarding this study, as indicated by the results, the roles of the stakeholders and the management and monitoring system of the MOE are the two main factors that could potentially impact the reform process. These conditional factors are discussed below.

3.1 Roles of Stakeholders. Several theorists and researchers have discussed in detail about the important roles of the stakeholders in a reform process (Ely, 1999; Aho, Pitkanen, & Sahlberg, 2006; Fullan, 2015; Shaukat, 2013). Shaukat (2013) contends:

Any reform must have stakeholders' input from the very beginning of the plan. Allowing stakeholders to be part of the planning process is one efficient way to ensure that they will be investing their energy and time to make the program succeed. Stakeholders must feel that their individual needs and the needs of those affected by the change initiatives are recognized and valued in the reform. Without acknowledging the stakeholders' needs, resistance from the very beginning of the reform will lead to a lack of acceptance, and ultimately to little change, if any at all (p.181).

The participants in this study express that the roles of the reformers, local implementers, school organizations, teachers' organizations, school principals, teachers, students, and parents are crucial in making the reform successful. However, a vast majority of the participants argue that among those stakeholders, the reformers, the district education officers (local implementers) and school teachers are the essential individuals who can play significant roles in making the reform successful. The roles of the game changer, i.e., the roles of reformers, the roles of district education officers and school teachers, are briefly discussed below.

3.1.1 Roles of reformers. In a top-down basis reform, similar to the one stated in this study, the roles of the reformers/government (i.e., MOE) is crucial. Success or failure of the reform largely depends on how the government plans and prepares the roadmap for the reform, involves the stakeholders and utilizes the knowledge and expertise of the experts, educators, and the stakeholders, and addresses the opposing opinions and attitudes during the reform process. The administrative structure of Nepal is vertical, and as such, it is the responsibility of the MOE to play the leadership role. As indicated by the findings, the reform would be successful if the reformers play the following roles cautiously and wisely. The reform would be successful if the reformers could:

(1) Establish a harmonious relationship with the local authorities, school administrators, teachers,

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and local community members meaning to address their questions and quandaries, and provide the necessary resources and support in order to implement the reform,

(2) Interact with the stakeholders, collect constructive feedback and incorporate them into the reform agenda for its further improvement,

(3) Form a separate unit or department of assessment comprising of experts, educators, MOE representatives, representatives of teachers' associations, private school owners to bridge the reformers and the stakeholders, and more importantly, to continuously monitor the reform process until it gets institutionalized.

In addition to these factors, as suggested by the findings, one of the most dominant conditional factors that could determine the success or failure of the reform is the driver of change presented by the reformers. Many participants, especially educators, experts, professors express suspect that whether or not the drive for change shown by the supreme authority remains the same. Justifying their suspicion, they contend that there has been plenty of evidence that owing to the political instability and frequently changing governments, the officials/bureaucrats are unable to hold their portfolio for a long time. Resultantly, the newly appointed officials may not have the same drive for the change. In many cases, as suggested by the participants, the newly appointed bureaucrat endorses a different model of change in their interest or in the interest of the political parties which appointed him/her. Shaukat's (2013) study on an educational reform initiative in Pakistan has also explored similar findings. In his study, Shaukat (2013) states that political instability and political interference interfered significantly with the implementation process. He adds frequent changes in the position of ministry officials, secretaries and project directors also was evidenced, with allegiance towards their work.

3.1.2 Roles of district education officer. The findings reveal that the actual local implementers comprise the 75 district education officers, with the responsibility of implementing the reform under the instruction of the MOE. Alternatively put, the district education officers essentially deal with the schools on a regular basis in order to implement the reform. Majority of the participants believe that the reform would advance in a right course if the districts properly conveyed the reform message, managed the necessary resources, and established a good rapport with the school administrators, teachers, and the community members. Conversely, the findings suggest that if the district education officers failed to take the reform seriously and sincerely, thereby indicating a lack of their firm commitment from the core of their heart (not only

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fulfilling a ritual) to make the reform successful, the reform would not adopt a definite course.

Educational change theories including Fullan's (2015) theory of change support the findings of the current study. Focusing on the role of the district in a reform process, Fullan (2015) states that it is abundantly clear that if a district is a part of the system, it can play a vital role for better or for worse (p. 113). Further, he states that it is the district, which should support the schools by providing required resources, such as financial, technological, and training to the teachers.

3.1.3 Roles of teachers. The extant literature shows that in any educational reforms, teachers play a central role as protagonists. In fact, the teacher introduces the reform into the classroom for experience and ratification. In Fullan's (2015) words, "Educational change depends on what teachers do and think" (p. 76). Particularly, in the case of assessment reform, a vast number of studies evidence how the teacher's roles have emerged as one of the most powerful determinants of reform success or failure. Highlighting the important roles of teachers in the reform process, Aho, Pitkaren, and Sahlberg (2006) state that the teachers of Finland played significant roles in making the Finish education system reform successful. They went on to say that considering the roles of the teachers in the reform process, before the commencement of the reform, the Finish government managed an in-service teacher training and transformed the existing hiring regulations so that they could hire more qualified teachers. Consequently, the Finish education reform was implemented and institutionalized successfully.

Contrarily, in several studies, the assessment reforms have become unsuccessful or could not meet the set goals of the reform in the lack of teachers' supportive roles or due to teachers' inability to support the reform. Berry (2011) has presented a number of assessment reform attempts (i.e., especially from summative to formative) which have not been reformed as intended due to the teachers' roles. According to Berry, countries like, France, Germany, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, England, and several Asian countries including China, Japan, Korea, underwent such reforms. However, none of the countries mentioned above reformed their assessment system as initially aimed. Highlighting this aspect, Berry (2011) states:

Although the countries mentioned above undertook different initiatives in their assessment reforms, most of them shared one commonality – advocating the use of assessment for learning. With all these good intentions, the results of the reforms showed that there were tensions between government assessment policies and classroom

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assessment practices. Teachers were still inclined very strongly to associate assessment with accountability instead of linking assessment with teaching and learning (p. 93).

The findings of this study concur with the instances presented above because the current study evidence that majority of the participants, except MOE authorities, express that success or failure of this reform, largely, is in the hands of teachers. They believe that if the teachers and their organizations took the reform seriously and worked with full devotion to meet the reform goals, the reform would be materialized. However, they mention a number of constraints, limiting the teachers, such as the need for training, budgetary issues, necessary infrastructures, etc. that might hinder the teachers' efforts.

4. Regular Monitoring and Evaluation

Talking about the technological reform in Dutch secondary education, Brummelhuis (1995, p. 94) attests that in addition to the preparation of requirements and development of the strategic plan, an efficient monitoring system is essential for a successful reform implementation. Stressing the importance of monitoring the implementation process, Brummelhuis (1995) contends that higher the uncertainty about the prediction of the output of innovation or reform, the higher is the monitoring of how well or poorly a change is advancing. Dozens of cases have been evidenced where the reformers have placed great importance on monitoring and evaluation system as part of the reform process. During the preparation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NLNS) in England, the Department for Education and Employment included 'regular monitoring and extensive evaluation' as one of the elements of the implementation strategy (Barber, 2000, cited in Fullan, 2015, p. 159).

As suggested by the findings in this study, another important factor that can hinder the successful implementation of the reform is a regular monitoring and evaluation system necessitated for tracking the reform process. Many participants discuss a number of 'nuts-and-bolts' associated with the reform, which needs to be fixed for a successful implementation of the reform. They attest that implementation of reform is not the end of the process, in fact, it is a commencement of the reform. They go on to express that if the MOE could no continuously monitor the reform process by establishing an effective monitoring and evaluation system, the reform would not be successful.

To conclude this section, there is evidence that the MOE does not seem to use concrete/solid strategic action plan, which is considered as an essential factor for implementing

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the reform. Several conditional factors determine the future of the reform. The supportive roles of the factors could facilitate the reform process and direct the reform to succeed, whereas, in contrast, non-supportive roles of the factors hinder the reform process and direct the reform consequently to failure (Fullan, 2016). One of the important conditional factors discussed in this section is the imperative role of the stakeholders. In other words, the success or failure of this reform mostly depends on the roles of the stakeholders. The other crucial conditional factor discussed in this section is the regular monitoring and evaluation system, which the government un-optimally utilized to make this reform success. Apart from these two major conditional factors, several other factors could play a significant role in making this reform a success. One of them is whether or not the MOE would be able to appropriately address the quandaries resulting from the reform. The other is how the schools and community would perceive the reform. Also, what kind of relationship the MOE would establish with the local implementers and other stakeholders is an important influencing factor. Finally, whether or not the institutional memory (i.e., collective memory) would be used for the reform also could play a significant role in making the reform successful.

The following section discusses those issues and concerns related to the second research question.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

In response to the second research question, ‘*What are the remarkable, resulting issues of the reform, and how have they been addressed for its successful implementation?*’ the results reveal a construct termed as *reform effects*, in addition to several conceptual categories and thematic sub-categories. Section one and two, as presented below, discuss some of the important resulting issues and major recommendations made by the study participants.

SECTION ONE: RESULTING ISSUES

DISCUSSION ON THE RESULTING ISSUES AND CONCERNS

The resulting issues and concerns revealed in the result section will be discussed under the following sub-titles.

- (1) Misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and paradox of the reform
- (2) Condemnation of the reform
- (3) The salient features of the reform
- (4) Analysis of reform impact

(5) Ideal reform model

1. Misinterpretation, Misunderstanding, and Paradox of the Reform

Reform-related literature shows that a large-scale educational reform, even a well-planned reform, results in several misunderstandings and quandaries among the stakeholders. Change theorists and researchers, such as Fullan (2015), Barber (2000), Masters (2013), Brummelhuis (1995), Aho, Pitkaren and Sahlberg (2006) argue that emergence of dilemmas and uncertainties are the typical characteristics of a large-scale change. Fullan (2015) states that any significant innovation if it is to result in change, involves a certain amount of ambiguity, ambivalence, and uncertainty for the individual about the meaning of the change. He goes on to express that an effective implementation embodies the process of clarification.

With regard to this reform, Sharma¹ (2016, July 15) states that a huge number of people have not understood the reformed assessment system properly, thereby resulting in a number of quandaries (p. 1). However, several of the conceptual categories and sub-categories emerged in the present study are different (exception may apply) from those categories and sub-categories found in the literature because of the nature of the reform and other contextual factors. The details are presented in the following sections.

1.1 Misinterpretation and misunderstanding. The findings suggest mainly two unique themes (i.e., rarely found in the extant literature) that were misinterpreted and misunderstood. The two misinterpreted themes emerged from the data are '*the misinterpretation of 'no pass-fail' provision and devaluing the obtained grades*'. These concepts are briefly discussed below.

1.1.1 Misinterpretation of 'no pass-fail' provision. Although this reform was called a giant reform in the history of assessment and testing system in the context of Nepal, the exam patterns (e.g., type of exam questions, exam duration, and other processes of exam administration) continued to remain the same as previous. The *Letter Grading Working Procedure* (the official document of the MOE), has not mentioned what other changes have been introduced, towards the reform. More importantly, there is apparent ambiguity as regards, whether or not the reform is a transition from a pass-fail assessment system to a no pass-fail system.

As suggested by the results, the principal agenda of the reform - a reform from a *pass-fail* to a *no pass-fail* situation (i.e., grade sheets contain no remarks like pass or fail), was misinterpreted. The participants report that many of the students and parents, including a large

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number of the public, took the reform as the total abolition of the *pass-fail* system. As expressed by the participants, it was a common understanding that the grades students got in the SLC exam would not affect the admission process in grade 11 or CTEVT programs. However, things did not proceed as thought. The MOE set a series of admission criteria for grade promotion and vocational courses (see Appendix C). The admission criteria indicate that students with GPA below 1.6 (i.e., below grade D⁺) were not eligible for grade promotion and thus, failed indirectly. This is because, for getting admission in Grade 11 and CTEVT programs, the students have to have at least GPA 1.6. In some cases, a higher GPA is required to choose the courses and programs they like or intend to pursue. For instance, one has to have at least GPA 2 in order to study in the Science stream. On the other hand, the grade descriptors (see Appendix O) printed on the back page of the grade sheet state that grade D and E (below GPA 1.6) denote *insufficient* and *very insufficient*, respectively. Referring to the admission criteria and grade descriptors, many of the participants argue that, in fact, the reformed assessment system is not an absolute *no pass-fail* system. Further, they claim that in reality the failing grades still exist, albeit invisibly.

The participants discuss that the entangled and indirect provision of failing grade was not documented well and timely distributed to the local implementers and schools. Nor did the MOE and the concerned authorities explicate the forthcoming admission criteria to the stakeholders via involving the key stakeholders in the conceptual phase or at the outset of implementation. Many participants claim that several test-takers become the victim of the reform as the admission criteria were made available very late. They express that students and parents, in some cases, even the teachers misinterpreted the assessment reform as an absolute non-failing system due to the lack of timely information.

1.1.2 Devaluing the obtained grade. The other misunderstanding reported by the participants is the misunderstanding of the value of the obtained grades. Specifically, several participants discuss the lack of detailed reform framework, clear guidelines and timely instructions from the MOE and concerned authorities. As such, many of the key stakeholders were unable to ensure the optimal opportunities in order to understand the value of the obtained grades. They express that the preliminary understanding of a vast majority of the stakeholders was that the obtained grade was not important as long as a grade promotion is concerned. The participants argue that the students and parents understood the importance of good grades only when they were rejected by the colleges and CTEVT for admission. By the time students

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understood the value of the obtained grade, it was too late to correct it.

1.2 Paradoxical issues in the reform. As was stated above, a vast number of the reform theories and studies inform that controversies and quandaries are part of the reform process that is essential for changes to happen in a real sense of the word. Discussing educational change, Fullan (2015) states that the smooth implementation is often a sign that not much is changing (p. 72). As such, depending upon nature, purpose, reform context and several other variables, controversies, quandaries, and uncertainties may vary from one reform to another. The main controversial and paradoxical issues, which emerged in this study that might be different from the ones found in the extant literature, are discussed below under separate sub-titles.

1.2.1 Commencement of reform in Grade 10. The findings suggest two schools of thought regarding whether or not it was an appropriate decision to commence the reform in Grade 10. Supporting the commencement of the reform in Grade 10, some of the participants argue that it was the Grade 10 students who were severely affected (e.g., suicide cases, distress, school dropout, etc.) by the high-stakes SLC exam. Further, they argue in favor of an urgent need towards focused interventions to address the problems created by the existing assessment system of the SLC exam, which the government attempted to do. They present another logic to support the commencement of the reform in Grade 10: If the government starts such a significant reform from the grade in which a national level exam is conducted, it creates a substantial national discourse that helps the government to improve further. On the other hand, the opponents argue that implementing such a new concept starting suddenly from Grade 10 (i.e., it was never practiced in the lower and upper level before) resulted in quandaries and problems, which negatively affected future of many of the students.

1.2.2 Interval of 10. The participants in the study also split into two groups regarding interval of ten, as set in the grading system. Many of the participants argue that this interval of ten established in the reformed grading system (i.e., in Grade 10) seems to be unjustifiable and discriminatory. They argue that the huge gap between one grade to another (i.e., the interval of 10) segregates different levels of students (i.e., in terms of their performance) in the same level, which, thus, is not reflective of the actual level of student performance. Student -13 states that this system is not doing justice especially to the high performers. For example, consider, two students, let's say student-A and student-B, who secure 70% and 79%, respectively get the same grade- Grade B', which seems absurd. A large number of participants including school principals

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and teachers also criticize the interval of ten claiming that it cannot reflect/report students' actual performance.

On the other hand, few of the participants including Educator-2 advocate the interval of ten. Educator-2 attests that the interval of ten in the grading system is appropriate and justifiable in the context of Nepal. To justify the interval of ten, he presents two logics. First, the cognitive level of the students belonging to the range of ten, in the context of Nepal, is more or less the same. However, no literature was evidenced (if any) to support this claim. The second logic is that more than the ten-point grading system seems to be clumsy from a practical standpoint. In the reformed assessment system, the teacher of the respective subject provides a numerical score (marks in percentage) to every student for each of the subjects. Subsequently, the OCE converts the obtained marks into letter grades based on the LGWP 2015 guide. Interestingly, there is no cut-off point, i.e., failing grade in the reformed assessment system. If letter grades were provided using a smaller interval (less than 10) for the marks between 0-100, the number of letter grades would significantly increase. Further, Educator-2 argues that they recommended the interval of ten, with the purpose to not make the assessment system clumsy by provisioning dozens of letter grades.

1.2.3 Announcement of programs for the low-grade holders. Few of the participants including the local implementers discuss that the MOE has announced twenty thousand quotas for vocational and technical education as an 'accommodation program' targeting the low-grade holders. Many participants argue that the announced package program has not been materialized yet (i.e., during data collection). They also express that the government's so-called package program (in Principal -5' words) is underway, however, there is no indication of when it would commence. During the interviews, many of the participants raise several questions as to the proposed accommodation program for the low-grade holders. Some of them include:

- (1) Is the MOE planning to set 20 thousand vocational programs exclusively for the low-grade holders? What is the mechanism, which underpins the reservation of these quotas for the low-grade holders? Are 20 thousand quotas sufficient?
- (2) Can the low-grade holders from low-income family afford the vocational education program? Alternatively, would it be free of cost for those who cannot afford it?
- (3) Would the vocational programs be made accessible for the low-grade holders who live in the remote place? If not, would the students be deprived of the programs due to accommodation

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problem even if the programs are offered free of cost.

(4) If the government provides scholarships to the target student, could all the target students get it or the MOE sets quotas? Suppose, if the scholarships are provided to all the target students, would it be sufficient to cover both the tuition fees and accommodation?

The participants argue that the government should have managed such programs (i.e., package program for the vulnerable test-takers) prior to implementing the reform. They criticize the MOE for not being able to start the announced package program even after the publication of the SLC exam results in the reformed assessment system. This situation, in fact, created more quandaries among stakeholders. With this regard, the MOE authorities state that they have been working rigorously in order to accommodate the test-takers with low-grades.

It should be noted that during data collection, these burning questions were, in fact, quite meaningful. However, naturally, by the time this dissertation gets published, these questions might have been meaningless. Having said that the reason for presenting these questions here in this dissertation is to create a discourse or let the readers decide on whether or not such questions should have been answered/addressed before the reform implementation.

1.2.4 Admission criteria for Grade 11 and CTEVT program. The other controversial issue, which emerged from the data is the admission criteria set by the National Examination Board for Grade 11, and by CTEVT for its programs. As stated elsewhere above, the reform was made public (made viral) with the message that the newly reformed assessment system allows all the SLC appeared students to get admitted to the upper level without any obstruction. As per the response, several participants argue that students, parents and many of the other stakeholders understood that the lower grades do not affect the students' access to higher education. On the contrary to this understanding and belief, the NEB and CTEVT set admission criteria just before the publication of the SLC exam results. These apparently contradictory events resulted in a situation, which created a confusing environment.

Similarly, the other quandary revealed by the data is the question of whether the university education is the right of people. Educator-2 expresses that people assume that university education is the right of people. He strongly suggests that this reform (i.e., no pass-fail provision) should not promote the idea that university education is the right of people. Further, he attests that in case, the wrong notion is established, there could be a question mark on the quality of education. And, this is not impossible in the country like Nepal where an

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organizational force is stronger than educators' and experts'.

Discussing the controversy between the elimination of pass-fail provision and the admission criteria for grade promotion, Sharma¹ (2016, July 15) express that the merit-based admission criteria set in grade 11 and CTEVT programs contradict with the elimination of pass-fail system. Further, he argues that the MOE set the contradictory merit-based admission criteria with the fear that a massive change, such as this, might impede the actual change process. Thus, in order to suggest a way out to the contradiction, he argues that the MOE should not set any admission criteria for grade promotion and vocational programs if the essence of the reform is to provide an equal opportunity to all level and type of learners for further studies and advancement. Rather, if there is fear of whether or not the learner has the pre-requisite essential basic knowledge to complete the program or the courses, different types of field-specific entrance exams can be managed by eliminating the admission criteria. Further, he states that the stakeholders must be essentially notified of this provision in advance, as the pre-notice would ensure that the students are accorded sufficient time to prepare themselves for the upcoming entrance exams.

1.2.5 Contradicting reform aim. The findings suggest that one of the reform aims mentioned in the *Letter Grading Working Procedure* (2015), which states that the aim of the reform is 'to enhance student learning,' is contradictory. The participants in the study argue the student learning cannot be enhanced by changing the numerical grading into letter grading, and a pass-fail system into a no pass-fail without any strong supportive measures. Even the MOE official and local implementers do not believe that the reform only can enhance student learning. Some participants shared different views. They express that the reform could diminish student learning as it demotivates the students and eliminates the school and teacher accountability.

Majority of the members of the *Letter Grading Working Procedure* Committee, according to Educator-2, advised the MOE not to include the aim mentioned above. However, despite their advice, it appeared in the final document, intentionally. Expert-4, who is a member of the *Letter Grading Working Procedure* committee, shares an interesting story about the aim of the reform mentioned above. He states:

...we noticed that one of the aims of the reform was to 'enhance student learning.' I told them that this reform could not enhance student learning. Some of the other members of the committee also strongly supported me. In response, one of the CDC authorities told

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us that that was the motto of the government. He insisted that the aim should be included, whether or not the reform enhances student learning. That was not good logic. So, we tried to convince the MOE authority to remove the aim. ...when the final document was publicized, the aim was still there....

Discussing this issue, Sharma¹ (2016, July 15) contended that the assessment system was reformed with the aim of enhancement of the quality of education, but the conversion of numerical grading to letter grading system solely cannot enhance the quality of education.

1.3 Factors contributing to magnifying confusion among stakeholders. Amendment of policy for improvement is a natural process in any large-scale oriented change (Fullan, 2008). However, the literature (e.g., Brummelhuis, 1995; Aho, Pitkaren & Sahlberg, 2006) clearly evidences that a well-planned and prepared educational reform creates minimal quandaries and misunderstandings compared to an unplanned or a weak-planned one. Regarding this particular reform, there are a number of misunderstandings and quandaries as mentioned above. The results point out the following two factors: The amendment of the *Letter Grading Working Procedure*, and uncertainty of eligibility criteria for the government jobs, that contributed to magnifying quandaries among stakeholders.

1.3.1 Amendment of the Letter Grading Working Procedure (LGWP) 2015. The majority of the participants attest that the amendment of the LGWP during academic session created quandaries amongst the stakeholders. They argue that the amendment of the policy after completing the piloting phase was a natural process. They, further add that if the MOE or CDC amended the LGWP after the completion of one session (not in the middle of the academic session), the reform would not result in such a huge number of quandaries. Further, they contend that the MOE demonstrated a continual alteration in their preliminary decisions one after another, due to the duress of organizations (e.g., PABSON, teacher organizations, student union) during the academic session. For instance, when the reform was implemented, they state that no admission criteria was instated, however, later the admission criteria were introduced. In addition, the MOE also amended the admission criteria a couple of times.

The report of the feedback committee formed under the chairmanship of Bhaskar Datta Panta (see page 43 under *Report of Feedback Committee* for detail) justifies that the reform created a confusion among the stakeholders. The report shows a total of 1,315 Grade 10 graduates could not meet the admission criteria set by the NEB, and thus were enrolled in Grade

11 in the different parts of the country.

1.3.2 Uncertainty of eligibility criteria for the government jobs. The other factors revealed by the data that magnified quandaries among stakeholders is the uncertainty of eligibility criteria for the government jobs. The Public Service Commission is the only government employer in the country, which is responsible for supplying capable human resources to the government through written and oral exams (official website of PSC). The results show that the PSC has not yet set any criteria for the SLC completed candidates. The PSC authority also accepts this fact. Many of the participants raise the following questions: What would be the government job application criteria for those who appeared in the SLC exam and scored considerably lower grades? Could anybody, regardless of their SLC grades, apply for the government job posting? Alternatively, would there be any barrier for the low-grade holders? Several similar questions have increased the quandaries among the stakeholders. Many of the participants argue that the MOE and under agencies had to resolve these issues before implementing the assessment reform.

2. Condemnation/Criticism of the Reform: What are the Major Reform Related Criticisms?

The literature on assessment and educational reform shows that, as stated elsewhere earlier, criticism is part of the change process without which a real and meaningful change scarcely happens. Put another way; it is necessary to understand that any large-scale educational reform or change is associated with many uncertainties, criticism or condemnation, and the constructive criticisms can contribute excessively to institutionalizing the change. This notion is well expressed in the following indented excerpt by Fullan (2015):

Assume that conflict and disagreement are not only inevitable but fundamental to successful change. Since any group of people possesses multiple realities, any collective change attempt will necessarily involve conflict. ...all successful efforts of significance, no matter how well planned, will experience an implementation dip in the early stages (p. 72).

Similarly, several reform theorists (Maurer, 1996; Heifetz, 1994; Fullan, 2015) argue that resistance to change or reform can be instructive and beneficial for a successful implementation of the reform. With this regard, Maurer (1996) discusses:

Often those who resist have something important to tell us. We can be influenced by

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them. People resist what they view as good reasons. They may see alternatives we never dreamed of. They may understand problems about the minutiae of implementation that we never see from our lofty perch atop Mount Olympus (cited in Fullan, 2015, p. 66)

The findings reveal several criticisms, which for study purposes are condensed into four major thematic categories: Unclear official document, pushing students into limbo, lack of empirical study on suitability and sustainability, and the irrational relation between the subject and discipline of study. These condemnations are briefly discussed below.

2.1 Unclear official document. Almost all the participants, except those participants who were involved in preparing the document, as per the responses, shared a criticism of the MOE official document. As expressed by the participants, owing to the fact that the type of assessment reform in Nepal was a new phenomenon; the stakeholders, particularly implementers were seeking a sound official document from the MOE that could explain the entire process of the reform. Contrary to their expectations, they express that no comprehensive document was found and even the short document was found to be vague as regards deliverables. Many of them highlighted the reform aims as regards the unclear official document. Although there is not any mentionable literature to support the opinions of the participants, the differences between the aims mentioned in the MOE's official document and as reported by the participants, justify that the reform document was confusing. Moreover, the differences between the aims of the reform as mentioned in the MOE's document and the aims reported by the MOE's official (in the interview) who played a key role in making the document support the participants' claims strongly.

2.2 Pushing students into limbo. Majority participants, except the MOE official and a few of the local implementers, express their anxiety that the reform has baffled many of the low performers. As stated elsewhere above, students misunderstood the reform as an absolute non-failing system and automatic grade promotion. Due to such misunderstanding, the low performers failed to see any necessity of improving their grades. In Educator-1's words, the reform posits many of the students into limbo as neither they re-wrote the exam assuming the reform as a no pass-fail system, nor did they get an opportunity to get admitted to the next level due to their low-grades. Having said that some of the participants including MOE official, local implementers, experts, and professors contend that this problem would be resolved by the increase in the reform literacy.

2.3 Lack of empirical study on the suitability and sustainability of the reform. Many participants expressed that the reform commenced without any empirical study on the reform suitability and sustainability. They express that Nepal was seeking reform in the existing education system. As shown by the findings, the previous research reports pointed out the necessity of assessment reform; but none of them presented details of the assessment reform. The participants argue that the MOE should facilitate the undertaking of an empirical study before commencing the reform focusing on whether or not the present condition of resources (human, technical and financial) and infrastructures are sufficient to initiate the reform. Further, they attest that such a study could instruct them on what kind of reform was suitable for the Nepalese education system, and what should be done immediately in order to make the reform successful and sustainable. They express that such a study could have provided a clear roadmap to the government and the other stakeholders. Sharma¹'s (2016, July 15) account also is in support of this finding. He argues that a lack of *stocktaking type* of study was evident, which essentially is an imperative part of commencement of a new type of reform such as this.

2.4 Irrational relation between the subject and the discipline of study. The other widely criticized issue with regard to this reform is the relation between the subject and the discipline of the study depicted in the admission criteria for Grade 11 and CTEVT programs. Before the implementation of the assessment reform, some streams and vocational programs, such as in Science stream, Nursing, Engineering etc. did have admission criteria. For instance, only the students having at least second division marks in aggregate with 50% or above marks in English and Mathematics could be eligible to apply in the Science stream.

A vast majority of the participants state that the admission criteria for Grade 11 and CTEVT programs were re-set (i.e., in the reformed assessment system) without any research and convincing rationales. Presenting examples from the admission criteria, many of them question why a student who has had a grade D (i.e., one must have to have D⁺ in Math to study Mass Communication) in Math cannot study Mass Communication. Moreover, they also question why one has to have at least a grade D⁺ in the Nepali language in order to get admitted to Science stream in Grade 11. They argue that as the medium of instruction in Science stream is English, a strong relation between Nepali language and Science stream could be negated. They attest that the admission criteria were made without any in-depth analysis and exploration of the relation between the subject and the study discipline. They highlight a need for detailed research and

investigation of such criteria.

3. Salient Features/Opportunities of the Reform: What are the Strengths of the Reform?

While several participants express several quandaries and condemnations in relation to this reform, almost all the participants admit that there are some salient features of this reform. The commonly shared salient features of this reform are: End of 'iron gate,' end of stigma, collaborative learning, minimizing unfair competition and grade increment exam. These features will be discussed briefly in the following section, under separate sub-titles.

3.1 End of 'Iron Gate.' One of the salient features revealed by the findings is that in the newly reformed assessment system of the SLC exam, the grade sheet does not contain concluding remarks, such as pass or fail. Despite their controversial opinions (i.e., due to admission criteria), almost all the participants admitted that the reform from a pass-fail to a no pass-fail system is a gigantic move in the educational history of Nepal. The results suggest that the reform has ended the so-called 'Iron Gate' (nickname of the SLC exam), which was established about eighty years ago. In the past, annually, more than 50% of the SLC appeared students on average could not pass the SLC exam (Mathema & Bista, 2006). In the reformed assessment system, no student is labeled as pass or fail. Before the reform, unless one secured at least 32% marks in all eight subjects, the student could not be eligible for admission to Grade 11 and vocational programs. However, in the reformed assessment system, a student securing GPA 1.6 is not restricted to enroll in Grade 11 and vocational programs irrespective, considerably low marks in a couple of subjects. It means that compared to the previous, this assessment system seems to be more flexible.

While the reform was condemned by many of the participants and non-participant stakeholders via articles and mass media, all of them accept that this reform has ended the so-called 'iron gate' that was established about eighty years ago.

3.2 End of the stigma attached to the SLC exam failure. The other salient feature suggested by the findings of this study is the end of the stigma attached with the SLC exam. A study conducted by Bhattarai (2014) shows that academic success is directly associated with the prestige and face of the test-takers, their family members, and their schools. The participants in his study contend that it has been a socially acceptable phenomenon to regard an SLC failure, ironically, as an illiterate person. Further, they add that after failing the SLC exam, a person's basic abilities used to be questioned and his/her personality was evaluated negatively. Due to this

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reason, the SLC failure used to be equated with a failure in life. With regards to this study, all the participants express that after this reform, none of the SLC exam takers is labeled as the failure and due to which he/she feels self-humiliation.

3.3 Conception of collaborative learning. Many participants including experts, professors, principals and teachers in this study believe that the reform would promote a collaborative learning environment as it minimizes unfair competition among the students. The results report that the newly introduced letter grading system eradicated the ranking system, which used to divide every student into different categories based on their performance in the exam. The participants in the study argue that the culture of competition among the classmates (i.e., to be first in the class or District) prevented many of them from sharing knowledge, ideas and experiences among their competitors (i.e., among equally talented) with the fear of being defeated. They attest that students learn much more in a collaborative learning environment than in the competitive, due to the associated benefits of sharing each other's knowledge, understanding and experiences.

Emphasizing what should the education of the 21st century look like, Noddings (2013) states that now it is time to replace the competitive education convention with collaborative education convention. He further elaborates that education in the 21st century should direct people towards such a world where people from different parts of the globe will be able to work together with cooperation, communication, and critical open-mindedness. Like Noddings (2013), the participants in the study express that collaborative learning is more effective in the enhancement of student learning, and moreover, it helps to build a global community where there is a feeling of pure friendship and brotherhood. As expressed in the newspaper articles and electronic media by experts and educators, however, it would be too early to conclude that the current reform would help to develop a collaborative learning environment.

3.4 Minimizing unfair competition among schools and colleges. Majority of the participants highlight an unhealthy and unfair competition among the schools and colleges that results in negative consequences on the student psychology and learning. In the past, school administrators, teachers, parents and students used to feel enormous pressure for better exam results. Further, they argue that it has polluted the whole academic environment by transforming the educational institution from a service-oriented organization to a business-oriented. They express that this reform would minimize such unfair and unhealthy competition among the

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private schools and colleges as the letter grading system does not provide a merit-based list (board first, second, third, etc.) of the SLC exam appeared students. The rationale is that due to the lack of a ranking system, the school and college owners are restricted from advertising the student scores to lure students for admission. However, some of the experts and educators seem to be still skeptical that the reform could minimize such unfair competition. They express that the schools and colleges are advertising much more than previous as the grading system has, in fact, provided them with a scope to misinterpret and manipulate the results in their way.

3.5 Grade increment exam. Many of the participating experts, educators, professors, and implementers claim that a grade increment exam provisioned in the reformed assessment system is one of the new phenomena that has rarely been practiced in assessment system in Nepal. The results show that the students with grade C or below (below GPA 1.6) up to two subjects got an opportunity to increase their grades (if they were interested) within the same academic year in 2016. As of 2017, the provision has been amended, wherein, all the interested students with grade C or below (below GPA 1.6) can get an opportunity to increase their grades (NEB website, 2017). The participants express that it has proved to be a stepping stone for those students who could not perform well in the previous exam due to sickness or other unfavorable and unavoidable circumstances. As argued by several participants, the grade increment exam can help minimize student's stress during the exam period and resultantly, they can perform well.

4. Analysis of Reform Impact: What are the Positive and Negative Impacts of the Reform?

As mentioned somewhere else earlier, reform is a process rather than a snapshot phenomenon and it may take 3-5 years to implement any of the reforms completely (Fullan, 2015), and moreover, it may take a higher number of years to assess its overall impact on the test-takers and the entire education system. In fact, it is too early to analyze the impact of the reform as the reform was just implemented in the year 2016. In other words, it might take a couple of years more to explore the actual impact of the reform.

Nevertheless, some of the participants, especially experts, educators, school principals, teachers discuss some of the possible impacts of the reform. Based on their perception, understanding, knowledge, and experiences, the participants present the following two types of reform impacts: Positive and negative. This primarily implies that the principal basis of the reform impact mentioned below is the perception of the participants. As the nature of the reform is different from rest of the assessment reforms as evident around the world, a few rare studies

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and theories support the findings of the current study. With the help of available documents and resources, both the positive and negative impact of the reform perceived by the participants are discussed below.

4.1 Positive impact. Majority of the participants discuss the following three major positive impacts: Drop off the SLC exam related fraud and distress on examinees, an increase of self-confidence of the low performers, and improvement of livelihood of the SLC graduates.

4.1.1 Drop off the SLC exam related fraud and distress. A vast majority of the participants claim that the exam related frauds, such as cheating, hiring exam writer, helping the test-takers by supplying answers, leaking questions before the exam date, etc. have significantly been dropped off or curtailed after the reform implementation. Similarly, referring to newspapers and mass media, they state an apparent decrease in the SLC exam result-induced suicides in 2016. They conclude that the reform has contributed extensively towards minimizing the student distress as the number of SLC exam result-induced suicides has remarkably decreased since the implementation of the reform in 2016. Rationalizing why the exam frauds and student distress dropped off after the reform, they argue that the reform has ended the stigma attached to the SLC exam failure. They reiterated that the provision inculcated a belief in the key stakeholders, such as, students, parents, that the reform has lowered the stakes of the SLC exam (i.e., that was the mass understanding). Thus, with the lowering of the stakes of the SLC exam, the focus shifted from the SLC results as an issue of prestige and face towards learning, and moreover, none had to be stigmatized as an SLC failure.

However, some of the participants seem to be skeptical as to whether or not the reform has lowered the stakes of the SLC exam. They argue that there are so many 'ifs and buts' attached to this reform (i.e., admission criteria, lack of vocational and skill-based programs for low-grade holders, etc.) that made them cynical.

4.1.2 Increase of self-confidence of the low performers. The other positive impact of the reform reported by the majority of the participants, however not by all, is the increase in confidence amongst the low performers. They attest that the reform has ended the examinees' fear of being stigmatized as an SLC failure and increased the possibilities of access to higher education and vocational education despite their low grades in a couple of subjects. Many of the participants believe that this situation helps the low performers develop a sense of self-confidence and, in fact, equips them with an opportunity to identify themselves as who they are.

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On the contrary, other participants disagree with the notion mentioned above, which states that the admission criteria set in Grade 11 and CTEVT programs have increased disappointment amongst the low performers, in addition to panic. The participants argue that the change of only replacing the numerical grades with the letter grades, and not writing pass-fail on the grade sheet, cannot impact an increase in the self-confidence of the low performers. They highlight a need for supportive alternative package programs for the low performers to increase their self-confidence.

4.1.3 Improvement of livelihood of people. Many participants including MOE official express their belief that the reform, which is believed to increase access to higher education, would contribute to improving the livelihood of people. This can be achieved in two ways: First, it has provided the weak students with the opportunity to join in higher education in the area of their interest and aptitude even if one has considerably poor marks in some of the subjects. They express that this *one subjective certification* provision would contribute to an increase in the number of white-collar employment for the students. Second, the reform has provisioned to provide sufficient vocational education and skill-oriented programs (although not materialized yet) to those who have low grades and cannot access higher education. They discuss that this would also help to increase the number of white-collar employment opportunities. Referring to the research studies, they contend that this reform would help to produce more professionals as compared to the past. Hence, it can be safely inferred that if the reform contributes to increasing people's access to education and vocational programs, there is no doubt that the reform helps to increase the livelihood of people. Research studies have also shown that on average, educated people earn much more than the uneducated and as such, the increase in the education level corresponds with an increase in income of people (Hofstede, 2010).

4.2 Negative impact. Several participants express that the reform not only results in positive impacts but also in some significant negative impacts. Even many of the implementers including MOE authorities accept that it may advance negative impact temporarily. However, they are hopeful that it would soon be resolved once the reform gets fully implemented. The negative impact mentioned by the participants include *loss of student motivation and hard-working trend, loss of responsibility and accountability, and the fear of decreasing the quality of education.*

4.2.1 Loss of student motivation and hard-working trend. Many participants criticize the

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reform stating that this reform demotivates students from working hard. They argue that this reform demotivates not only the low performers but also the high performers, attributing it to the lack of a failing grade and ranking system, which, in fact, motivated the students to perform better. Many participants question as to why one has to work harder in order to pass the exam, in absence of a failing grade. Further, they question as to why one has to work harder for obtaining a good position in the class or district or nation if there is no ranking system.

Many participants including Educator-2 accept that this reform might demotivate students from working hard temporarily. They also express their belief that such a situation would change as the stakeholders understand the value of grades and the essence of no pass-fail provision. Whatever the reasons are- whether it is due to the misunderstanding of the reform essence or other transition-related issues, the data indicate an apparent decrease in the student motivation.

4.2.2 Loss of responsibility and accountability. One of the condemnations expressed by many of the participants is the danger of loss of responsibility and accountability. The extant literature informs that the supporters of high-stakes testing believe that a high-stakes test/exam makes schools and teachers responsible and accountable for the student performance (Mathema & Bista, 2007; Signorino, 2007; Minarechová, 2012). In this regard, Volante (2005) states that holding individual teachers, schools, and districts accountable for student performance continues to be a central feature of educational reform throughout the Western world. Regarding this reform, many of the participants discuss that the reform, which superficially abolished a pass-fail system, leads to an environment, wherein, neither the schools nor the teachers should be accountable for student performance. The participants argue that many of the teachers in Nepal, however, not all, hold a side business or are involved in politics (directly or indirectly), in addition to their primary job. And consequently, the teachers would easily become unaccountable for the student performance in case the pass-fail system is abolished.

4.2.3 Fear of decreasing the quality of education. Some of the educators, experts, professors, principals, teachers, representative of teachers' organizations, and school and college owners express their concerns that the concept of unobstructed grade promotion provisioned in the reform document affects the quality of education in the long run. Referring to the extant literature, they argue that the stakes of the test ensure the accountability and responsibility of the schools and teachers towards student performance. Also, as such, the teachers encourage students to work harder in order to secure their academic career. Further, they express that as

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planned if the no pass-fail system is to be continued up to Grade 12, one could easily estimate the quality of school education. They raise a question on as to how the international community would evaluate the quality of school education of Nepal. Nevertheless, as mentioned somewhere else, some of the intellectual participants, such as educators, experts, school principals, teachers discuss that the reform has nothing to do with the quality of education. They imply that neither it enhances students learning and the quality of education as envisioned in the policy document nor does it decrease the quality of education. With this regard, Sharma¹ (2016, July 15) attested that the MOE seems to aim to increase the quality of education in school education system via this reform, but the conversion of the numerical grading system into the letter grading solely cannot meet the desired aims (p. 3).

As mentioned in the result section, some of the participants discuss that the reform impacted the stakeholders, especially students a bit differently, attributing to the type of school (i.e., whether it is a private or a public school), location of the school (i.e., whether it is situated in an urban or rural area), and performance level of the examinees (i.e., whether the examinee is high performer or a low performer). As shown by the study findings, the reform seemed to be much more beneficial to the public schools and the low performers as the public schools had been criticized for a low pass percentage for years.

5. Ideal Reform Model: Was the Reform Demand of the Time?

Many participants, especially the educators, experts, representative of school and teacher organizations, principals and teachers discuss that the present reform was not the type of reform, which, in fact, Nepal had been seeking for years. They express that, as mentioned earlier, this reform includes only two types of changes in the existing assessment system in the SLC exam: The transition from a numerical grading to the letter grading along with GPA and descriptors, and a pass-fail system to a no pass-fail. They point out the following three types of changes, which, Nepal was necessarily seeking in school education system for years.

5.1 Need for educational changes. Changes in the education sector cannot be an exception to this changing world. Almost all the educational institutions throughout the world have experienced different types of reforms including the assessment system reform. As mentioned by Berry (2011), over the last few decades, waves of assessment reforms have been evident around the world. Referring to the changes taking places around the world, many of the participants in this study suggest that this reform is incomplete and partial as it cannot address

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the problems and challenges attached to the modern school education in Nepal. They argue that although this reform attempts to address a few of the assessment related issues, the decades-old curriculum and pedagogy have been used as it is for years. They contend that the agenda for the reform should have been an entire educational change, i.e., a complete change of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. They question how this reform could be justified without changing the decades-old curriculum and classroom pedagogy. They also suggest the MOE should introduce such changes from the beginning to the end of school education (i.e., Grade 1 to Grade 12).

5.2 Assessment of multi-abilities. One of the significant issues suggested by the findings is that the present reform is not the one Nepal was seeking for years, in order to address multiple problems resulting from the traditional assessment system. Majority of participants express that the present reform is a progressive step in the endeavor of reforming the assessment system to fulfill the demand of the 21st-century model assessment in the context of Nepal. They argue that the MOE has only changed the reporting system from percentile to a letter grading and a pass-fail to a no pass-fail system. Further, they state that in the reformed system, the curriculum, methodology, exam administration and marking system continue to remain the same as previous. The findings suggest a total reform of the existing assessment system that could not only minimize the educational loss but also enhance students learning and more importantly precisely evaluate the multi-talent and skills of the test-takers.

They recommend the MOE to develop such an assessment system that could help the schools and teachers to identify the individual's unique talents and skills. Within the assessment system, multiple assessment tools, such as classroom observation, project work, practicum or on-field task or fieldwork, etc. can be employed for optimal application. Such assessment tools could contribute towards flourishing the different qualities of the students.

5.3 Internal formative assessment with remedial classes. The extant literature informs that there have been waves of assessment reform from summative to formative assessment around the world. Highlighting this wave, Airasian (1991), Mavrommatis (1995), Tunstall and Gipps (1996a) state that in many countries, educators are currently showing an increased interest in the formative dimension of assessment in the classroom (cited in Mavrommatis, 1997, p. 381). A plea for formative assessment in classrooms has become a common denominator in academic publications in all sorts of forums across the different countries, and likewise across different

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educational cultures (Remesal, 2007, p. 27). It means that formative assessment has been a common fashion in academia with the belief that it contributes to enhancing student learning. A vast majority of participants in this study also point out an urgent need for formative assessment in the school education system in Nepal. They discuss that the present reform should have been geared to align with formative assessment, but unfortunately, it did not happen. It has been proven worldwide that a formative assessment can enhance the student learning. They argue that although the reformers have been advocating this reform as a giant leap in the field of student assessment, it fails to apparently cross the boundary of the summative assessment. It is a reform of a reporting system for the SLC exam from a summative assessment with a pass-fail system to the same one (i.e., summative) with a no pass-fail (i.e., seemingly). The no pass-fail provision has many 'nuts and bolts' to be fixed. They attest that this reform could address only a few of the problems and challenges of the present school education as currently followed. The major issues and challenges, such as how to enhance student learning, provide whole-person-education, provide skill-based and talent-based education, and increase the quality of education seem to still remain unsolved. They also recommend the concerned authorities to manage remedial classes in every school for the low performers as many students fall under this category due to socio-economic condition, geographical variation and language barrier (i.e., as more than hundred languages are spoken as mother tongue in Nepal). Such remedial classes are believed to help the marginalized students enter the mainstream arena of education and subsequently employment.

To sum up, section one under the second research question has focused on the issues and concerns that emerged after implementing the assessment system reform. The issues and concerns include misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and paradox of the reform, condemnation of the reform, the salient features of the reform, analysis of reform impact, and ideal reform model. The findings have suggested the concerned authority to take cognizance of the critical albeit constructive criticisms and undertake necessary actions to address them before it is too late.

SECTION TWO: STEP FORWARD

Step Forward: What are the Further Steps that the Reformers should Undertake?

The intellectual participants, such as educators, experts, school and college owners, representatives of teacher's associations, school principals, teachers, recommended the reformers and the concerned authorities take some immediate decisive action to address some of the

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challenges resulting from implementation of the reform. They recommended the following nine principal issues that should be addressed for the successful implementation of the reform. The nine issues, which are discussed below, are:

- (1) Clarification and information session
- (2) Vocational and technical education
- (3) Use of constructive feedback
- (4) Resource management
- (5) Compatibility of the practical and theoretical marks
- (6) Stream transfer program
- (7) Capacity building program
- (8) Need for an assessment unit
- (9) Use of rubric

1. Clarification and information session. The findings indicate that many of the stakeholders misunderstood the reform essence, i.e., the reform purpose, procedures, and provisions. For instance, some of the key stakeholders (e.g., such as students and parents, and in some cases even teachers) misunderstood the reform as a non-failing automatic grade promotion provision. In fact, as indicated by the data, it does not seem to be a total abolition of the pass-fail system. The continuation of admission criteria in Grade 11 and CTEVT programs, instead implies a lack of alternative programs for the ones deprived of admission in Grade 11 and CTEVT programs due to low grades in the SLC exam, as such the reformed assessment system could not be an absolute non-failing system. The results reveal that misunderstanding the reform as an absolute non-pass-fail system was the most significant misunderstanding that severely impacted the majority of the low performers. The other misunderstanding found among many of the students was the misinterpretation of the value of the grade they got in the SLC exam. As indicated by the data, many students stopped working hard for their study (however, no data are presented/available) assuming a lack of any significant difference between the higher and lower grade in the non-failing automatic grade promotion system. Again, it was not the case in practicality as the merit-based (i.e., based on GPA) scholarship opportunities and admission criteria still continues to exist in the renowned higher secondary schools (as of 2017, secondary schools) and colleges.

The participants, mainly, the educators, experts, professors, principals, teachers,

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representatives of teachers' organizations, school and college owners, highlight an urgent need of information campaign to overcome the misunderstanding and quandaries resulting from the reform. They suggest the concerned authorities manage sufficient information sessions throughout the country, with the purpose to inform all the stakeholders. Moreover, warning the concerned authorities, they attest that the more the reformers delay issuing a clarification of the associated misunderstanding and quandaries, the greater number of students would be victimized.

2. Vocational and technical education. An urgent need for vocational and technical education is one of the significant issues, which becomes evident in the collated data. A vast majority of participants, especially experts, professors, educators, representative of organizations (e.g., NTA, NNTA, PABSON, N-PABSON) criticize the MOE and concerned authorities for not being able to manage vocational and technical education for the low-grade holders prior to reform implementation. They argue that if the MOE intended to deter educational loss practically, they should have managed a sufficient number of vocational and technical institutions targeting the potential talents and skills the low-grade holders possess. They claim that this initiative was not undertaken before implementing the reform. Indicating the admission criteria and the MOE's initiative, they question as to what the low-grade holders would do if they could not join in Grade 11 and study vocational programs due to their low grades. They highly recommend the MOE and the concerned authorities to establish vocational and technical institutions, on an expedited basis, mainly targeting the low-grade holders. They also suggest the MOE make it affordable and accessible for all, and most importantly the programs and courses should be designed based on the local market needs. This would, they argue, help to promote the livelihood of people and develop the positive attitude towards vocational education. Furthermore, highlighting on how education, particularly vocational education opens up opportunities for individuals and also groups to achieve greater access to labor markets and livelihoods, Goel (2011, August 17) states that countries with higher and better levels of knowledge and skills respond more effectively and promptly to the challenges and opportunities associated with globalization in the education space.

The findings suggest a couple of challenges attached to the vocational education. First, vocational education in Nepal is considered as second-class education, i.e., the kind of education chosen by the weak students or low performers. As presented by some of the participants, the

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reason behind the negative connotation of vocational education is the lower paid jobs. Sharing their views, the participants express that the graduates from the academic institutions can get a higher paid job than the ones graduated from the vocational institutions. Second, vocational education is out of reach for several of the low-income families as it is expensive in Nepal. As evolved from the data, the majority of the low grade-holders come from the low-income families. Correspondingly, the participants argue that the limited number of scholarships provided by the MOE is insufficient in comparison to a large number of low-grade holders. Third, vocational institutions are located or confined only within few cities (i.e., not spread throughout the country based on geographical structure) and this, in turn, forces students to leave their home for the study, which could not be possible to many of the students due to financial reason.

3. Collection and use of constructive feedback. As indicated by the findings, feedback from the experts, educators and other stakeholders can prove to be one of the most effective measures that could contribute towards making the reform successful. Many participants, other than the reformers, moreover argue that the hurriedly implemented reform could take its right course only when the reformers collect exhaustive feedback from experts, educators, and stakeholders and incorporate the same within the implementation plan. Similarly, the participating reformers also mention that collection and use of constructive feedback for its fully-fledged implementation was part of the reform process, i.e., the MOE official calls it a '*strategic plan.*'

Although the NEB formed a three-membered committee meaning to collect feedback, the report prepared by the committee revolves around the admission criteria and the student enrollment in Grade 11 (see page 43 for details). Alternatively put, the committee's report did not include an exhaustive feedback as expressed/hoped by the participants that could, in fact, contribute towards the facilitation and improvement of the entire reform process. This study suggests the reformers to form a separate committee with the purpose to collect feedback.

4. Resource management. The results suggest that the other important step, which the reformers should undertake immediately is the resource management. Many participants express that the reform will meet its targeted goals only when the reformers manage skilled and trained human resources (e.g., experts, trained school superintendents, etc.), necessary technical resources (e.g., internet, computer, etc.) and financial support necessary for implementing and further developing the reform. Discussing on resource management, Shaukat (2013) states that

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the appointment of an information broker or specialist to help participants and provide support on a regular basis seems necessary, particularly at the beginning stages of implementation. As mentioned under 'Limitation,' the MOE official and other implementers also accept that they still lack human, technical and financial resources. The findings indicate that resource management seems to be one of the challenges for the MOE and under agencies.

5. Compatibility of practical and theoretical marks. The findings suggest that a huge discrepancy between the theory and practical exam scores in the same subject (i.e., high grade in the practical exam and considerably low grade in theory) should be optimally addressed by making the teachers responsible and accountable. The participants, who raised this issue, argue that if this situation further continues in the reformed assessment system (as it existed for decades in the previous system as well), the reform would become meaningless, i.e., just a conversion of percentile to a letter grade assessment. For this, the participants recommend the MOE to train the teachers and ask them to use the rubric and establish some sorts of standards while assessing students in the practical exams.

6. Stream transfer program. In the present education system, students after the SLC exam, either join the university or a vocational education program. Some of the participants argue that after implementing the reform, there is an increased likelihood that the negative connotation attached with the vocational education would change and the student enrollment in the vocational institutions would subsequently increase. In this scenario, a large number of students might be enrolled in the vocational streams. The participants express that the higher the increase in the number of students enrolling in the vocational stream, the more is the imperativeness of a stream transfer program (a two-way track for transferring the students from vocational to academic stream and vice versa). They recommend the MOE and under agencies to develop a two-way track for transferring from one stream to another. They attest that if the MOE develops such two-way track, the enrollment in the vocational education programs increases.

7. Capacity building program. As stated above, the participants contend that the weakly prepared and hurriedly implemented reform lack the optimal use of trained and skilled human resources. Discussing on further steps the reformers should immediately take, the participants state that the MOE and concerned authorities should manage special programs focusing on capacity building, such as special training programs for personnel, resource persons, school administrators and teachers who are, in fact, the true reform implementers. The extant literature

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also suggests that no reforms (huge change like this) have become successful without the cognizance of capacity building programs (Fullan, 2001, p. 11). Such programs can, either be completed before commencement of the reform, which is more common or during the process of implementation. Shaukat (2013) also highlights the importance of training in the change process. She states that entire staff operating at different levels should be given appropriate training and professional development. Further, she adds that training is a change-management strategy, which is well supported by the literature (e.g., Hultman, 1998; Maurer, 1996). For successful implementation of the reform, Sharma¹ (2016, July 15) also stresses on the teacher training programs. He states that as the teachers are the key implementers for the reform, they should be well-equipped with the theoretical and practical knowledge.

8. Need for an evaluation and assessment unit. Many of the participants opined that the MOE and under agencies, which bear the responsibility of performing multiple tasks, cannot handle the reform correctly in the right direction. They contend that the reform is just a beginning of a huge work, not an end. There is a lot more to be done for its successful implementation and institutionalization. To perform this enormous responsibility, the participants suggest the MOE should establish a separate unit of evaluation and assessment that could make this reform successful. Further, they suggest the MOE should appoint evaluation and assessment experts as the member of the unit and provide them with the necessary resources and support. Sharma¹, (2016, July 15) also stresses the need for a separate and powerful unit of evaluation and assessment. He argues that such a unit could not only make this reform successful but also introduce necessary changes in the assessment system in order to make it an ideal 21st-century model assessment system.

9. Use of rubrics. Suggesting the concerned authorities, many participants including the experts and educators express that it is imperative to use rubrics in an assessment system in a single high-stakes summative assessment system to assess student performance. Educator-2 and other participants strongly recommend the MOE and under agencies to make the use of rubrics mandatory in the assessment of student performance. They argue that the use of rubrics would not be only useful for marking the theory papers but also for the practical assessment. This is because the rubrics can guide the teachers for defining what should be the performance or skill level of a student in order to get certain grades or marks. Further, they argue that this initiative would help minimize the discrepancy between the scores in practical and theory exam. Sharma²

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(2016, July 15) has also pointed out a need for rubrics in assessing the student performance. Further Sharma² (2016, July 15) states that the use of rubric not only guides the teachers in an easy and accurate marking of the student performance but also helps in increasing reliability and validity of the test results and decreasing inter-rater reliability.

The essence of discussion of this section can be summed up in this way. The implementation of the reform has been challenging due to a lack of exhaustive preparation, a robust action plan, and necessary resources. The resulted issues, such as misinterpretation, misunderstanding, paradox, etc., have been hurdles to the reform implementation. Such issues have to be addressed immediately in order to stop precipitation of any further harm to the test-takers. More importantly, the reformers should take into account some of the genuine criticisms and possible harmful reform impacts attached to this reform and attempt to optimally resolve them. On top of these issues, this study has recommended some few more prospective steps that the reformers and implementers should take in order to make the reform successful.

ESSENCE OF DISCUSSIONS ON FINDINGS

As stated earlier, the main purpose of this study was to develop a *substantive* (i.e., a theory that provides a theoretical interpretation or explanation for a particular area) grounded theory of the assessment reform of the SLC exam that explicates a complete process of the assessment reform in Nepal. The introduction section provided an overview of the global assessment reform movement and highlighted the context of the assessment reform of the SLC exam. The literature review and methodology sections contributed to situating this study within the extant literature and presented a methodological framework for this study. The results section methodically organized all the thematic sub-categories, conceptual categories, and the construct in order to describe the assessment reform process. A huge number of relevant quotations from the participants were used to support the categories and sub-categories. In some cases, the reformers and the other stakeholders including experts and educators shared their contradictory views on several reform-related issues. In such situations, quotations from both sides were used maximally possible. Finally, the discussion section presented considerations on the findings, which were presented in the order of the reform process (i.e., initial phase, implementation phase, and post-implementation phase) by re-organizing the constructs, categories, and sub-categories under the research questions. In the discussion section, the extant literature was

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extensively used in order to analyze (i.e., compare and contrast) the study findings.

In fact, this section has explicitly presented a synopsis of the complete process of the assessment reform of the SLC exam. In addition to the process related aspects, this study has also explored several other aspects of assessment reform which were overtly or covertly entangled with the reform process. To be specific, this section has offered the synopsis of the emergent issues, such as paradoxes, controversies, quandaries; impact of the reform; strengths and condemnations. Finally, this section is summed up with a list of suggestions by this study that the reformers should take into account for the successful implementation of the reform. The following section presents a synopsis of the major issues that were discussed under the *discussion on finding* section.

1. Process of the Assessment Reform

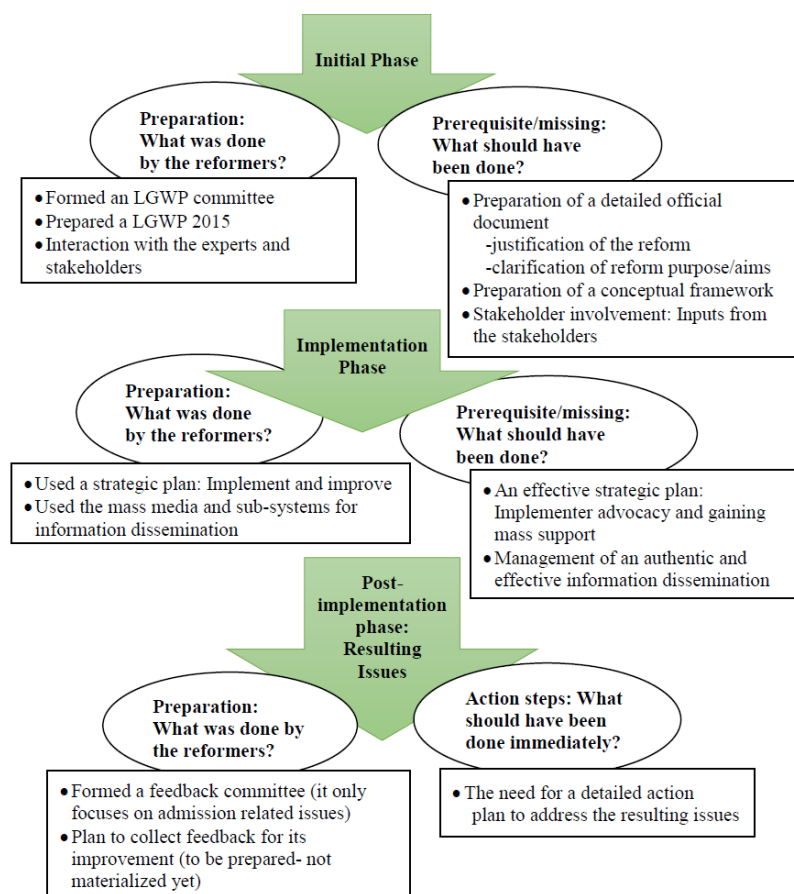


Figure 30: Process of the assessment reform

The synopsis of the process of the assessment reform has been presented by dividing each of the three phases of the reform (i.e., initial, implementation and post-implementation) into two sections. The first section on the left side of the figure (see Figure 30) presents the steps

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undertaken by the reformers towards necessary preparation for the reform in the three phases. The second section on the right side of the figure depicts the potential steps, which the reformers should have undertaken in the initiation and implementation phase of the reform and the action steps that the reformers should immediately commence in order to address the resulting issues (in the post-implementation phase). It means that this section presents some of the missing aspects or prerequisites of the reform process and recommends few potential measures, which the reformers should have undertaken and/or should initiate for the successful implementation of the reform.

As shown in the above figure, the findings suggest that in the initial phase of the reform, the reformers formed a nine-membered committee for preparing the necessary official documents. The committee prepared a 12-page official document called a Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015 that simply describes the process of grading in the reformed assessment system. In addition to this, a couple of seminars were conducted, wherein, a few educators, experts (both national and international) and the representatives of organizations, such as the Teachers' Union, PABSON, participated and expressed their individual views. However, as suggested by the findings, the preparation was not optimal in order to prepare a strong base for the reform. Alternatively, the reformers should have prepared a detailed official document that could justify the reform and clarify the reform purpose. Moreover, a detailed conceptual framework should have been prepared to guide the stakeholders including the implementers. The other missing aspect in this phase was an involvement of the key stakeholders, especially in the conceptual phase of the reform, who could provide useful inputs.

In the implementation phase of the reform, the reformers did not use any specific strategy in order to implement the reform. They used just a simple strategy, i.e., implement the reform with basic preparation and improve it over the progression of reform through collecting feedback. But, the reformers failed to conduct the necessary preparation in order to collect feedback from the stakeholders, experts, and educators for the improvement of the reform process. To disseminate the reform-related information and documents, the reformers used the platforms of mass media and the sub-system, which could not be effective. Given the lapses, the study findings suggest that the reformers should have instated effective strategic plans, such as implementer advocacy, a strategy that could help gain a mass support that could help the reformers achieve the reform targets on an expedited basis. The findings also highlight that the

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reformers should have used an effective and authentic information dissemination system in order to provide the necessary information to the implementers and other parties as well as individuals affected by the reforms.

Regarding the post-implementation phase of the reform, the findings suggest that the reformers did not conduct any specific preparation (at the time of data collection) for addressing the resulting issues. Nor did the reformers constitute any feedback committees to collect feedback for further improvement of the reform. They formed a feedback committee whose function was to investigate the shortcomings as regards the student enrollment and registration in Grade 11 resulting from the assessment reform.

2. Paradoxes, Controversies and Quandaries in the Reform

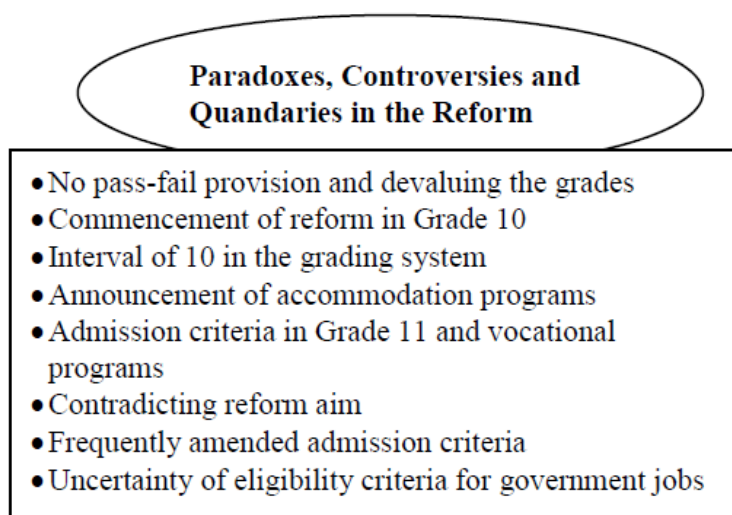


Figure 31. Paradoxes, controversies and quandaries in the reform

It is necessary to understand that any large-scale educational reform or change is associated with many uncertainties, criticism or condemnation, and the constructive criticisms can contribute excessively to institutionalizing the change (Fullan,2015, p.72). The current study suggests that the implementation of the reform has resulted in several paradoxes, controversies and quandaries that have challenged the successful implementation of the reform. These absurdities, which emerged in this study that are supposed to be part of the reform process, are as follows:

- (1) The no pass-fail provision and value of the obtained grades were misinterpreted and misunderstood,
- (2) The commencement of reform in Grade 10 and interval of 10 in the grading system were

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not well justified,

- (3) The announcement of accommodation programs for the low grade-holders could not be materialized,
- (4) The discrepancy between the elimination of pass-fail provision and the admission criteria for grade promotion created confusion,
- (5) The unachievable and vague reform aim set in the official documents confused the stakeholders, and
- (6) The frequently amended admission criteria and uncertainty of eligibility criteria for government jobs increased quandaries among stakeholders.

3. Impact of the Reform

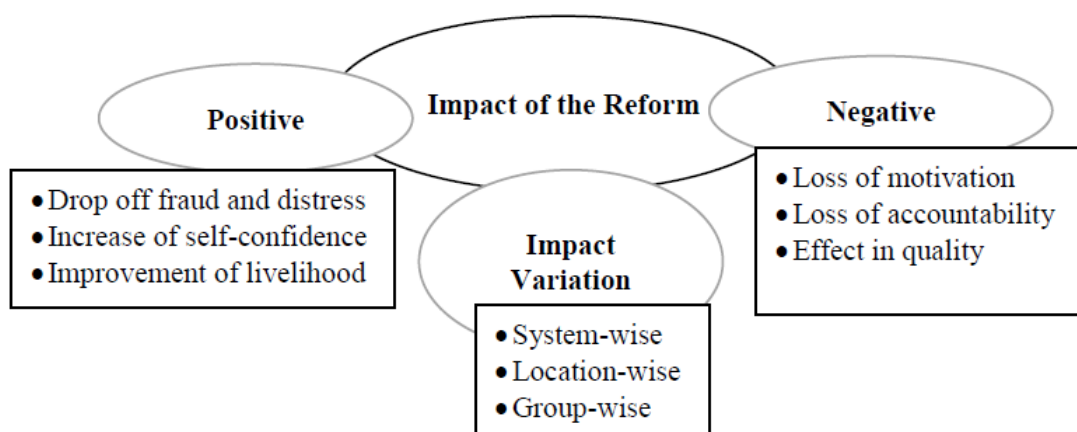


Figure 32. Impact of the reform

As shown in Figure 32, the findings suggest two types of reform impacts: positive and negative. A vast majority of the participants report the following three positive aspects of the reform:

- (1) The reform has dropped off the SLC exam related fraud and distress on examinees as there is no seemingly pass-fail provision in the reformed assessment system,
- (2) The reform has increased the self-confidence of low performers by eliminating the so called 'Iron Gate' and making the grade promotion easier and more flexible, and
- (3) The reform is likely to improve the livelihood of people as the reform has increased access to education by introducing a one-subject certification provision and managing additional vocational programs targeting the low grade-holders.

On the contrary, many of the participants expressed that the reform has impacted the test-takers, schools and the entire education system negatively. They claimed that the reform has

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eliminated the pass-fail, merit-based, and accountability system that has reduced student motivation for learning. Further they argue that in a no-pass-fail assessment system, neither the teachers nor the school administrators should be accountable for the students' performance, consequently it would reduce the quality of education. The findings also indicate that the reform impacted the key stakeholders differently depending on the type of the school, the location of the school and the performance level of the students, which can be termed as system-wise, location-wise and group-wise impact respectively.

4. Strengths and Condemnations

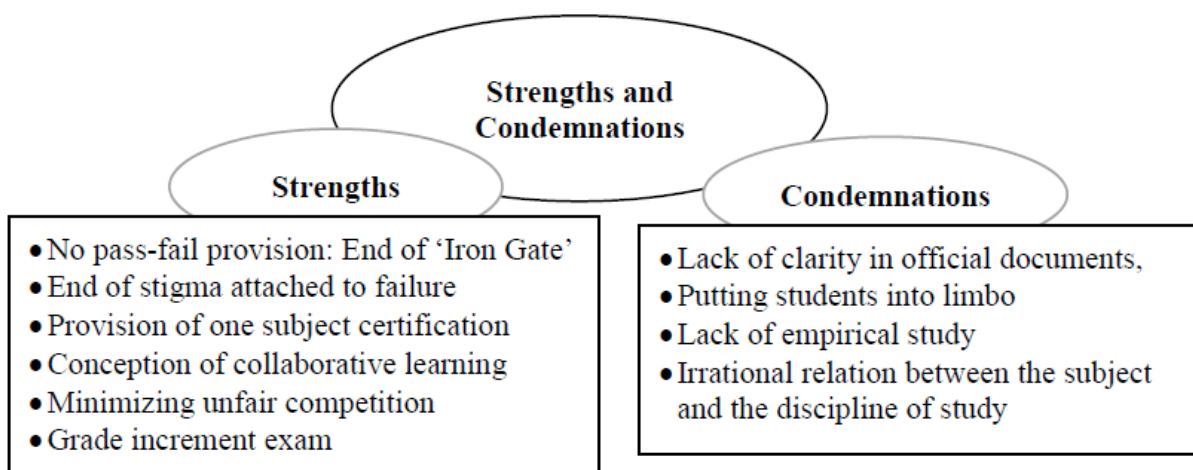


Figure 33. Strengths and condemnations

As depicted in Figure 33, the present study has explored both the strengths and condemnations attached to the reform. The strengths suggested by the findings are as follows:

- (1) The no pass-fail provision in the reformed assessment system has ended the so-called 'Iron Gate',
- (2) The findings of this study suggest that the assessment reform has ended the stigma (i. e., labeled as the SLC failure) attached with the SLC exam,
- (3) One of the remarkable strengths of this reform is a one-subject certification provision, which has provided students with an opportunity to proceed with their further studies in the subjects or area of their interest and strength, irrespective of lower grades in few subjects,
- (4) The study suggests that this reform would help to establish a co-operative learning environment among students and reduce the unfair and unhealthy competition among the private school and college owners,
- (5) A grade increment exam provisioned in the reformed assessment system is another

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remarkable strength which provides the low performers with an opportunity to increase their grades.

Similarly, the study has also explored criticisms attached to this reform. Some of the salient condemnations that emerged in this study are presented below:

- (1) The reform related official documents were vague that, in many cases, misled/misguided the stakeholders,
- (2) The inadequately planned and hurriedly implemented reform put students into limbo,
- (3) The assessment system was reformed without conducting an empirical study that could facilitate and guide the reform process in many ways, and
- (4) The findings indicate that the relation between the subject and the discipline of the study mentioned in the admission criteria set by the National Examination Board for Grade 11, and by CTEVT for its programs are irrational and incompatible.

5. Step Ahead/Forward

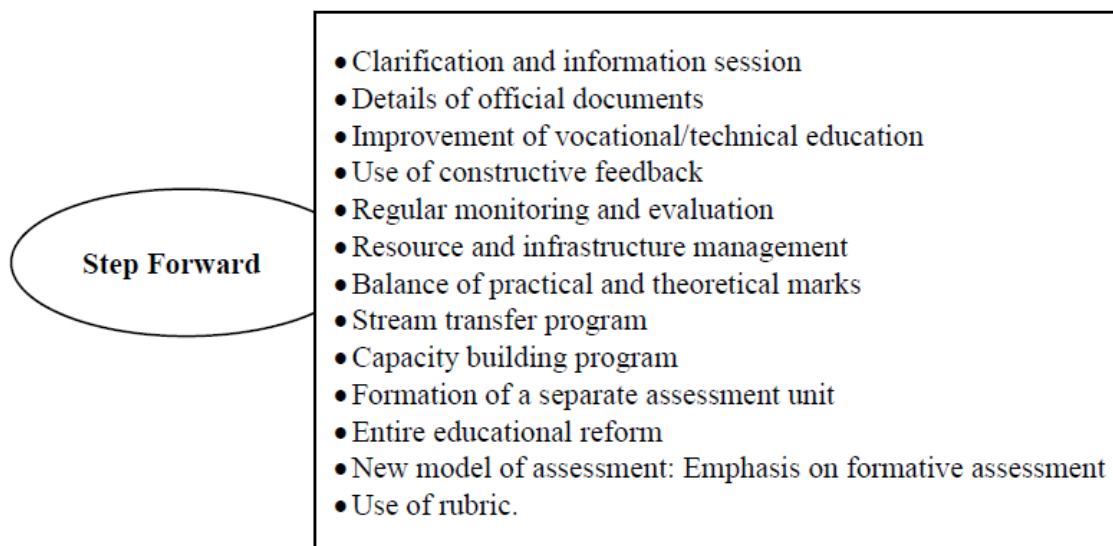


Figure 34. Step ahead/forward

As depicted in Figure 34, the study findings underpin the recommendations of several steps that the reformers should immediately initiate to ensure the success of the reform. To facilitate the reform process and meet the reform goals, the findings suggest that the reformers should:

- (1) Organize sufficient clarification and information sessions throughout the country to clarify quandaries and paradoxes resulted from the implementation of the reform,
- (2) Prepare a detailed document that clarifies the confusing issues and properly guides the

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- implementers,
- (3) Expand and restructure the vocational and technical education, and also make it accessible to the target population (e.g. low grade-holders),
 - (4) Form a feedback committee to collect feedback from experts, educators, and specifically from the implementers, students, and parents, and construct an action plan incorporating the constructive feedback,
 - (5) Develop a regular monitoring and evaluation system for a continuous progress of the reform,
 - (6) Manage the necessary infrastructure and human, technological and financial resources to make the reform successful,
 - (7) Restructure the assessment system of the practical exam to address the discrepancy between the practical and theoretical scores,
 - (8) Establish a stream transfer program/mechanism that permits student-transfer from one stream to another,
 - (9) Manage capacity building program, such as short-term courses, on-job training, series of seminars, that could help increase the working capacity of individuals involved in the implementation process,
 - (10) Form a separate powerful unit or department of assessment and testing with the purpose to update and upgrade the assessment system,
 - (11) Make the fundamental changes in the entire education system including curriculum and pedagogy change,
 - (12) Restructure the existing assessment system, specifically focusing on the formative assessment with remedial classes for the marginalized students, and
 - (13) Encourage (or make it mandatory for assessment) the teachers to use rubrics for assessing exam papers or student tasks.

Before moving forward to the conclusion section, I am presenting the emergent integrated substantive grounded theory of assessment reform of the SLC exam in Nepal.

INTEGRATED GROUNDED THEORY OF ASSESSMENT REFORM

The principal basis of the emergent substantive grounded theories of the assessment system reform of the SLC exam is the interactive analysis and interpretation of the constructs,

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categories, and sub-categories presented in chapter four and five. The constructs, conceptual categories, and thematic categories and sub-categories are the theoretical components of the emergent grounded theory. To present the assessment reform process in order, and make it compatible with the reform process depicted in the common reform theories and reform-related literature, I have presented the theory under three phases: the pre-implementation phase, the implementation phase, and the post-implementation phase. The combination of the theoretical components described under the three phases mentioned above is the integrated substantive grounded theory of the assessment system reform in Nepal. The theory describes the essential features of the conceptualization of the reform, implementation of the reform, and post-implementation of the reform. Put differently, the integrated theory has not only explored what was done by the reformers and what was missing (i.e., what should have been done?) in each of the phases of the reform but has also explicated many facets of the entire process of the reform. The phase-wise theoretical components of the assessment system reform are described below.

Theoretical Components in the Pre-implementation Phase of Reform

As presented below, the eight aspects that characterize the conceptual phase of the reform are the major substantive grounded theories of the assessment system reform in the pre-implementation phase. The following section presents a short description of these theoretical components.

- Exhaustive analysis of need and feasibility
- Input from experts, educators, and key stakeholders
- Clarity on reform aims and objectives
- Cooperative triangular relationships
- Comprehensive documentation
- Explicit roadmap and exhaustive planning
- Infrastructure and resource management
- Capacity building

1. Exhaustive analysis of need and feasibility. Some of the participants including reform supporters claimed that the reform was implemented after the completion of the need analysis. To support their claims, they pointed out the reports prepared and submitted by different commissions formed by the MOE of Nepal at different times. Among those reports, the most claimed one was the “Student Performance in SLC: Determinants of Student Performance in the SLC Examinations (2005)”, prepared by a study team of four—Ex-vice chancellor of TU Kedar Bhakta Mathema (team leader), educator Min Bahadur Bista, assessment expert Dibya Man

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Karmacharya, and researcher Saurav Dev Bhatta. The report has pointed out some major changes such as change in the school structure, change in the curricula, and change in the pedagogy, that are needed to be undertaken to improve the school education system in Nepal. It has also suggested introducing the letter grading system with GPA and grade descriptors, one-subject certification, limiting the number of subjects to be tested in SLC, teaching Nepali as a second language in early Grades, introducing school-based examinations, aligning teacher professional development with assessments and examinations, ensuring sufficient remediation for struggling students, taking actions to minimize the negative consequences or backwash effects of SLC, abolishing the practice of declaring students as pass/fail in the long-term, making districts accountable for performance, improving the status of girls' education, designing appropriate interventions to combat poverty, social exclusion, and illiteracy, starting formative assessments, etc. The list of such suggestions goes on and on. These instances justify the claim that the assessment reform was the demand for the change.

However, the fundamental question raised by many of the participants is how many recommendations became the aims of this reform. Put differently, has the reform incorporated all the important recommendations made by the study report? A vast majority of the participants' answer to this question was a big NO when they were asked if the reformers included all the possible recommendations made by the Mathema and Bista (2005) led report, which is not illogical. Among the dozens of important recommendations, this reform has incorporated four agendas: letter grading with GPA and grade descriptors, no pass-fail provision, one subject-certification provision, and grade increment examinations. A vast majority of the participants argued that based on the recommendations of the Mathema and Bista (2005) led report, a few of the agendas were selected for the reform (i.e., as the reform aims) without any in-depth analysis. Further, they argued that due to a lack of in-depth analysis of the demand of the change, the major agendas, such as an entire educational change, including curricular and pedagogical change, remained unaddressed in this reform.

In response to a question of why they incorporated only a few of the recommendations by the Mathema and Bista (2005) led report, the reformers pointed out limited resources and a short timeframe as the main constraints. Further, they attested that they would keep on addressing the important recommendations in the years to come by developing necessary infrastructures and managing the necessary resources. Rogan's (2006) notion of Zone of Feasible Innovation (ZFI)

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supports the argument of the reformers. Rogan (2006) argues that educational systems in developing countries may not have the capacity to introduce and sustain a deep change, and therefore, innovation or change should not exceed the current practices by too large a gap between the existing practices and the demands of innovation.

The instances mentioned above clearly show two important aspects. On the one hand, many of the stakeholders including teachers, school principals, school owners, and educators seem to have an expectation of a drastic change in the educational system as recommended by the report. On the other hand, the reformers seem to be able to address only a few agendas mentioned above. This has created a gap between the reformers and the other stakeholders. Whatever the arguments for and against are, an in-depth analysis of a need of change and feasibility are the first prerequisites for a reform (Fullan, 2016; Aho, Pitkanen, & Sahlberg, 2006, Rogan, 2006). Such an analysis helps to maintain a balance between the demand for change and the feasibility of possible change. What could be concluded from the analysis of the findings is that if the reformers made an exhaustive analysis of the demands of the change and the possibilities of change at the moment, several other agendas could have been incorporated within the same framework and budget. The inclusion of more agendas recommended by the educational commissions in this reform could help gain a broader support from the stakeholders and make the reform more meaningful.

2. Input from experts, educators, and key stakeholders. A vast majority of the participants including some of the local implementers argued that although the reformers conducted a few workshops and seminars inviting experts, educators, and the key stakeholders, their input was not incorporated. Lack of detailed documents, lack of clarity on reform aims and objectives, lack of plans to addressing the resulting issues, controversies, and paradoxes attached to the reform are some of the main bases for their claims. However, there are no strong supporting documents to falsify their claims.

In a top-down approach-based reform like this, the expertise, experiences, and knowledge of experts, educators, and the key stakeholders are valuable assets that help the reformers make a detailed conceptual framework for the reform. Involvement of experts, educators, and the key stakeholders not only help the reformers make detailed plans and documentation but also help them make a strong team of reformers by developing a harmonious relationship between the reformers and the other stakeholders (Fullan, 2016). This type of relationship is considered to be

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one of the important prerequisites for a large-scale reform. In this regard, Aho, Pitkanen, and Sahlberg (2006) argue that one of the main reasons behind the successful implementation of the reform in Finland is the broader participation of the stakeholders, educators, experts, and representative of political parties who help in developing a harmonious relationship between the reformers and the other stakeholders. To sum up, studies and theories on educational reform have shown that the reforms that have gained enormous support from the experts, educators, and other stakeholders from the beginning to the end have been successful in getting the reform target (Shaukat, 2013; Ely, 1999; Fullan, 2016).

3. Clarity on reform aims and objectives. The point-wise reform aims presented in the LGWP 2015/2016 have provided a flexible ground for interpreting the aims of the reform differently because they have not been explained in detail in the publicly available documents. Several bases support the claims of many of the participants that the reform aims were ambiguous, insufficient, or in some cases too superficial. Interestingly, the findings reveal that the reform aims mentioned in the LGWP (2015/2016) and the ones expressed by the participants during interviews and focus group discussions are different. Furthermore, irrespective of the reasons behind the differences, the inconsistency in the reform aims mentioned in the document and the emergent ones indicate that the reformers failed to explicate the reform aims in the documents clearly. Additionally, none of the reform-related documents have stated how the reform achieves an exact measurement of the student's learning abilities, nor have the reformers mentioned how the reform increases the quality of education by replacing the numerical grading system with the letter grading system. More importantly, one of the aims of the reform mentioned in the LGWP 2015/16 (i.e., to introduce a nine-point letter grading system for measuring student achievement) seems to be more confusing because it is not clear whether or not the 'introduction of the nine-point letter grading system for measuring student achievement' is the reform aim.

The reviewed literature (Ely, & Atkinson, 1978; Shaukat, 2013; Philips, 2000; Berry, 2011) informs that one of the preliminary and important tasks that the reformers have to do is communicate the reform aims and its short- and long-term objectives to the stakeholders. The clear aims and objectives make the implementation process easier by guiding the implementers in the right direction and also result in fewer quandaries, contradictions, and challenges. In

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Atkinson's (1978) words, the lack of a clearly expressed purpose or reason for innovation or change may constitute a significant condition for the failure of a reform.

4. Cooperative triangular relationships. In terms of relationship among the reformers, local implementers, and the school family (i.e., administrators, teachers, students, parents), the findings indicate that the reformers' attempt to include the key stakeholders by organizing seminars and workshops seemed to be unproductive as the number of participants involved in the reform process was not sufficient. In the participants' words, the participation of the key stakeholders was limited to a ritual because none of their input was incorporated nor was their voice heard. A vast majority of the participants felt that they were outsiders in the reform process. They openly criticized the reformers for not being able to involve them in the reform process. Similarly, the local implementers such as the representatives of the Regional Directorate and District Education Office complained that their expertise and experiences were not incorporated in the reform process. Although the basis of the claims mentioned above was the participants' perception, no supporting documentation was found to falsify the claims. Anyway, the expressions of dissatisfaction by the local implementers and the school family signify that there was not a harmonious relationship among the three major players of the reform: reformers who were responsible for making policies, local implementers who had the responsibility of implementing the reform, and the school family where the reform had to be practiced.

There is an array of literature that advocates the importance of the three-level relationship for a successful implementation of the reform. A cooperative relation among these parties could reduce the quandaries and paradoxes that are a result of the implementation of the reform. Making the inclusion of maximal individuals relevant to the reform process from the beginning not only helps develop a harmonious relationship among reformers, local implementers, and the school family but also prepares a solid foundation for change (Fullan, 2015; Shaukat, 2013). As stated above, a broader participation of the stakeholders, educators, experts, and representative of political parties in the Finish educational reform helped in developing a harmonious relationship between the reformers and the other stakeholders.

5. Comprehensive documentation. One of the main concerns raised by the vast majority of the participants is the lack of detailed documentation that describes the reform process and guides the implementers and other stakeholders. Almost all the participants attested that the government failed to prepare a comprehensive document; as a result, some of the key aspects of

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the reform, such as no pass-fail provision, provision of a single/one-subject certification were misunderstood and misinterpreted. As expressed by some of the participants, many of the students became victims of the misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

While no empirical studies, extant literature, and authentic documents support their claims directly, several instances justify that a document that provides the details of the reform was missing. With my rigorous attempts, I was able to find four documents that were developed for the reform. The available documents include Letter Grading Working Procedure 2015/2016, Admission Criteria, Report of the Feedback Committee, and the Training Manual (see page 66-69 for details). Interestingly, none of these brief documents have described the purpose of the reform in detail, the actual meaning of the no pass-fail provision and one-subject certificate provision, a detailed plan of the reform, the step forward, etc.

However, it could be argued that as the key agendas of the reform, such as letter grading with GPA and grade descriptors, no pass-fail provision, one-subject certification provision, and grade increment examinations were taken from Mathema and Bista (2005) led report, no further details were necessary. This may only be partially true because it was a holistic document and not a detailed plan for the reform. The Mathema and Bista (2005) led team dissected the assessment phenomena from its length and breadth and recommended dozens and dozens of steps that the MOE of Nepal should take for further improvement of school education in Nepal in general and in the assessment system of the SLC exam, in particular. Based on the participants' expressions and the Mathema and Bista led report (2005), out of the dozens of recommendations, the reformers incorporated only a few of them. It was necessary to tell the stakeholders why only a few of the recommendations were chosen, what the main purpose of the reform was, what their next step would be, what their implementing strategy would be, how would they address the resulting issues, how would they accommodate the low-grade holders, etc.

In the lack of a comprehensive document, there is always a possibility that the succeeding authorities may manipulate the reform agendas in their way. It may happen both intentionally or due to the lack of a proper understanding of the former reformers' intentions and plans (details are presented below under *institutional memory*). Therefore, a detailed document that could provide sufficient information to the implementers and stakeholders was essential. The document could answer such questions:

(1) Why did the reformers choose only a few of the reform aims that were recommended by the

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Mathema and Bista led report (2005)?

- (2) What was the main purpose of the reform?
- (3) What would be the next steps to resolve the resulting issues?
- (4) What would be their implementing strategies and short-term and long-term action plans?
- (5) How would they accommodate the low-grade holders?
- (6) How would they involve the experts, educators, and other stakeholders?

The participants in this study widely expressed that if the reformers prepared a detailed document by incorporating the input from the key stakeholders, the reform would have been meaningful and successful. Input from the key stakeholders could be collected by conducting seminars, workshops, interaction programs, or by administering questionnaires. However, the fundamental question with this regard is the number of participants. What is true is that the more stakeholders you involve in collecting input, the wider range of issues and concerns emerge that could help in strengthening the quality of the input. Such input from the stakeholders could contribute a lot in preparing a comprehensive document.

6. Explicit roadmap and exhaustive planning. The participants' expressions and the huge number of quandaries, contradictions, and challenges that emerged from the implementation of the reform indicate that the reform was launched without preparing an explicit roadmap and exhaustive planning, which are considered to be the backbone of the reform process. As suggested by the participants, the reformers should have analyzed the possible impact of the reform, such as the impact of the elimination of the pass-fail provision, and made a roadmap and phase-wise short-term and long-term plan. The participants contended that there were several problems and challenges attached to the reform, some of which included the misunderstanding of the no-pass-fail provision, the future of low-grade holders, the management of vocational programs, and the eligibility criteria for government jobs. Further, they stated that the reformers did not have any specific plans to resolve them. The participants expressed that they heard the reformers' plans from television interviews, newspapers, and public speeches. They suggested the reformers properly document their plans and roadmap and make them publicly available. Several researchers including Ely (1999) and Aho, Pitkanen, and Sahlberg (2006) have also pointed out the importance of preparing a detailed documentation before launching a reform. A comprehensive document that explicates the reform aims, objectives, and

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procedures clearly not only guides the stakeholders and the implementers in the proper direction but also contributes a lot to making the reform successful (Fullan, 2015; Shaukat, 2013).

As shown by the extant literature, planning is the first pre-requisite for a reform. Any of the reforms, especially a large-scale reform is only launched when detailed planning is completed, which may take years. The detailed planning guides the local implementers and the school family by providing a clear roadmap of the destination.

7. Infrastructure and resource management. All the participants including the reformers expressed a common voice that the assessment reform was implemented before managing all the necessary human, technological, and financial resources. Although the World Bank committed to providing 20% of the total budget needed for the reform, the reformers expressed that they did not have enough funds to prepare all the necessary infrastructures and human resources they needed immediately. The reformers conducted seminars and workshops as a part of the capacity building program (details are presented below) after implementing the reform; but as suggested by the findings, it was not sufficient. Only a few of the personnel and teachers got the opportunity of being trained, and a vast majority of the human resources who had to be involved in implementing the reform remained uninformed/untrained. As expressed by the reformers, due to a lack of financial support they could not spread the workshops throughout the country.

It should be noted that the focus of the workshops and seminars was to increase literacy on the reform issues rather than providing specific training. The technical aspects of the reform were not so difficult as the teachers provided numerical marks as they did usually and the personnel converted the numerical grades into letter grades using the established norms/criteria. The teachers needed no training, and the personnel needed just simple information on how to convert the grades. However, it was urgently necessary to clarify some of the reform agendas, such as the value of grades, the meaning of eliminating the pass-fail provision, and the meaning of one-subject certification provision to all the stakeholders including the students and parents. For this purpose, a sufficient number of informers or resource persons had to be managed by providing the necessary information and training. As suggested by the findings, the reform was implemented without preparing such human resources (i.e., informers) due to lack of funds and the short timeframe. As a result, many students became victims of misunderstanding and quandaries. In this particular case, I mean in the case of this study, human resources and the

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funds to manage such human resources were much more important than the infrastructure and technical management.

8. Capacity building. Pointing out one of the missing aspects of the reform, many of the participants, especially experts, educators, school owners, principals, and teachers contended that the MOE should have conducted capacity building programs, such as pre-service teacher training, in-service teacher training, personnel training, seminars, and workshops focusing on the assessment practices around the world before implementing the reform to prepare them for grappling with the possible challenges. They opined that if the reformers had started such training at least a few years before launching this reform, the reform would have resulted in a fewer number of quandaries and challenges. The reformers also accepted that there was still a lot more to do for the professional development in the educational sector, which means that Nepal is still far behind in the process of professional development. Highlighting the need and importance of professional development, Borko (2004) contends:

Educational reform movements in the United States and around the world are setting ambitious goals for student learning. Many factors contribute to achieving these goals. However, the changes in classroom practices demanded by the reform visions ultimately rely on teachers (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Spillane, 1999). Changes of this magnitude will require a great deal of learning on the part of teachers and will be difficult to make without support and guidance (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Putnam & Borko, 1997; Wilson & Berne, 1999). This realization has led educational scholars and policymakers to demand professional development opportunities for teachers—opportunities that will help them enhance their knowledge and develop new instructional practices (p. 3).

Literature has shown that the pre-service and in-service training, which equips the teachers and personnel with the knowledge and skills needed for grappling with the change-induced challenges, are the key components of professional development (Sharma¹, 2016, July 15; Hultman, 1998; Maurer, 1996). And without professional development, it would be difficult to achieve the targeted educational change.

Theoretical Components in the Implementation Phase of Reform

The following three major aspects, which are the theoretical components of the integrated grounded theory (i.e., substantive grounded theory) of the assessment system reform in the implementation phase, were inferred from the interactive analysis and interpretation of the

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constructs, categories, and sub-categories presented in chapter four and five. These theoretical components are briefly presented below.

- Teacher advocacy
- Stakeholder ownership
- Timely and authentic information

1. Teacher advocacy. The vast majority of the participants pointed out an important role of teachers in the reform process. They argued that it is the teachers who bring the reform agendas into the classroom. Many participants, especially school owners and representatives of teachers' organizations, opined that the reformers underestimated the roles of teachers and did not listen to their voice; instead of making them advocates of the reform, they were considered as outsiders. The reformers, on the other hand, contended that they tried their best to involve teachers in the reform process, but due to the short timeframe and other constraints, they could not involve as many teachers as they wished.

The literature on educational reforms around the world has shown that the reforms' success or failure largely depends on the teachers' role—a supportive role of teachers directs the reform to success, and an unsupportive or a negative role directs it to failure (Fullan, 2015; Aho, Pitkaren, & Sahlberg, 2006; Berry, 2011). Berry (2011) has presented a list of countries, such as France, Germany, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Denmark, England, and several Asian countries including China, Japan, Korea, which went through assessment reforms but could not get reform aims. One of the prominent reasons she gave for the unsuccessful reforms was the unsupportive role of the teachers—lack of teacher advocacy.

2. Stakeholder ownership. The majority of the participants argued that the reformers neglected the key stakeholders in not only the initial phase of the reform but also the implementation phase. Further, they contended that although the reformers attempted to involve a few of the stakeholders in the implementation phase of the reform, the number was meagre and even the voices of the limited participants were not heard. They claimed that this situation increased the distance between the reformers and the key stakeholders, and consequently the key stakeholders did not get the opportunity to be a part of the reform process.

The extant literature on educational reform has shown that stakeholder-driven reforms seemed to be more successful than the ones imposed by the top authorities. In other words, if the

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stakeholders intrinsically feel that they are a part of the reform process, undoubtedly, the reform will be successful in meeting its targeted goals. In Shaukat's (2013) words, allowing stakeholders to be a part of the planning process is one efficient way to ensure that they will be investing their energy and time to make the program successful. Further, she added that stakeholders must feel that their individual needs and the needs of those affected by the change initiatives are recognized and valued in the reform.

3. Timely and authentic information. One of the widely raised issues in the interviews and focus group discussions was the ineffective dissemination of reform-related documents and information. The participants expressed that the reformers kept on changing some of the provisions of the reform, especially the admission criteria and the grade increment provision after implementing the reform. They argued that they did not get the changed information in time and the way they got information (i.e., through mass and electronic media) was not the authentic means of communication. Although there was a common agreement among the other participants, the reformers accepted it partially. They argued that they did their best to inform the stakeholders timely with the limited resources they had; they used both mass media and sub-systems to disseminate the reform-related information. They accepted that due to geographic difficulty, the reform-related documents and information might not have reached in time in some places.

Studies and theories on educational reforms show that information dissemination is the first pre-requisite for the reform process (Ely & Atkinson, 1978; Shaukat, 2013). The information dissemination systems might be different from one reform context to another. As shown by the extant literature, a broader involvement of stakeholders, preparation of detailed documents and distribution of the documents to the stakeholders before implementation of the reform, uploading the documents on their official websites, information dissemination by seminars and workshops, use of mass and electronic media, radio, and television interviews, are some of the common practices that the reformers use to disseminate the reform-related information. The reformers can use whichever ways and means of communication they wish to disseminate the reform-related information, as long as the information provided is unambiguous, timely, and authentic.

Theoretical Components in the Post-implementation Phase of Reform

As indicated by the findings of this study, eight major aspects were identified as the theoretical components of the assessment system reform that depicts the post-implementation phase of the reform. Having said that as stated somewhere else earlier, these components are not only the by-products of the implementation of the reform, but some of them are also a combination of the policy and implementation of the reform. These theoretical components, presented below, are briefly described in the following section.

- Identification and analysis of resulting issues
- Immediate actions for the urgent/sensitive issues
- Special programs for the low-grade holders
- Bridge between academic and vocational programs
- Need for impact analysis
- Effective communication channel
- Need for institutional memory
- Need for an unconventional assessment system
- Need for a resourceful unit of assessment and testing

1. Identification and analysis of resulting issues. As indicated by the findings of this study, the reform was implemented without the detailed preparation and homework that the type and context of the reform entailed. The reformers' remarks also support the other participants' claim that the reform lacked a detailed preparation and homework. The participants expressed that the implementation of the reform resulted in some unprecedented quandaries, paradoxes, condemnations, and challenges due to the lack of comprehensive preparation. Having said that the extant literature has shown that even well-planned and prepared reforms have resulted in some issues, such as quandaries, condemnations, and challenges. It means that such issues are part of the reform process.

Given the fact that such quandaries, controversies, and challenges are part of the reform process, it seems to be essential to identify and analyze the resulting issues. There are two ways to do so. First, a comprehensive analysis of the possible impact of the reform can be done in the initial phase of the reform and an effective intervention plan can be made accordingly. This seems to be a common practice in academia, and as indicated by the extant literature, it is an effective way of launching a reform. Second, an exhaustive analysis of the resulting issues can be done after implementing the reform and making the intervention plans accordingly. The in-depth analysis of the resulting issues, whether that was done before or after the implementation

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of the reform, allows the reformers to categorize the resulting issues, such as the issues that need an urgent action plan to solve them, the issues that need short-term planning to resolve them, and the issues that need long-term planning to address them, based on their nature and possible impact on the stakeholders and the entire education system. Based on the findings of this study, an example of the categorization of the resulted issues based on an action plan needed for resolving them has been presented in the following table.

Table 17.

Categorization of the resulted issues based on the type of plan

Resulted Issues	Type of Plan
Misunderstanding/misinterpretation of the <i>no pass-fail</i> provision and the <i>value of the grade</i>	Issues that need an urgent action plan
Stream transfer mechanism—from vocational to academic and vice versa	Issues that need a short-term action plan
Capacity building programs	Issues that need a long-term action plan

What must be clarified here is that the examples presented in Table 17 are entirely based on the findings of the present study. As stated somewhere else earlier, this study has not done an in-depth analysis of the reform impact, and the basis of some of the resulted issues are the participants' perceptions. This means that the categorization of the issues based on the required action plans cannot be assumed as the ultimate ones. Before making such actual action plans, an exhaustive analysis of the reform impact should be done on a large scale using all the available resources and evidence. Such action plans should be made based on the evidence-based evaluation of the reform. To conclude, Table 17 above presents just an example of how the resulting issues could be categorized based on the action plans required for addressing the resulted issues.

2. Immediate actions for the urgent/sensitive issues. As revealed by the data, some resulted issues are more serious and sensitive and needed an urgent action plan for prevention of any further damage. The findings indicated that a few issues related to the reform, such as the elimination of the existing pass-fail provision, grade increment exam, and the admission criteria set for Grade 11 and CTEVT programs, were severe and sensitive because many students including parents, and in many cases other implementers misunderstood these constructs. Many

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students and parents, in the lack of proper information, understood the no pass-fail provision as an absolute no failing system. Their understanding was that their lower marks in the grade sheets will not prevent them from joining higher education. However, the provision set in the admission criteria prevented the low-grade holders from joining the university. As reported by the participants, many of the test takers became victims of the misunderstanding. As was informed by the findings, such misunderstandings were still prevalent in some parts of the country, especially in the remote areas. Given such serious and sensitive issues, the reformers were advised to address such sensitive and severe issues immediately by preparing effective action plans.

3. Special programs for the target population (i.e., low-grade holders). One of the main aims of the reform, as revealed by the findings, was to minimize the educational loss by loosening the existing assessment system and creating other alternatives and opportunities. While the reformers introduced a one-subject certification provision, the preliminary results have shown that a large number of low-grade holders were still suffering because they had to have at least GPA 1.6 in aggregate to be admitted in Grade 11 or the vocational programs run by CTEVT (see Appendix C). It means that although the grade sheet does not contain any concluding remarks, such as pass or fail, the pass-fail provision still exists invisibly in the reformed assessment system. It seemed that the reform aims, such as the elimination of the pass-fail provision and minimization of the educational loss would be fulfilled only when the reformers brought about special package programs targeting the low-grade holders. Although the reformers and the concerned authorities, as reported by the participants, announced vocational education programs for the low-grade holders (i.e., 20 thousand quotas for the low-grade holders), it had not been materialized at the time of data collection. The package programs as indicated by the findings include, but are not limited to, short-term job-oriented training, skill development training, and skill-based vocational and technical education that could help the graduates get a good payable job or establish a business of their own.

4. Bridge between academic and vocational programs. A vast majority of the participants suggested the reformers and the concerned authority expand the scope of vocational and technical education by developing skill-based programs and loosening the admission criteria. They contended that unless the reformers can manage sufficient vocational and technical education programs to the interested and needy students, both financially and geographically

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feasible, the no pass-fail provision in the reform cannot be justified, and the problem of educational loss cannot be minimized in the real sense. These accounts indicate that the reformers and the concerned authorities by no means can escape from managing sufficient vocational and technical education programs. As a result, the intake in the vocational programs is likely to increase significantly. In the participants' words, there is an increased likelihood that the negative connotation attached with the vocational education would change and the students' enrollment in the vocational institutions would subsequently increase. If this is the case (i.e., no evidence was found yet), the increase in the number of student intake in vocational programs demands a bridge (a two-way track for transferring the students from vocational to academic stream and vice versa) between the academic and vocational programs through which students can get the opportunity to transfer from the academic to the vocational stream and vice versa.

5. Need for impact analysis. The participants in this study pointed out some positive and negative impacts of the reform. However, the impacts mentioned in this study are not the ones that were revealed from an in-depth analysis of the reform. Rather, the basis of those impacts, both positive and negative, was the participants' understanding, experiences, and perceptions. It means that some of the impacts mentioned in this study look more like predictions.

As indicated by the findings, impact analysis should be made part of the reform process. The comprehensive analysis could inform the reformers and other stakeholders whether or not:

- (1) The reform process has minimized the educational loss,
- (2) The reform has decreased the exam result-induced distress on students,
- (3) The reform has brought about positive impacts on student learning,
- (4) The reform is sufficient enough to serve the social selection process.

As the school system works as a social selection process, the question of what the impact of the reform is at the educational practices is crucial. The analysis should explore whether or not the new assessment approach has created a positive environment to ensure academic success. It should also explore the impact of the reform from social perspectives as the literature has shown that assessments in the educational systems serve social, cultural, and political goals (McNamara & Roever, 2006; Shohamy, 1998). Analysis of the reform impact is very important from a policy perspective as well because some of the intervention policies are made based on the impacts of the reform. An accurate analysis of the reform helps the policymakers make an important and useful policy whereas a wrong analysis of the reform impact results in a misleading policy.

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Therefore, a proper analysis of the reform impact is extremely important because the policy may be affected negatively by wrong analysis of the reform impact.

6. Effective communication channel. The three parties—the reformers, local implementers, and school family (i.e., school administrators, teachers, students, parents)—are the key players in the reform process. The reformers make the reform policy, and the local implementers and school family implement the reform policy. As stated somewhere else earlier, reform is a process, and it may take years to institutionalize it (Fullan, 2016). The reform would take a right course only when a three-level communication channel was made. The implementation of the reform has resulted in many quandaries, contradictions, and challenges that could jeopardize the institutionalization of the reform. The findings of this study indicated that one of the effective ways of resolving such issues is by establishing a three-level communication mechanism among the school family, local implementers, and reformers.

The school family encountered several problems as a result of the implementation of the reform. The problems should have been communicated to the local implementers (i.e., District Education Office) in a timely manner; and the local implementers should also have reported the problems to the reformers (i.e., MOE). This could help the reformers in making intervention strategies and deciding the further action plans. Likewise, the reformers should have communicated the changes in the policy, intervention strategies, and action plan to the school family via local implementers. In this process, the local implementers were the conduit who could help establish a communication channel between the reformers and the school family.

7. Need for institutional memory. As expressed by Linde (2008), the term *institutional memory* is defined and described in many ways. Given the variety of definitions, the term is defined in the context of this study. In this study, the term, *institutional memory* refers to a proper alignment/link between the past and present regarding the reform policies, action plans, and practices of the reform.

As indicated by the findings, the institutionalization of the reform seems to be still challenging due to political and bureaucratic changes. Along with the change of government and bureaucrats at the policy level, there was the likelihood that the reform agendas might be shadowed or might not be undertaken with the same drive and intensity as the previous reformers did. As reported by the findings, it may happen due to two reasons. First, in the lack of comprehensive documentation, the newly-appointed authorities may be unaware of the plans and

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roadmap of the reform. In this case, the reform agenda cannot go as envisioned and wished (i.e., internally planned) by the former reformers. Second, the newly-appointed authorities intentionally might ignore the reform agendas due to different political leaning or interests. Such problems could only be resolved when a culture of the use of institutional memory is established. Preparation of a comprehensive future action plan and roadmap and making them publicly available could help to make the use of institutional memory more effective.

8. Need for an unconventional assessment system. Many of the participants, especially the intellectual participants pointed out the need for a 21st-century model assessment system in Nepal. By a 21st-century model assessment system, they meant to say that the assessment in the 21st century should not only be able to enhance student learning but should also assess the students' unique and multi-talents. The participants suggested the reformers to use multiple assessment tools, such as classroom observation, project work, practicum, or field work that could help the assessors identify the individual's unique talents and skills. The AERA, APA, and NCME standards (2014) have presented a number of assessment tools/techniques depending on the nature of the learner, such as project work, field work, task-based or performance-based assignment, observation checklist, self-assessment, peer-assessment, and portfolio-based assessment, that can be used to assess the specific knowledge, skills, and talents of the test takers.

9. Need for a unit of assessment and testing. The findings suggested many steps that the reformers have to take to make the assessment reform successful. The participants expressed that the reform would only be successful when the reformers or the MOE formed a separate unit of assessment and testing comprising of assessment experts, educators, and scholars. They believed that such a team of experts could efficiently handle the reform-related issues and concerns. They also emphasized that the team of experts should be independent and powerful about taking decisions. Sharma¹ (2016, July 15) also stresses the need for a separate and powerful unit of evaluation and assessment. He argues that such a unit could not only make this reform successful but could also introduce the necessary changes in the assessment system to make it an ideal 21st-century model assessment system.

Theory of Controversy/Opposition in the Reform Process.

The data clearly show that there has been a ping-pong between the reformers and other stakeholders regarding their views on the different aspects of the reform, including the reform

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process and the possible impacts of the reform. Among the participants, the policymakers and the key implementers, such as the MOE, CDC, and OCE officials, attested that the reform was relevantly endorsed based on the research reports, and implemented with a basic preparation and homework. They claimed that they prepared the required official documents to disseminate the reform-related information, and tried their optimal best to involve the key stakeholders in the reform process. On the contrary, the majority of the participants including some of the local implementers, representative of schools' and teachers' organizations, experts, and educators denied these claims and arguments of the leading reformers, which explicated that the existing assessment system was reformed only after rigorous preparation and planning. They expressed that the reform was implemented in haste without the foundation of the necessary fundamental preparation and homework under the duress of the donor agency. As a result, they argued that the reform has resulted in many quandaries among stakeholders, and moreover, jeopardized the future of several low performers.

Such controversies, however, are not surprising issues in a reform such as this. Reform-related literature shows that a large-scale educational reform, even a well-planned reform, results in several misunderstandings and quandaries among the stakeholders. Change theorists and researchers, such as Fullan (2015), Barber (2000), Masters (2013), Brummelhuis (1995), and Aho, Pitkaren, and Sahlberg (2006) argue that the emergence of dilemmas and uncertainties are the typical characteristics of a large-scale change. Fullan (2015) states that any significant innovation, if it is to result in change, involves a certain amount of ambiguity, ambivalence, and uncertainty for the individual about the meaning of the change. He goes on to express that an effective implementation embodies the process of clarification. From these instances, it can be concluded that controversies/oppositions are part of the reform process. Having said that what has been clear from the extant literature and the findings of the present study is that a well-planned and an exhaustively prepared reform results in lesser number of quandaries and controversies than the one that lacks such thorough planning.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has presented the findings of this study more precisely and meaningfully by organizing the emergent conceptual and thematic categories and sub-categories under research questions. Moreover, the discussions of the findings have been presented under four sections: Two section under the first research question and two under the second one. The first and second

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section under the first research question present discussions on the issues and concerns relevant to the initiation phase and implementation phase of the reform, respectively. Similarly, the first and second section under the second research question present discussions on the resulting issues and the remarkable recommendations (i.e., step forward) suggested by the knowledgeable participants, respectively. This structure of the discussion has made it easier for the readers to understand the conception of the reform concept, necessary activities entailed in the foundational preparation, the implementation processes, and the preliminary responses of the implementation of the reform. On top of this, each of the sections is concluded with a section summary, synopsis of the assessment system reform, and finally the chapter is concluded with an integrated theory of assessment reform of the SLC exam in Nepal.

CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS CONCLUSION, PERSONAL REFLECTION, RECOMMENDATION, DELIMITATION AND LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

In the midst of the participants' controversial views (i.e., reformers vs. other stakeholders), it was albeit challenging to conclude the study findings. In consideration of the controversies, the significant issues and concerns (i.e., either supported by literature or multiple participants) raised from both sides were theorized to explicate a complete process of the assessment system reform. On one hand, among the participants, the leading implementers, such as the MOE, CDC, and OCE officials, claim that the reform was relevantly endorsed based on the research reports, and implemented with a basic preparation and homework. They argue that they prepared the required official documents to disseminate the reform-related information. They also claim that they tried their optimally best to involve the key stakeholders, such as school owners, representative of teachers' organizations, principals, teachers, parents in the reform process. They also argue that few of the quandaries resulting from the reform was due to the limited resources. On the other hand, the majority of the participants including local implementers, representative of schools' and teachers' organizations, experts and educators deny these claims and arguments of the leading reformers, which explicate that the existing assessment system was reformed only after a rigorous preparation and planning. They express that the reform was implemented in haste without the foundation of necessary fundamental preparation and homework under the duress of the donor agency. They contend that the MOE not only failed to involve the key stakeholders in preparing a detailed framework for the reform but also disseminate the necessary information and circulars to the local implementers. As a result, they argue that the reform has resulted in some quandaries among stakeholders, and moreover, jeopardized the future of several low-performers.

Besides the controversial opinions and analyses of the participants, a review of the reform-related literature, documents, seminar reports and newspaper articles by educators and experts indicate that some of the arguments of the critics of the reform process are not groundless. But, in fact, some of the arguments are supported by the literature. A few studies and articles (e.g., Brummelhuis, 1995; Aho, Pitkaren & Sahlberg, 2006) show that a well-planned and well-prepared educational reform has been successful. They indicate that, in addition to the planning

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and preparation, the involvement of key stakeholders as part of the reform process is the key to success. About the reform mentioned in this study, weaknesses in planning, preparation, and involvement of the critical stakeholders/implementers are evident. The implementation of the reform before setting admission criteria in Grade 11 and CTEVT programs and making/mentioning the eligibility criteria for the government jobs posted by the Public Service Commission supports the arguments of the critics. The amendment of the admission criteria during the academic year also strengthens their arguments. Similarly, several seminar reports (e.g., Sharma¹, 2016, July 15; Sharma², 2016, July 15; Luitel, & Neupane, 2016, February 22) and newspaper articles by educators and experts (e.g., Dixit, 2014, December 31; Niroula, 2016, January 11) also support their arguments.

Nevertheless, it would not be a genuine and justifiable idea to make a conclusion that they did nothing for planning and preparing the reform. The study reveals that the reform was implemented with a good intention, and the authorities did everything possible in a short period with the limited available resources. The only missing or unaddressed agendas in this process are a comprehensive framework and detailed preparation and homework for the reform. More importantly, the inability of the reformers in creating the environment in which the key implementers, such as the school principals and teachers could take the ownership of the reform, was another apparent weakness. Since the reform has already been implemented, the MOE should take immediate decisive actions in order to address the resulting problems.

The shortly planned and prepared reform has been a challenge for both the reformers and the implementers. As expressed by the participants, many 'nuts and bolts' need to be fixed. The MOE has the responsibility to clarify the misunderstanding resulting from the reform and address the reform-induced quandaries on an immediate basis. For this, an effective action plan is essential. The other important issue raised in this study is the elimination of the pass-fail provision in the reformed assessment system. It is still vague whether or not the no pass-fail provision set in the reformed assessment system would affect the quality of education. The MOE authority seems to establish a reliable quality control mechanism to ensure the quality of education. What can be inferred from the data, literature and the opinions of the experts and educators is that the quality of education must be the central agenda of the reform and it should not be compromised with anything else or in any excuses. The other challenge ahead of the reformers is the management of the low-grade holders. There is enormous pressure on the

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reformers to justify the elimination of the pass-fail system in the grade sheet. Alternatively stated, until and unless all the SLC appeared students get an opportunity to join either in the academic stream for higher education or the technical and vocational stream for skill and talent based vocational programs, the elimination of the pass-fail system and the slogan of one subject certification cannot be justified.

On one hand, as indicated by the data, the admission criteria in Grade 11 and CTEVT programs seem to restrict several low-grade holders from joining both the academic as well as the vocational programs. Moreover, on the other hand, the MOE and under agencies do not seem to have established any particular skill and talent based vocational and technical programs (till the date of data collection) that target the low-grade holders. This situation is a riddle itself within this reform. The only solution to this riddle is to establish a particular skill and talent based technical and vocational program, which particularly focuses on the possible skills and talents possessed by the low-grade holders. On top of this, the job market for the graduates of these programs should be demanding with a good salary. Also, the other most important thing is that such programs should be affordable for the economically marginalized people and accessible to population residing in remote areas.

The other remarkable issue raised in the study is the concern of how to bridge the academic and vocational streams. If the vocational education is made accessible and affordable, the intake in the vocational and technical programs is likely to increase in the days to come. Given this scenario, the MOE and under agencies seem to manage a two-way track (i.e., criteria with pre-requisite, credit transfer) to transfer from vocational towards the academic stream and vice versa.

In addition to the issues and concerns mentioned above, the most common issue raised by the majority of the participants and the other experts and educators is whether the assessment system reform recently implemented in Nepal was the type of the reform Nepal was seeking for years. As suggested by the findings, the answer to this question is *no*, which is also validated by the opinions of the experts and educators. In this context, two types of changes in the present assessment system need to be highlighted. First, as the reformed assessment system is a transition from a high-stakes summative to a low-stakes (arguably) summative assessment system, which was not the demand of the present era, the MOE should reform the present assessment system from summative to formative assessment. This recommendation is underpinned by the rationale that a formative assessment has been proven to be one of the useful

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tools for the enhancement of student learning.

Given the diversity of Nepal where people are divided into different groups and sub-groups regarding socio-economic condition, geographical variation, and linguistic background, the marginalized students might need special assistance even within the formative assessment system. For this, the MOE should organize some special remedial classes for the marginalized students. The remedial classes, of course, could help to bring the marginalized students (i.e., target students) into the mainstream. Having said that in the 21st century, a formative assessment with remedial classes solely could not serve as the ideal model of the assessment system for Nepal. As indicated by this study, the assessment model (a formative assessment with remedial classes) could be the ideal model only when the assessment tools are developed to exactly assess and evaluate every individual's inherent skills, talents, and specific capabilities. The 21st model assessment system should go beyond the old practices (i.e., assessment of whether or not the student has learned the taught lesson); beyond the dichotomy of pass or fail based on one's written or oral performance. It should identify every individual's innate skills, talents, and other capabilities, in addition to, assess their cognitive ability, with the purpose to guide them to the right career path. To sum up, the 21st-century model assessment system suited for Nepal would be the formative assessment system, which in addition to assessing the cognitive ability of the test-takers, can also measure their innate skills, talents, and other capabilities, and help identify the type of remedial classes each of the marginalized students needed. This can be achieved through instating fundamental changes not only in the pattern and construction of the existing assessment systems but also in the curriculum and pedagogy. It is because curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are an integral part of teaching and learning and are linked together.

Personal Reflection

I feel privileged having an opportunity to work on a topic of my interest and an area of my expertise. Dating back to 2014, I at Carleton University explored the negative consequences of the SLC exam results in my MA thesis. '*Assessment system reform of the SLC exam*' was one of my recommendations in the study, and the MOE reformed the assessment system starting from 2015. Notably, this is not to imply that my study contributed in any which way in the reform of assessment system (which is, in fact, not true), rather I mean to explicitly express why this topic (*A theory of assessment system reform of the SLC exam*) has been the topic of my interest and expertise. First, I was born, grew up, graduated and began my teaching career in Nepal, which in

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fact constituted my first exposure to the SLC exam and its positive and negative impact on students. Second, as stated above, I carried out a study in my MA program focusing on the negative consequences of the SLC exam that further broadened my knowledge and understanding about the SLC exam. These two aspects contributed in combination towards the selection of this topic as the research focus and provided me with the ground to claim that this is the area of my expertise.

Leaving some exceptions, I have had wonderful experiences with this dissertation. At first, it was difficult to locate the office, meet the participants and schedule the interview dates. However, once I had met with the participants and told them that I had come there to collect data by traveling about 11,500 kilometers (one way from Ottawa to Nepal), I found the participants to extremely co-operative with positive responses. In some cases, some of the higher-level MOE officials were ready to be interviewed at the first meet. Others provided me their first available date and time. It was beyond my expectation. This is how I was able to collect enough data for this study within 90 days.

During data analysis, especially while presenting results and discussions, I often encountered two contradictory views (i.e., for and against) of the participants on the same issue. Given the fact that such contradictions are part of the reform process (Fullan, 2015), I decided to present both the views with quotes (as far as possible) intending to let the readers exactly know the depth of their (i.e., participants') argument. I believe that this could also help both the reformers and the stakeholders to understand each other's perspectives on the reform issues and find a middle way or to reach consensus. The extant literature suggests that, for a successful implementation of reform, it is essential to establish a harmonious relationship between the policymakers/reformers and the other implementers in case of confronting issues. With regard to this reform, several confronting issues and concerns emerged, thereby highlighting that the MOE should play a role of negotiator to establish a harmonious relationship between the implementers (i.e., CDC, NEB, DEO etc.) and the school family (i.e., school and college owners, principals, teachers, students, parents etc.). It has not been too late to do so because, the implementation of reform, as stated earlier, is not the end but in fact, a beginning of the reform process.

Despite the extensive assessment reform related literature, only a few of the studies and theories have supported the findings of this study. The reason for the lack of supporting literature is the emergence of some unprecedented thematic categories and sub-categories from the data.

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Moreover, it is very natural that the factors and variables associated with an assessment reform might be different from another one. Several factors, such as the nature of the assessment reform, the existing assessment culture, geographical variation, socio-economic factors, infrastructure, and resources (i.e., human, technical and financial resources) contribute to the diversified assessment reforms. In the lack of such literature that could validate the findings, in many cases, I used seminars papers and occasionally newspaper article to verify the findings.

The data for this study were collected in the same year (i.e., in 2016) when the assessment reform was fully implemented throughout the country in all streams. Thus, the data were collected after four to five months from the date of the publication of the results of the SLC exam. Notably, several changes would have been possibly implemented since the completion of the data collection. Many of the issues and concerns raised by the participants during data collection, in all probability, might have been addressed by the time of defense of this dissertation. However, I retrieved the updated information related to the reform through the MOE's website and personal contact with some of the participants during the write-up period. For instance, I got the amended admission criteria and a recommendation report prepared by a committee of three MOE officials about the shortcomings taken place regarding student enrollment and registration in Grade 11 resulting from the assessment reform (Official website NEB). Having said that as the principal focus of this study was to explicate the process of the assessment system reform of SLC exam, rather than exploring reform impact immensely, a rigorous attempt was not made to include all the implemented changes post data collection. Even if I tried to include all the update living in Ottawa, Canada, it would have been a very difficult task.

Finally, what I must confess while concluding this dissertation is that all the research questions and sub-questions set for this study might not have been addressed properly. The reason is that some of the sub-questions were related to the impact of the reform rather than the process. As mentioned earlier, this dissertation cannot exactly explore the reform impacts, nor was its goal as it was too soon (i.e., it was just implemented the year before the date of data collection) to analyze the reform impact.

Recommendations

The reason for highlighting the issues and concerns attached to the reform, notably, does not mean to criticize the reformers and any other people directly or indirectly involved in the

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reform process. I completely agree with one of the study participants who states that the reform started with a good intention and the MOE and under agencies have been doing the best in their capacity with the limited available resources.

I affirm that the main purpose of exploring the issues and concerns through this study was to explicate the entire process of the assessment reform that could inform future researchers and academicians working on or planning to work on the reform agendas. I hope that it would prove to be a milestone for the researchers and academicians as it has presented some of the constructive solutions to the approaching problems. Some of the major recommendations suggested by the findings, that might contribute towards planning or strategizing for future researchers and academicians to address the problems, are presented below.

(1) Many of the participants in this study seem to be critical to the process of the reform. They pointed out a lack of involvement of the assessment experts, educators, and the key stakeholders, such as local implementers, school owners, teachers etc. in the initiation phase of the reform. Because, the input of experts, educators and the key stakeholders in the conceptual phase could help develop stakeholder advocacy, make the stakeholders feel part of the reform process, and reduce the possible resistance, the stakeholders, for future reforms, should be involved in the reform process from the very initial stages. Literature has shown that management of possible resistance and teacher advocacy is the key to success for an educational reform.

(2) For an analogous educational reform, a detailed conceptual framework that describes a long-term future plan is one of the essential requirements. As stated above, input from the assessment experts and the key stakeholders in the conceptual framework helps to develop a harmonious relationship between the reformers and the stakeholders and allows the stakeholders to take an ownership of the reform. The study strongly suggests the future researchers and academicians develop **a detailed conceptual framework involving experts and the key stakeholders in the conceptual phase of the reform.**

(3) The reform marks just a beginning of assessment reform in Nepal (in such a large scale), which began in Grade 10, and as such, this study suggests the future researchers and academicians conduct an in-depth analysis of infrastructure and availability of resources (technical, human and financial) before endorsement of a large-scale change or reform.

(4) The study highlights several numbers of issues that still need to be addressed for a successful implementation of the reform. As the reform is still in its initial implementation phase, it has not

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been too late to address the issues. **An explicit strategic plan** for implementing the reform should be made, thus, in order to clarify the quandaries resulting from the implementation and guide the reformers and implementers in the right direction. The plan might also help to reduce the problems and challenges resulting from the implementation and increase the likelihood of success of the reform.

(5) As suggested by the reform, the weakly prepared and hurriedly implemented reform has resulted in a number of quandaries and misunderstanding. In such a situation, without any delay, an effective action plan should be immediately instated and brought into action.

(6) The findings indicate that the concept of letter grading, GPA and grade descriptors is new to many of the teachers. Literature has shown that a lack of reform literacy (i.e., a lack of knowledge and skills to handle the change), which sometimes results in resistance to change or dissatisfaction with the change (Fullan, 2016). So, this study shows **a necessity of conducting teacher training programs or capacity building programs that could help increase the reform literacy and clarify the misunderstanding and quandaries attached to the reform.**

(7) For a top-down approach-based reform such as this, a notion of *pressure and support* (Fullan, 2016) should be used for the successful implementation of the reform. Correspondingly, the pressure for implementing a reform from the upper authorities is essential as in the lack of pressure, many reforms seem to be unsuccessful. However, pressure singularly never works well in implementing a top-down approach-based reform. If the reformers really want to make the reform successful, **supports and incentives must be activated in combination with pressure.** This strategy seems to have worked well in Finland when the government successfully reformed the education system.

(8) As shown by the data, many of the stakeholders, especially school owners, principals, teachers seem to be dissatisfied with the reform process. **Key stakeholders' voice should be heard and the constructive feedback must be incorporated for making such reforms successful.** No educational reform seems to be successful without the active roles of the school owners, principals, and teachers because they are the real game changer.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

In consideration of some of the practical difficulties, few delimitations were identified for this study. First, due to the inability to understand other languages, the search of the literature was limited to only three languages- Nepal, English, and Hindi. I assume that if I were able to

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understand other languages rather than the ones mentioned above, for instance, French, Spanish, Chinese, etc., I would have been able to obtain more appropriate literature that could optimally situate and validate this study. The rationale behind this assumption is that the technological evolution and globalization, have contributed to educational reform emerging as a global movement. As depicted in the extant literature (Berry, 2011), very rare countries or States in the world have not gone through educational innovation or reform. Second, although more than 20 months have elapsed since I last collected the data, I was unable to include all the updates/changes made after the completion of data collection due to geographic distance (i.e., as the data field is about 11,500 kilometers away (one-way distance) from Ottawa). I could collect the updated data by using technology, such as telephone, official websites, skypes, etc., but these modes also presented certain constraints. As most of the participants were higher level MOE officials, it was quite challenging to reach them via telephone or skype. I tried to obtain some information by using e-mail, but this channel also failed to yield any proper results. Moreover, I could not get the updates in the official websites of the MOE and under agencies as many of the decisions (amendments) were limited in the meeting minute, which were circulated to the concerned agencies or implementers via its sub-systems. Third, the other prominent delimitation, which I failed to accommodate due to technical reason, was the use of the transcript in the Nepali language. To save the time and lessen the translation related errors, I decided not to translate the transcripts into English. However, I used English translation for the quotes and codes. As a result of using the transcripts written in the Nepali language, I could not use the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) for coding of the transcripts. This situation prevented me from comparing and contrasting the codes emerged from the manual coding system and software-produced codes

While this study explored a number of novel aspects of the assessment reform process in the form of substantive grounded theory, it presented some limitations. First, like other qualitative studies, although it has attempted to cover a broader range of population sample from most of the possible categories (i.e., MOE representative to all categories of stakeholder) considerably, yet the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the other contexts. As defined earlier in the previous chapter, a substantive grounded theory, irrespective of the study quality, cannot be considered a final theory. Put differently, this emergent theory is specific to the assessment system reform of the SLC exam in Nepal within the Nepalese context, such as

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education culture of Nepal, the socio-cultural situation of Nepal, geopolitical situation of Nepal, etc. Hence, this study cannot precisely characterize an analogous reform from other parts of the world. Second, due to geographical difficulty, a short period and a lack of access to the target population, a fewer number of participants was recruited from the rural areas. The participants from the rural areas, especially teachers and students might have shared vivid experiences about how they were impacted (both positively and negatively) by the reform.

Third, this study fails to include participants from political parties. This drawback prevented from the researcher from developing an insight whether or not the political parties which were in opposition (i.e., which were not the part of the coalition government) at the time of assessment reform, agree on the endorsement of the reform. This aspect might also play an essential role in resistance management. Fourth, due to a lack of a platform to access the concerned person (i.e., the person who involved in donating the education fund to Nepal), this study fails to include participant/s from the World Bank. The representative of the World Bank could have provided useful and relevant information to this study. Fifth, as suggested by findings, after implementing the reform, the MOE announced some of the programs, such as accommodation program for the low-grade holders, though did not make a formal public announcement. The MOE circulated the instructions or meeting minutes to the concerned authority or department for action. Some of those issues were raised in the data, but the documents were not found. Due to the lack of the official documents, some of the findings could not be discussed with supportive documents. Sixth, as the assessment reform had just begun in 2016 (throughout the country) and the reform was in the implementation phase of the reform, the principal focus of interview and focus group discussion was on the initial and implementation phase of the reform. This study might have missed some of the aspects of the institutionalization phase of the reform. Seventh, as stated in the methodology section, the interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in the native language of the interviewees (i.e., Nepali language) and transcribed in the same language. However, the transcripts were coded into English. Although the codes were verified by another translator (mentioned in the methodology section) for correctness, an inadvertent omit of translation-related errors cannot be negated. Eighth, despite the researcher's best efforts, researcher bias may present as the researcher has had experiences working in that context.

Ninth, given the geopolitical situation of Nepal and almost the similar education culture

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among the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries (as Nepal is a member of the SAARC countries), the search of literature from the Eastern world was emphasized, however not limited to the Eastern world. But the search didn't go as anticipated because only a limited relevant literature was found in these countries. Notably, this does not imply that no empirical studies on the assessment system reform are available. There might be several studies exactly like this. What I meant to say is that due to the following two reasons, I might have been unable to find sufficient literature. First, all the studies might not have been available electronically, as correspondingly, I failed to search the literature present in the libraries. Second, some of the studies might have been published in the language beyond my capacity. I must confess that the search was limited to these three languages- English, Nepali and Hindi as I am fluent in these languages.

Finally, there was a common agreement among the participants that the high-stakes exam-induced suicides and educational losses (i.e., a huge number of failures as defined earlier) are the critical problems that the Nepali education sector is facing. The findings of this study and the mass media (see page 22) indicated that a number of SLC exam failures used to commit suicide after failing the SLC exam. Additionally, no official record showed how many students dropped out of school due to the stress or fear of exam failure (NHSSP report, 2011). In addition to the problem of school dropouts, there was another apparent problem where more than half of the examinees of the SLC exam used to be declared as exam failures every year (see Table 1, page 8). What can be concluded from these instances is that the SLC exam used to take hundreds of innocent lives and prevented a large number of students from joining higher education and technical education and vocational training programs. Specifically, the high-stakes exam-induced suicides and educational losses are systemic problems, and this could be an issue of human rights. It should be noted that such systemic problems are not unique to Nepal as such problems exist in other parts of the world where high-stakes testing is being practiced. Having said that, the degree and intensity of the problems might be different depending on several factors including the socio-economical and educational culture.

Right to live and right to education is the principal tenets of human rights. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights; everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person (Osler & Starkey, 2010). The systemic problems mentioned above indicate that the existing assessment policy in the school education in Nepal seems to violate the principle

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tenets of human rights. These two issues—the high-stakes exam-induced suicides and educational loss—seem to be explicated in depth. Unfortunately, this study remained silent about these issues, which is one of the significant limitations of the study. None of the participants raised these issues nor did the researcher attempt to explore them.

Implications

Although several theories and empirical studies have been conducted on educational and assessment reform, to my knowledge, this study is a first endeavor that has attempted to theorize a complete process of the high-stakes assessment system reform by using a grounded theory methodology. However, like other qualitative studies, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to a broader context. Evidently, every educational reform follows a distinctive process and protocol, and thus, none of the reform theories functions as a ready-made framework for the forthcoming reform. However, despite every reform's unique characteristics and the protocols, reformers could use some of the ideas from the previous studies towards conceptualization or implementation of the reform. I believe that this study would be useful for policymakers, educators, researchers, and reformers as it explains necessary initiatives relevant to foundational preparation in the conceptual phase, minimizing of the possible resistance to reform, strategies that could be used to implement the reform successfully, and optimal steps to resolve the resulting issues and challenges. More specifically, the findings of this study can be viewed from the theoretical, methodological as well as practical perspectives. The following section presents implications of this study under these four categories: Implications for theory, implications for the method, implications for practice and implications for further research. Before presenting the category-wise implications, a synopsis, which tells the readers what findings validated the pre-established findings and what findings were uncommon in the extant literature, is presented.

The main purpose of a grounded theory study is to develop a new theory on the particular field. Having said that, the area of research has been so extensive that all the current study findings might not necessarily be new to the subject under study. In other words, due to the mushrooming of studies, it would not be difficult to find studies parallel (i.e., in one or another way) to the empirical study. In recent years, even in a grounded theory study, it is commonplace to encounter findings of the empirical study being compared with the extant literature. I think that the comparison helps readers explicitly identify what findings validated the pre-existing

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findings and what findings constituted the emergent ones as new knowledge. Given this fact, the main findings of this study (i.e., only gist) are categorized into two groups: (1) The findings that validated some of the pre-established findings and theories of educational and assessment reform and (2) the findings that are uncommon in the extant literature. The following table summarizes both types of findings.

Table 18

Category-wise summary of the findings

S. No.	Category 1: The findings that validated the pre-established ones	S. No.	Category 2: The findings that are uncommon in the extant literature
1	A combination of top-down and bottom-up approach could be a better option for an assessment reform.	1	The need for an effective system for dissemination of implementation related documents/information.
2	The need for a comprehensive official document.	2	The need for unambiguous reform purposes and future direction.
3	The need for a detailed conceptual or theoretical framework.	3	The need for clarity for official documents.
4	The need for an involvement of the stakeholders.	4	The need for a mechanism of quality control (due to transition from a <i>pass-fail</i> to a <i>no pass-fail</i> system).
5	The need for a solid strategic plan for implementing the reform.	5	The need for post-implementation clarification sessions for addressing the resulting issues.
6	The need for a regular monitoring and evaluation system.	6	The need for a separate unit for evaluation and assessment.
7	The need for infrastructure and resources management (human, financial and technical resources).	7	The need for alternative programs for the low grade-holders (e.g., vocational and technical education, stream transfer program).
8	The need for a capacity building program.	8	The need for clarity for the criteria for the government jobs.
9	The need for collection and use of feedback.	9	The need for clarity for admission criteria.
10	The need for teacher advocacy	10	The need for clarity on the <i>GPA</i> , <i>grade descriptors</i> , and <i>no pass-fail</i> provision.
		11	The need for more empirical studies.

As shown in Table 18, the Category 1 findings are common in the extant literature, whereas the Category 2 findings are more specific (however, not exclusively) to the assessment reform mentioned in this study. As stated earlier, both the types of findings have their specific

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importance, namely, the Category 1 findings validate the pre-existing studies and the Category 2 findings postulate new knowledge for further research. I believe that the categorization makes it easier to present the current study implications.

Implications for theory. Both the categories of findings (i.e., the findings that validated the pre-established ones and the findings that are uncommon in the extant literature) presented in Table 12, directly or indirectly contributed to the reform theory. The first category of findings has contributed to theory by validating some of the pre-existing findings and principles of reform, which has, in fact, strengthened the trustworthiness of the previous findings and hypothesis. The second category of findings has opened a new window for the development of a theory of high-stakes assessment reform. As this study has revealed some of the research context specific (i.e., uncommon) aspects of assessment reform, such as need of an effective system of information dissemination, need of an unambiguous reform purposes, need of a mechanism of quality control, need of post-implementation clarification sessions, need of clarity on no pass-fail provision, need of clarity on admission criteria and the criteria for the government jobs, these findings might be useful for developing a formal theory of assessment system reform. Correspondingly, several countries in Asia and other parts of the world have been practicing an assessment system similar to the SLC exam. The theory of assessment reform that incorporates and explicates the ideas expressed in this study could be a milestone for the reformers if the similar type of assessment system is going to be reformed.

Implications for method. Unlike the other studies on educational or assessment system reform, this study has organized the study findings in a framework that affords to explain a complete process of the assessment system reform of the SLC exam in a linear manner. This study has suggested that an inclusion of the key stakeholders in the conceptual phase of the reform and preparation of a comprehensive and explicit official document could prove useful information that could help to clarify some of the quandaries that resulted from the implementation of the reform. It has also suggested that an effective information dissemination system (i.e., mass media) and a strategic plan (i.e., implementer advocacy) are the key aspects in the implementation phase of the reform. Promptly provided authentic information could help school administrators and teachers clarify the confusing issues and concerns, which resulted from the implementation of the reform. This study has also presented a number of measures that the reformers should immediately incorporate and initiate the post-implementation phase of the

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reform. To sum up, this study has clearly explicated what was done in the conceptual, implementation and post-implementation phase of the reform, and suggested what should have been done in the three phases of the reform in order to meet the reform targets. In other words, although several issues of the reform depicted in this study are context specific, it has explored what was done, what was missed and what needs to be done in both the initiation and implementation phase of the reform.

Implications for practice. This study has helped both the reformers and implementers gain an in-depth understanding of the reform process, especially from others' perspectives. Such understanding could contribute to lessen the gap (i.e., if still exists) between the reformers and implementers including the key stakeholders, such as students and parents and resolve the unaddressed issues in conjunction. As this study has clarified some of the confusing issues, such as reform aims, the value of letter grades, whether or not the reformed assessment system was practically a no pass-fail system, it might facilitate the implementers for its practice. Moreover, this study could be useful for students and parents who misinterpreted the reform as an abolition of the pass-fail system.

Implications for further research. As the present study has investigated the assessment reform process in the context of Nepal and revealed several associated unique issues and concerns as regards the assessment system reform, results of this study could be used for further research in many ways. First, as more data is available on the reform impact since the time of data collection to date, researchers may investigate the impact of reform on the test-takers, teachers and the entire education system. Following the endorsement of a large-scale reform such as this, it is necessary to conduct an impact analysis. A mixed method (qualitative + quantitative) approach could serve as a better option for exploring the impact of the reform on the test-takers, the society, and the entire education system. Second, this reform can be replicated in other context or country, wherein, such an assessment system is going to be reformed. Two or more than two grounded theory studies carried out in different countries on the same topic could also reveal the contextual factors that could affect the reform process. Moreover, this study can be replicated by using other research methodologies, such as case study or quantitative method that might reveal other new aspects of the reform. Consequently, such studies could contribute to modifying the existing reform theories and principles.

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Appendices Appendix A

SLC Exam Results 2016 (Technical Stream)

TECHNICAL SLC2072, REGULAR				TECHNICAL SLC2072, EXEMPTED			
Items	Students	Boys	Girls	Items	Students	Boys	Girls
00. APPEARED	3223	1965	1258	00. APPEARED	3	0	3
01. "GPA 3.6 TO 4.0	200	146	54	01. "GPA 3.6 TO 4.0	0	0	0
02. "GPA 3.2 TO BELOW 3.6	704	480	224	02. "GPA 3.2 TO BELOW 3.6	0	0	0
03. "GPA 2.8 TO BELOW 3.2	1196	694	502	03. "GPA 2.8 TO BELOW 3.2	1	0	1
04. "GPA 2.4 TO BELOW 2.8	861	478	383	04. "GPA 2.4 TO BELOW 2.8	1	0	1
05. "GPA 2.0 TO BELOW 2.4	218	142	76	05. "GPA 2.0 TO BELOW 2.4	0	0	0
06. "GPA 1.6 TO BELOW 2.0	27	15	12	06. "GPA 1.6 TO BELOW 2.0	0	0	0
07. "GPA 1.2 TO BELOW 1.6	1	1	0	07. "GPA 1.2 TO BELOW 1.6	0	0	0
08. "GPA 0.8 TO BELOW 1.2	0	0	0	08. "GPA 0.8 TO BELOW 1.2	0	0	0
09. UNDER AGE	1	1	0	09. UNDER AGE	0	0	0
10. THEORY MISSING	13	6	7	10. THEORY MISSING	0	0	0
11. PRACTICAL MISSING	2	2	0	11. PRACTICAL MISSING	1	0	1
12. COPY CANCELLED	0	0	0	12. COPY CANCELLED	0	0	0
13. DROP OUT	31	14	17	13. DROP OUT	0	0	0
14. EXPELLED	0	0	0	14. EXPELLED	0	0	0

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Appendix B

SLC Exam Results 2016 (Regular Stream)

SLC2072, REGULAR		SLC2072, EXEMPTED	
Items	Students	Items	Students
00. APPEARED	437326	00. APPEARED	150826
01. "GPA ABOVE 3.6 TO 4.0"	16454	01. "GPA ABOVE 3.6 TO 4.0"	4
02. "GPA ABOVE 3.2 TO 3.6"	41577	02. "GPA ABOVE 3.2 TO 3.6"	8
03. "GPA ABOVE 2.8 TO 3.2"	48611	03. "GPA ABOVE 2.8 TO 3.2"	94
04. "GPA ABOVE 2.4 TO 2.8"	63181	04. "GPA ABOVE 2.4 TO 2.8"	2943
05. "GPA ABOVE 2.0 TO 2.4"	94716	05. "GPA ABOVE 2.0 TO 2.4"	29780
06. "GPA ABOVE 1.6 TO 2.0"	104278	06. "GPA ABOVE 1.6 TO 2.0"	75340
07. "GPA ABOVE 1.2 TO 1.6"	56763	07. "GPA ABOVE 1.2 TO 1.6"	37939
08. "GPA ABOVE 0.8 TO 1.2"	8000	08. "GPA ABOVE 0.8 TO 1.2"	2452
09. "GPA FROM 0.0 TO 0.8"	11	09. "GPA FROM 0.0 TO 0.8"	2
10. UNDER AGE	16	10. UNDER AGE	27
11. THEORY MISSING	1733	11. THEORY MISSING	1081
12. PRACTICAL MISSING	1800	12. PRACTICAL MISSING	952
13. COPY CANCELLED	188	13. COPY CANCELLED	195
14. DROP OUT	6878	14. DROP OUT	8675
15. EXPELLED	1	15. EXPELLED	2

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(iii) Admission Criteria for Vocational and Technical Programs

प्राविधिक शिक्षा तथा व्यावसायिक तालीम परिषद्,
परीक्षा नियन्त्रण कार्यालय, सानोठिमी, भक्तपुर

(ख) अक्षराङ्कन पदार्थको नतिजाको हकमा

क्र.सं.	अध्ययन गराइने शैक्षिक कार्यक्रम	आवश्यक न्यूनतम शैक्षिक योग्यता
१	प्रमाणपत्र तह नर्सिङ	मान्यता प्राप्त शिक्षण सम्बन्धित प्रवेशका परीक्षामा औसतमाई ग्रेडपन्ट, अरेजी र विज्ञान विषयमा न्यूनतम C ग्रेड प्राप्त रही समग्र ग्रेड Grade Point Average (GPA) - न्यूनतम 2 प्राप्त ।
२	प्रमाणपत्र तह सामान्य चिकित्सा	
३	प्रमाणपत्र तह सेटिबल (प्याथ टेक्नोलोजी)	
४	प्रमाणपत्र तह सेफ्टन साइकल (सेफ्टन हाइजिन)	
५	प्रमाणपत्र तह डाइग्नोस्टिक रेडियोग्राफी	
६	प्रमाणपत्र तह डीएमपीआर	
७	प्रमाणपत्र तह सामान्य शारीरिक चिकित्सा	
८	प्रमाणपत्र तह अत्याधुनिक विज्ञान	
९	प्रमाणपत्र तह अक्युपन्चर	
१०	डिप्लोमा इन फार्मेसी	
११	डिप्लोमा इन एपिकन्चर (बायो विज्ञान)	
१२	डिप्लोमा इन एपिकन्चर (पशु विज्ञान)	
१३	डिप्लोमा इन फूड एण्ड डेरी टेक्नोलोजी	
१४	डिप्लोमा इन फरेस्ट्री	
१५	डिप्लोमा इन शिथिल इन्जिनियरिङ	
१६	डिप्लोमा इन इलेक्ट्रिकल इन्जिनियरिङ	
१७	डिप्लोमा इन इलेक्ट्रोनिकल इन्जिनियरिङ	
१८	डिप्लोमा इन इलेक्ट्रिकल एण्ड इलेक्ट्रोनिकल इन्जिनियरिङ	
१९	डिप्लोमा इन त्रिकोमेट्रिक इन्जिनियरिङ	
२०	डिप्लोमा इन आर्कीटेक्चर इन्जिनियरिङ	
२१	डिप्लोमा इन मेकानिकल इन्जिनियरिङ	
२२	डिप्लोमा इन अटोमेकानिकल इन्जिनियरिङ	
२३	डिप्लोमा इन इन्टरमेशन टेक्नोलोजी (आई.टी.)	
२४	डिप्लोमा इन कम्प्युटर इन्जिनियरिङ	
२५	डिप्लोमा इन होटल म्यानेजमेण्ट	

(ग) माथि उल्लेखित कार्यक्रमहरू मध्ये युरा (क) को कस २६ को डिप्लोमा इन बायोमेडिकल इन्जिनियरिङ इन्जिनियरिङ को शैक्षिक कार्यक्रमको अध्ययन अर्बाधि (प्रमाणपत्र तह/दश जोड दुई) उत्तीर्ण पछि १८ महिना र सो बाहेक अन्य सबै शैक्षिक कार्यक्रमहरूको अध्ययन अर्बाधि जम्मा ३ (तीन) वर्षको हुनेछ ।

(घ) तोकिएको कार्यक्रमको लागि आवश्यक पर्ने न्यूनतम शैक्षिक योग्यता तपुगी ग्रेड वृद्धिका लागि एस.एस.सी.को मौका परीक्षामा समावेश हुने परीक्षार्थीहरूले यस बमोजिमको प्रवेश परीक्षामा सामेल हुन पाउने छन् तर प.नि.का ले भर्नाका लागि तोकिएको अन्तिम मिति भित्र तोकिएको योग्यता परेको प्रमाणपत्र अनिवार्य रूपमा पेश गर्नु पर्नेछ । यदि पेश गर्न नसकेमा निजलाई भर्ना गराइने छैन ।

५ प्रवेश परीक्षाको सूचना :
परिषद्, प.नि.का बाट संचालन हुने यस निर्देशिकामा उल्लेखित शैक्षिक कार्यक्रममा प्रवेश परीक्षाबाट परीक्षार्थी छनौट गरी भर्ना गर्नका लागि परिषद्, प.नि.का द्वारा प्रत्येक वर्ष गोरखापत्र राष्ट्रिय दैनिक पत्रिकामा सार्वजनिक सूचना प्रकाशित गरी आवेदन फाराम माग गरिनेछ ।

क) यस निर्देशिका बमोजिम संचालन हुने अर्गिकृत (वि.शु.क.) छात्रवृत्ति र पूर्ण शुल्किय प्रवेश परीक्षा छुट्टा-छुट्टै संचालन गरी नतिजा प्रकाशन गरिनेछ ।

डिप्लोमा तथा प्रमाण पत्र तहको प्रवेश परीक्षा सम्बन्धित छात्रवृत्ति विवरण एव चर्चा सम्बन्धी निर्देशिका २०७७

3

Appendix D

Letter of Invitation

(i) Letter of Invitation in English

Title of the study: A Grounded Theory of High-stakes Assessment System Reform: The Case of School Leaving Certificate (SLC) Exam in Nepal.

Supervisor

Prof. Michel Laurier, PhD (Vice-President)
Office of the Vice-President Academic and Provost
University of Ottawa

Researcher

Yogendra Bhattarai
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education

Invitation to Participate: You are invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Yogendra Bhattarai under the supervision of Professor Michel Laurier, PhD. This research is a part of my PhD program.

Participation: If you wish to participate in this study, please respond to the researcher (me) via phone or e-mail. By agreeing to participate in this study will be interpreted as an indication of your consent to participate. If you participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in one-on-one semi-structured interview or focus group discussion. During the interview or focus group discussion, you will answer the questions, share your experiences, put your opinion/view on the research related topics, and can ask clarification question to the researcher. The interview/focus group discussion would be about 40/55 minutes long. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.

Purpose of the Study: The main purpose of this study is to develop a substantive grounded theory of high-stakes assessment system reform (i.e., an assessment system reform of the SLC exam) that explicates multi-facets of the assessment system reform. I believe that the theory I am developing by means of this study focusing on the transition from a pass-fail assessment system to a no pass-fail, would be a first-fully-fledged theory on this particular field.

Benefits: This study will inform the concern stakeholders about the possible problems, dilemmas, challenges, opportunities and short-term and long-term impact attached to the assessment reform. Specifically, this study will prove to be a milestone and road map to those who will be conducting studies on the issues related to abolition of high-stakes assessment system and are thinking to reform the existing assessment and evaluation system like the one depicted in this study in their educational institutions.

Risks: Although there is no danger of participating in this study, in some cases, you may feel uneasy or uncomfortable to share your views or answer any of the questions. During the interview/focus group discussion, if you feel uncomfortable answering any question/s for any reason, you can simply not answer that question. You have the right to withdraw your participation any time during the interview/focus group discussion or even after completion of the interview/focus group discussion (if you feel uncomfortable).

Confidentiality and Anonymity: The information that you will share will remain strictly confidential and will be used solely for the purpose of this research. The only people who will

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have access to the research data are the principal researcher and the supervisor. Your answers to open-ended questions may be used verbatim in presentations and publications but neither you nor your administrative position (that reveals your identity) will be identified. Anonymity is guaranteed since you are not being asked to provide your name or any personal information.

Conservation of Data: The interviews and discussions will be audio recorded. The audio recorded data, memos, field notes and the completed demographic survey questionnaires will be kept in a locked wooden/metal box and the transcripts will be saved on a password protected computer. A copy of the transcript will also be saved on a hard drive and kept in the locked box. After downloading the audio recorded data into the computer/laptop, the data from the recording device will be deleted entirely.

Voluntary Participation: You are under no obligation to participate and if you choose to participate, you may refuse to answer questions that you do not want to answer. Participating in this research implies consent.

Information about the Study Results: A summary of findings of the research will be sent to you by e-mail if you wish to have it.

If you have any questions or require more information about the study itself, you may contact the researcher or his/her supervisor at the numbers mentioned herein.

If you have any questions with regards to the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, ...

Please keep this form for your records.

Researcher :..... **Date:**

(ii) Letter Invitation in Nepali

सहभागिताको लागि आमन्त्रण

उच्च महत्व भएको एस. एल.सी.परिक्षाको मुल्यांकन प्रणालीको रूपान्तरण सम्बन्धि एउटा ग्राउन्डेड सिद्धान्त

सुपरभाइजर:

प्रो. मिशेल लोरिए, पीएचडी
ओटवा विश्वविद्यालय
शिक्षा संकाय
550 कम्बरल्याण्ड (Tabaret 217) ओटवा

अनुसन्धानकर्ता:

योगेन्द्र भट्टराई
ओटवा विश्वविद्यालय
शिक्षा संकाय

सहभागिताको लागि आमन्त्रण: म योगेन्द्र भट्टराईद्वारा संचालित तथा प्रोफेसर मिशेल लोरिएद्वारा

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सुपरिवेक्षण गरिएको माथि उल्लेखित अनुसन्धानमा भाग लिनको लागि अनुरोध गर्दछु। यो अनुसन्धान मेरो पीएचडी कार्यक्रम को एक भाग हो।

सहभागिता: तपाईं यो अध्ययनमा भाग लिन चाहनुहुन्छ भने, कृपया शोधकर्तालाई (मलाई) फोन वा ई-मेल मार्फत सम्पर्क गर्नहुन अनुरोध गर्दछु। यदि तपाईं यो शोधमा भाग लिन चाहनुहुन्छ भने, मितिभित्र सम्पर्क गर्नहुन अनुरोध गर्दछु।

अध्ययनको उद्देश्य: यस अध्ययनको मुख्य उद्देश्य उच्च महत्व भएको एस. एल. सी. परिक्षा मूल्यांकन प्रणालीको रूपान्तरण सम्बन्धि ग्राउन्डेड सिद्धान्त निर्माण गारनु हो। यो सिद्धान्तले परिवर्तित मूल्यांकन प्रणाली सम्बन्धि यावत तथ्यहरु उजागर गर्नेछ।

लाभ: यो अध्ययनबाट उच्च महत्व भएको एस. एल. सी. परिक्षा मूल्यांकन प्रणालीको रूपान्तरण संग सम्बन्धि समस्या, दुविधा, चुनौतीहरू, अवसरहरू र अल्पकालीन र दीर्घकालीन प्रभावको बारेमा जानकारी हुने छ। यसले यस प्रकारका परिवर्तन गर्न चाहने र अनुसन्धान गर्न चाहने मानिसको लागि एउटा कोशे ढुंगाको काम गर्नेछ।

जोखिम: यस अध्ययनमा भाग लिंदा कुनै खतरा छैन। तापनि केही अवस्थामा जबाफ दिन असहज महसुस हुन सक्छ। तर तपाईं सहभागीले कुनै प्रश्नको जबाफ दिन चाहानुहुन्न भने, तपाइलाई पुर्णरूपमा छुट छ। तपाईं कुनै पनि बेला आफ्नो सहभागिता फिर्ता लिन सक्नु हुन्छ।

गोपनीयता: तपाईंको सहभागिताको जानकारी कडाईका साथ गोप्य रहनेछ, र तपाईंसंग कलेक्सन गरेको डेटा यो अनुसन्धानको प्रयोजनको लागि मात्र प्रयोग गरिनेछ। अनुसन्धानको डाटाको पहुँच मात्र शोधकर्ता र पर्यवेक्षकसंग हुनेछ। तपाईंको आफ्नो नाम वा कुनै पनि व्यक्तिगत जानकारी प्रकाशित गरिने छैन।

डाटाको संरक्षण: अडियो रेकर्ड डाटा, मेमोहरू, टिप्पणीहरू र पूरा डेमोग्राफिक सर्वेक्षणको प्रतिहरु लक काठको बक्समा राखिनेछ। इलेक्ट्रोनिक डेटाहरु भने पासवर्ड राखेर कम्प्युटरमा सुरक्षित राखिनेछ।

स्वेच्छिक सहभागिता: यो शोधमा तपाईंको सहभागिता स्वेच्छिक हुनेछ र तपाईंले कुनै प्रश्नको जवाफ दिन चाहनुहुन्न भने पूर्ण रूपमा इन्कार गर्न सक्नुहुन्छ।

तपाईंसंग कुनै पनि प्रश्न छ भने वा अध्ययनको बारेमा थप जानकारी आवश्यक भएमा, तपाईं यहाँ उल्लेख गरिएको शोधकर्ता वा उनको पर्यवेक्षकसंग सम्पर्क गर्न सक्नु हुन्छ।

अनुसन्धान सम्बन्धि कुनै जिज्ञाशा भए निम्न अनुसार सम्पर्क गर्नुहोला
प्रोटोकल अधिकारी,

ओटवा विश्वविद्यालय,

550 Cumberland Street, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5,

कृपया आफ्नो रेकर्डको लागि यो फारम राख्नु होला।

शोधकर्ताको हस्ताक्षर :मिति:

Appendix E
Sample Questions for Focus Group Discussion

(i) English Version

Set 3
Parents

- (1) I would like to start this interview with your professional background. Could you please tell me about your educational and professional background briefly?
- (2) What changes have recently been made in the assessment system of the School Leaving Certificate exam in Nepal? How do you describe this reform- as a giant leap or a tiny change?
- (3) What is the fundamental difference between the previous and the newly reformed assessment system? How do you evaluate the assessment system reform overall? Are you and your children satisfied or happy with this reform?
- (4) What are the (a) opportunities/strengths, (b) challenges, (c) problems and (d) weaknesses (if any) attached to the reform? What strategic steps should the concerned authority take to address the challenges, problems and weaknesses?
- (5) What is your opinion on the short and long-term impact of the assessment system reform on student learning and student's personal life?
 - (i) Do you think the reform helps in enhancing student learning and increasing quality of education?
 - (ii) Will the newly introduced assessment system be less stressful to test-takers and teachers?
 - (iii) How does the reformed assessment reform impact on student motivation?
 - (iv) Does the assessment reform deter or minimize the SLC exam failure related devastating consequences, such as suicide, school dropout, etc. in Nepal?
 - (v) How are low achieving students, for those having grade D or below, treated by the employers, colleges and universities?
- (6) Finally, do you have anything else to share with me or any suggestions?

(ii) Nepali Version (for Students)

प्रश्न (Student)
प्रश्न (बिधार्थी)

- (१) आजको छल-फल भाई-बहिनीहरुको छोटो परिचयबाट शुरु गर्न चाहन्छु। भाई-बहिनीहरुले पालै पालो आ-आफ्नो छोटकरीमा परिचय दिनुस्न।
- (२) SLC परीक्षाको मुल्यांकन प्रक्रियामा हाल सालै कस्तो प्रकारको परिवर्तन भएको छ? यो परिवर्तनको श्रोत के हो (internal need वा external force - donor agency)? यो परिवर्तनको लक्ष के हो? यहाको बिचारमा यो परिवर्तन आमूल वा सामान्य के हो?
- (३) यो परिवर्तनको बारेमा तपाइले कसरि थाहा पाउनु भयो?
- (४) पहिलेको र अहिलेको मुल्यांकन प्रणालीमा मुख्य के भिन्नता छ? यो परिवर्तनको बारेमा के सुन्नु भएको छ? यो परिवर्तनको बारेमा सरहरू, अभिभावकहरु र अग्रज दाई -दिदीहरु के भन्नु हुन्छ?
- (५) तपाइलाई यो परिवर्तनको ठिक वा बेठिक के लाग्छ? किन?
- (६) यो परिवर्तन को लागि राज्य, शिक्षा मन्त्रालय र विद्यालयले के कस्तो तयारी र पूर्वाधार निर्माण गर्यो?
- (७) यो परिवर्तनलाइ तपाइहरु कसरि मुल्यांकन गर्नुहुन्छ? बिशेष गरी तलका सन्दर्भमा
 - (i) परिवर्तनको श्रोत (आन्तरिक वा बाह्य ?)
 - (ii) देशको आवश्यकता

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- (iii) आवश्यक गृहकार्य र तयारी
- (८) यो परिवर्तनका तात्कालिक र दीर्घ कालिक असरहरु के के हुन्? (अबसरहरु, चुनौतिहरु, समस्याहरु, कमजोरीहरु)
- (i) यो परिवर्तनले विधार्थी सिकाइलाइ मद्दत पुरयाउन्छ? यसले शिक्षाको गुणस्तर बृधी गर्छ?
- (ii) यो परिवर्तन ब्यबहारिक रुपमा low-stakes परिक्षा प्रणाली हुन् सक्ला?
- (iii) यो परिवर्तनले बिद्वार्थिको motivation मा कस्तो असर पार्ला?
- (iv) यो परिवर्तनले SLC failure मा देखा पर्ने अति negative परिणामहरु, जस्तै suicide जस्ता क्षेतीलाइ न्यूनीकरण वा समाप्त गर्ला?
- (v) low grade - D वा E ल्याउने विधार्थिको भबिश्य कस्तो होला ? पहिलेको मुल्यांकन प्रणाली भन्दा राम्रो कि अझ खराब? (how are they treated by job markets, colleges , universities or in the international arena ?)
- (९) छोटकरीमा भन्नु पर्दा यो परिवर्तनका सबल र दुर्बल पक्षहरु के के हुन्?
- (१०) यो परिवर्तनसंग जोडिएका समस्या, चुनौती र कमजोरीहरुलाई सम्बोधन गर्न सम्बन्धित निकायहरुले अब कस्तो प्रकारको strategy अपनाउनु पर्ला?
- (११) आगामी SLC परीक्षाको बारेमा चिन्तित हुनुहुन्छ? किन?
- (१२) अन्त्यमा, छुट-फुट कुराहरु छन् भने वा share गर्न मन लागेका कुराहरु वा कुनै सुझाव भए राखी दिनुस्र
- Thank you so much for your active participation and insightful thoughts and ideas. It will definitely contribute a lot to construct an assessment system reform theory!

Appendix F
Sample Questions for Interview

(i) English Version

Set 1

Expert/Principal/ Teacher/School owner/College owner/Employer/University administrator

(1) I would like to start this interview/discussion with your academic and professional background. Could you please tell me about your academic and professional background briefly?

(2) What changes have recently been made in the assessment system of the School Leaving Certificate exam in Nepal? What was/were the source/s and goals of the reform? How do you describe this reform- as a giant leap or a tiny change?

(3) What has the government (or concerned authority) done as a foundational preparation and necessary homework for initiating and implementing the reform?

(4) Who were involved in the reform process? What roles did they (i.e., local authorities, school principals and teachers etc.) play in the initiation and implementation process of the reform?

(5) What roles have you played as an expert for the initiation or /and implementation of the reform?

(6) How do you evaluate the assessment system reform in terms of (a) **sources of reform**, (b) **necessity of the reform**, (c) **theoretical basis**, (d) **clarity in policy documents**, and (e) **necessary homework and preparation**? **Do you think there could be better alternatives to this reform?**

(7) What is your opinion on the short and long-term impact of the assessment system reform (i.e., opportunities, challenges, problems and weaknesses) on student learning, student's personal life, curriculum, pedagogy, and other stakeholders?

(i) Do you think the reform helps in enhancing student learning and increasing quality of education?

(ii) Will the newly introduced evaluation system be practically low-stakes exam?

(iii) How does the reformed assessment system impact on student motivation?

(iv) Does the assessment reform deter or minimize the SLC exam failure related devastating consequences, such as suicide, school dropout, etc. in Nepal?

(v) How are low achieving students, for those having grade D or below, treated by the employers, colleges and universities?

(8) What strategic steps and procedures have been/should be employed to address the challenges, problems and weaknesses attached to the different phases (i.e., initiation, implementation) of the reform?

(9) Finally, do you have anything else to share with me or any suggestions?

(ii) Nepali Version

प्रश्न (शिक्षक-Teacher)

(१) आजको छल-फल यहाहरुको छोटो परिचयबाट शुरु गर्न चाहन्छु। यहाहरुले पालै पालो आ-आफ्नो academic र professional पृष्ठभूमि छोटकरीमा बताई दिनुस्न।

(२) SLC परीक्षाको मुल्यांकन प्रक्रियामा हाल सालै कस्तो प्रकारको परिवर्तन भएको छ? यो परिवर्तनको श्रोत के हो (internal need वा external force - donor agency)? यो परिवर्तनको लक्ष के हो? यहाको बिचारमा यो परिवर्तन आमूल वा सामान्य के हो?

(३) यो परिवर्तनको औचित्य पुष्टि गर्ने आधारहरु देख्नु हुन्छ? वा नेपाल को सन्दर्भमा मुल्यांकन प्रणालीमा

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कस्तो प्रकारको परिवर्तनको आवश्यकता थियो वा छ? The same one or different?

(४) यो परिवर्तन को लागि राज्य वा शिक्षा मन्त्रालय अन्तर्गतका सम्बन्धित निकायहरूले के कस्तो तयारी र पूर्वाधार निर्माण गर्यो?

(५) यो परिवर्तनको लागि क-कस्को कस्तो- कस्तो भूमिका रह्यो?

(६) यो परिवर्तनमा तपाईंको के कस्तो भूमिका रह्यो?? (initiation मा वा implementation मा?)

(७) यो परिवर्तनलाई यहाहरूले कसरि मुल्यांकन गर्नुहुन्छ? बिशेष गरी तलका सन्दर्भमा

(i) परिवर्तनको श्रोत (आन्तरिक)

(ii) देशको आवश्यकता

(iii) सैदान्तिक आधार

(iii) policy document मा स्पष्टता

(iv) आवश्यक गृहकार्य र तयारी

(८) यो परिवर्तनका तात्कालिक र दीर्घ कालिक असरहरू के के हुन्? (अबसरहरू, चुनौतिहरू, समस्याहरू, कमजोरीहरू)

(i) यो परिवर्तनले बिधार्थी सिकाइलाई मद्दत पुरयाउन्छ? यसले शिक्षाको गुणस्तर बृधी गर्छ?

(ii) यो परिवर्तन ब्यबहारिक रुपमा low-stakes परिक्षा प्रणाली हुन् सक्ला?

(iii) यो परिवर्तनले बिद्वार्थीको motivation मा कस्तो असर पार्ला?

(iv) यो परिवर्तनले SLC failure मा देखा पर्ने अति negative परिणामहरू, जस्तै suicide जस्ता क्षेतीलाई न्यूनीकरण वा समाप्त गर्ला?

(v) low grade - D वा E ल्याउने बिधार्थीको भबिश्य कस्तो होला ? पहिलेको मुल्यांकन प्रणाली भन्दा राम्रो कि अझ खराब? (how are they treated by job markets, colleges , universities or in the international arena ?)

(९) छोटकरीमा भन्नु पर्दा यो परिवर्तनका सबल र दुर्बल पक्षहरू के के हुन्?

(१०) यो परिवर्तनसंग जोडिएका समस्या, चुनौती र कमजोरीहरूलाई सम्बोधन गर्न सम्बन्धित निकायहरूले अब कस्तो प्रकारको strategy अपनाउनु पर्ला?

(११)अन्त्यमा, छुट-फुट कुराहरू छन् भने वा share गर्न मन लागेका कुराहरू वा कुनै सुझाव भए राखी दिनुस

Thank you so much for your active participation and insightful thoughts and ideas. It will definitely contribute a lot to construct an assessment system reform theory!

Appendix G
Questionnaire

Questionnaire for Demographic Information 2016 (student participants)

This questionnaire, which is designed to collect demographic information of the participants, is part of a study designed to explore multi-dimension of the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam assessment system reform in Nepal. The demographic information will be used just to explicate the findings from participants' cultural, ethnic, linguistic or economic perspectives (if applicable). However, if there is a danger of disclosing the identity/confidentiality of any of the participants due to limited number of participant/s in a particular group (i.e., ethnic, linguistic etc.), I will avoid mentioning it. **The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. All survey respondents and the data collected will remain anonymous.**

Thank you for your assistance with this study!!!

If, however, you would like to receive results (by the end of the research), please provide your

If not, leave the e-mail line blank.

E-mail..... (OPTIONAL)

DIRECTIONS: Please respond to the following items. Place a check mark (✓) in each of the boxes that best describes you and add information if required. You can avoid answering any of the following questions if you feel uncomfortable in answering them. Please do not write your name.

1. I am: Male Fema I don't want to meion Or Please specify.....

2. My year of birth is:

3. How do you self-identify in terms of ethnicity? I am:

4. My mother tongue (first language-language spoken at home) is.....

5. The type of school I will be attending/ have attended the SLC exam is:

Public school Private school Technicschool

6. My school is located at (village/

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city):.....

7. Have you taken the SLC exam before? Yes No If "Yes," how many times?.....

8. Have you ever failed any examinations? Yes No If "Yes," how many times?.....

9. Are you the first member of your family to attend school? Yes No

10. What is the level of education of your parents?

Father: Below SLC/High School SLC/High School passed Undergraduate
Graduate passed or above

Mother: Below SLC/High School SLC/High School passed Undergraduate
Graduate passed or above

11. Does your father have a job? Yes No

12. Does your mother have a job? Yes No

13. My optional papers/courses/stream in grade ten/nine are/were:.....

14. In school, approximately what percentage of classes do/did you attend?

100% 80-99% 60-79% less than 60%

15. What percentage did you receive in your previous grades (i.e., grade, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9)?

Grade 5:..... Grade 6:..... Grade 7:..... Grade 8:..... Grade 9:.....

16. What Grade are you thinking to obtain or have you obtained in the SLC exam?

A+ A B E

17. Do you have to work at home? Yes No If "Yes," about how many hours a day?

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.....

18. How many hours do you study at home?.....

19. Do you have any job? Yes No

**Thank you for your participation!
Yogendra Bhattarai**

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Appendix H Ethics Approval

File Number: 06-16-20

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 08/02/2016



Université d'Ottawa **University of Ottawa**
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Ethics Approval Notice

Social Sciences and Humanities REB

Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Michel	Launier	Education / Education	Supervisor
Yogendra	Bhattarai	Education / Education	Student Researcher

File Number: 06-16-20

Type of Project: PhD Thesis

Title: A Grounded Theory of High-stakes Assessment System Reform: The Case of the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) Exam in Nepal

<u>Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</u>	<u>Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</u>	<u>Approval Type</u>
08/02/2016	08/01/2017	Approved

Special Conditions / Comments:
N/A



THE ASSESSMENT REFORM OF THE SLC EXAM IN NEPAL

File Number: 06-16-20

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 03/02/2016



Université d'Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement (2010) and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the ethics application for the above named research project. Ethics approval is valid for the period indicated above and subject to the conditions listed in the section entitled "Special Conditions / Comments".

During the course of the project, the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the project (e.g., change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, including consent and recruitment documentation, should be submitted to the Ethics Office for approval using the "Modification to research project" form available at: <http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>

Please submit an annual report to the Ethics Office four weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to request a renewal of this ethics approval. To close the file, a final report must be submitted. These documents can be found at: <http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/forms.html>

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Office at extension 5387 or by e-mail at: ethics@uOttawa.ca.

Signature:

Hoda Shawki
Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research
For Barbara Graves, Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB

550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154
Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada

550 Cumberland Street, room 154
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada

Appendix I

Consent Form for the Participants

Consent Form

(i) Consent Form for Student Participants

Title of the study: A Grounded Theory of High-stakes Assessment System Reform: The Case of School Leaving Certificate (SLC) Exam in Nepal

Supervisor

Prof. Michel Laurier, PhD (Vice-President)
Office of the Vice-President Academic and Provost
University of Ottawa

Researcher

Yogendra Bhattarai
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Yogendra Bhattarai under the supervision of Professor Michel Laurier, PhD.

Purpose of the Study: The main purpose of this study is to explore multi-facets of the SLC exam assessment system reform including problems, challenges and impact of the reform. I believe that this study will help to investigate the problems, challenges and opportunities attached to the transition from a **pass-fail** assessment system to a **no pass-fail**.

Participation: My participation will consist essentially of focus group for a single session during which I share my thoughts and experiences and answer the researcher's questions. The focus group discussion has been scheduled at Kamyak School, Bagbazar, Kathmandu on Sunday, 11 September, 2016 at 4:00 pm. I will also be asked to complete a 15-minutes long demographic survey at the beginning of the focus group discussion. The discussions will be audio recorded.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer my personal thoughts and opinions, and this may cause me to feel nervous or uncomfortable. I have received assurance from the researcher that I do not have to answer any questions that I do not want to answer.

Benefits: My participation in this study will make me familiar with issues, concerns and possible consequences of the SLC exam assessment system reform. This study will also prove to be a milestone and road map to those who will be conducting studies on the issues related to abolition of high-stakes assessment system and are thinking to reform the existing assessment system like the one depicted in this study in their educational institutions.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for the aforementioned research purposes, and that my confidentiality will be protected by using pseudonym while quoting.

Anonymity: In order to keep the participants' identity anonymous, no names and signals (that disclose their identity) will be mentioned in the study. Instead of participants' names, Student 1, Student 2 etc. will be used while quoting.

Conservation of data: The audio recorded data, memos, field notes and the completed survey questionnaires will be kept in a locked wooden/metal box and the transcripts will be saved on a personal password protected computer. A copy of the transcript will also be saved on a hard drive and kept in the locked box. Only the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the data.

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All the data will be disposed within five years of this date.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed.

Acceptance: I, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Yogendra Bhattarai of the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, under the supervision of Professor Michel Laurier, PhD. If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or his supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5.

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

(ii) Consent Form for Non-student Participants

Title of the study: A Grounded Theory of High-stakes Assessment System Reform: The Case of School Leaving Certificate (SLC) Exam in Nepal

Supervisor

Prof. Michel Laurier, PhD (Vice-President)
Office of the Vice-President Academic and Provost
University of Ottawa

Researcher

Yogendra Bhattarai
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Yogendra Bhattarai under the supervision of Professor Michel Laurier, PhD.

Purpose of the Study: The main purpose of this study is to explore multi-facets of the SLC exam assessment system reform including problems, challenges and impact of the reform. I believe that this study will help to investigate the problems, challenges and opportunities attached to the transition from a **pass-fail** assessment system to a **no pass-fail**.

Participation: My participation will consist essentially of focus group/interview for a single session during which I share my thoughts and experiences and answer the researcher's questions. The focus group discussion/interview has been scheduled at on....., 2016 atpm/am. The discussions/interview will be audio recorded.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer my personal thoughts and opinions, and this may cause me to feel nervous or uncomfortable. I have received assurance from the researcher that I do not have to answer any questions that I do not want to answer.

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Benefits: My participation in this study will make me familiar with issues, concerns and possible consequences of the SLC exam assessment system reform. This study will also prove to be a milestone and road map to those who will be conducting studies on the issues related to abolition of high-stakes assessment system and are thinking to reform the existing assessment system like the one depicted in this study in their educational institutions.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for the aforementioned research purposes, and that my confidentiality will be protected by using pseudonym while quoting.

Anonymity: In order to keep the participants' identity anonymous, no names and signals (that disclose their identity) will be mentioned in the study. Instead of participants' names, participant -1, participant-2, etc. will be used while quoting.

Conservation of data: The audio recorded data, memos, field notes and the completed survey questionnaires will be kept in a locked wooden/metal box and the transcripts will be saved on a personal password protected computer. A copy of the transcript will also be saved on a hard drive and kept in the locked box. Only the researcher and the supervisor will have access to the data.

All the data will be disposed within five years of this date.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed.

Acceptance: I, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Yogendra Bhattarai of the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, under the supervision of Professor Michel Laurier, PhD. If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or his supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

(iii) Consent Form in Nepali for Students

सहभागीको मजुरी

उच्च महत्व भएको एस. एल.सी.परिक्षाको मुल्यांकन प्रणालीको रुपान्तरण सम्बन्धि एउटा ग्राउन्डेड सिद्धान्त

सुपरभाइजर:

प्रो. मिशेल लोरिए, पीएचडी
ओटवा विश्वविद्यालय
शिक्षा संकाय

550 कम्बरल्याण्ड (Tabaret 217) ओटवा
ओटवा, क्यानाडा, K1N 6N5

अनुसन्धानकर्ता:

योगेन्द्र भट्टराई
ओटवा विश्वविद्यालय
शिक्षा संकाय

सहभागिताको लागि आमन्त्रण: तपाईं योगेन्द्र भट्टराईद्वारा संचालित तथा प्रोफेसर मिशेल लोरिएद्वारा सुपरिवेक्षण गरिएको माथि उल्लेखित अनुसन्धानमा भाग लिनको लागि म मन्जुर गर्दछु।

अध्ययनको उद्देश्य: यस अध्ययनको मुख्य उद्देश्य उच्च महत्व भएको एस. एल. सी. परिक्षा मूल्यांकन प्रणालीको रूपान्तरण सम्बन्धि ग्राउन्डेड सिद्धान्त निर्माण गारनु हो। यो सिद्धान्तले परिबर्तित मुल्यांकन प्रणाली सम्बन्धि यावत तथ्यहरु उजागर गर्नेछ।

सहभागिता: फोकस ग्रुपको छल-फल निम्न स्थान, मिति र समयमा हुने छ

स्थान :.....

मिति:

समय:.....

लाभ: यो अध्ययनबाट उच्च महत्व भएको एस. एल. सी. परिक्षा मूल्यांकन प्रणालीको रूपान्तरण संग सम्बन्धि समस्या, दुविधा, चुनौतीहरू, अवसरहरू र अल्पकालीन र दीर्घकालीन प्रभावको बारेमा जानकारी हुनेछ। यसले यस प्रकारका परिबर्तन गर्न चाहने र अनुसन्धान गर्न चाहने मानिसको लागि एउटा कोशे ढुंगाको काम गर्नेछ।

जोखिम: यस अध्ययनमा भाग लिंदा कुनै खतरा छैन। तापनि केही अवस्थामा जबाफ दिन असहज महसुस हुन सक्ने कुरा जानकारी पायें। चाहाना नभयमा वा मलाइ असहज महसुस भयेमा म कुनै पनि बेला आफ्नो सहभागिता फिर्ता लिन सक्नेकुरा मलाइ जानकारी गराइयो।

गोपनीयता: मेरो सहभागिताको जानकारी कडाईका साथ गोप्य रहने र मसंग कलेक्सन गरेको डेटा यो अनुसन्धानको प्रयोजनको लागि मात्र प्रयोग गरिने कुराको जानकारी पायें। अनुसन्धानको डाटाको पहुँच मात्र शोधकर्ता र पर्यवेक्षकसंग हुने र मेरो आफ्नो नाम वा कुनै पनि व्यक्तिगत जानकारी प्रकाशित नगरिने कुराको जानकारी पायें।

डाटाको संरक्षण: अडियो रेकर्ड डाटा, मेमोहरू, टिप्पणीहरू र पूरा डेमोग्राफिक सर्वेक्षणको प्रतिहरु लक काठको बक्समा राखिने र इलेक्ट्रोनिक डेटाहरु भने पासवर्ड राखेर कम्प्युटरमा सुरक्षित राखिने कुराको जानकारी पायें।

स्वेच्छिक सहभागिता: यो शोधमा मेरो सहभागिता स्वेच्छिक हुने र मैले कुनै प्रस्नको जवाफ दिन नचाहेमा पूर्ण रूपमा इन्कार गर्न पाइने कुराको जानकारी पायें।

स्विकृती:

अनुसन्धानको एथिक्स सम्बन्धि कुनै जिज्ञाशा भए निम्न अनुसार सम्पर्क गर्ने:

प्रोटोकल अधिकारी,
विश्वविद्यालय ओटवा,

Tabaret Hall (Room No. 54)

THE ASSESSMENT REFORM OF THE SLC EXAM IN NEPAL

कृपया आफ्नो रेकर्डको लागि यो फारम राख्नु होला
शोधकर्ताको हस्ताक्षर :मिति:

THE ASSESSMENT REFORM OF THE SLC EXAM IN NEPAL

Appendix J Sample of Open Coding

English teacher, MA, MPhil,
Co-ordinator,
12- year experience
Nepali teacher,
MBA, MA
7-year experience
Astrology teacher at Sanskrit school
MA in astrology,
MA in Economics,
15-year experience
Maths teacher,
MA in Maths,
More than 15 years' experience
English teacher
M Ed in English, 12-year experience
Research experience
Social studies teacher
MA, Med,
8-year experience
Technical electrical teacher
MA in Engineering,
1-year experience
Replacing numerical measurement
Following international trends
Making assessment more objective
Reducing number of failure
Opening doors to higher education for all (poor students)
Strength based continuous promotion
Low graders seem to be satisfied with their grades
Leaving re-exams
Administering and marking system is same
Changing from % to letter grades
Minor change
Increasing pass %
Need of a drastic change in data processing
'No fail' means a drastic change
Reforming system
Replacing paper-pencil test
Pointing out a need of measuring multiple intelligence
Creating confusion
Continuous assessment system
Connecting to international assessment system
Bringing positive changes
Non-stop promotion
Bringing positive changes
Creating confusion among students and teachers
Discouraging competition that enhance learning
Removing reward system
Defying rights of information
Non-beneficial and inefficient
Implementing without preparation and homework
Amending many times
Creating confusing environment
Blaming as incomplete homework
Receiving no clear instructions about admissions by colleges
Many changes brought after exam proved to be useless
Facing many confrontations
Lacking preparation
Implementing without necessary homework and preparation
Imposing from the State
Top-down change
Initiating from internal source
Seeing a positive change
Initiating from the external source
More confusion in rural area

THE ASSESSMENT REFORM OF THE SLC EXAM IN NEPAL

Failure of policy makers as there is no preparation
4-year piloting is essential
No training for teachers
Bringing positive changes
Still confusion
Starting earlier in technical stream
Following international trends and practices
Copying from other countries
Not addressing the local problems
Lacking adequate research
Increasing negligence in weak subjects
Lacking clarity in policy document
Requiring amendment in the policy documents
No fail, but can't get admission without certain GPA
Not clear whether it minimizes educational loss or maximizes
Losing motivation
Stop working on weak subjects
Changing from competitive to co-operative learning system
Minimizing educational losses
Decreasing exam result-induced suicides
Low graders are not admitted to the university,
Getting admission to the technical institutions
Technical education is expensive
Advocating for numerical assessment
GPA measures student performance
Suggesting to decrease interval of 10
Advocating for a CAS from the beginning to the school end year
Feeling need of more quantitative research before reform
Explaining as an unobstructed promotion
Hopeful for positive consequences

THE ASSESSMENT REFORM OF THE SLC EXAM IN NEPAL

Appendix K

Sample of Axial Coding

(a) Conceptualization of the Reform

A New Phenomenon in Nepal

Introduction of GPA System in Nepal

Commencement of 'No Fail' System in Nepal- Breaking down iron gate for more than eight decades (12)

Origin of the Reform

Minor research reports, interactions with the system and sub-system and insight are the source of reform (13)

External Force- External funding of 20% 16

Aims of the Reform

Improvement of the Educational Loss

Unobstructed Promotion and One-subject Certification

Reduction of Distress on Test-takers

Meaning to addressing global practice 16

Following SAARC countries' practices 16

Framework of the Reform

Lacking of Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Preparation and Homework

Preparation of the Official Documents

Involvement of the Stakeholders in the Conceptualization and Roadmap Phase

Involvement of the Stakeholders in the Implementation Phase

(b) Implementation of the Reform

Dissemination of the Information

Use of the Mass and Electronic Media- Disseminating by website, media, booklet, seminar (14)

Use of Sub-system under the MOE

Strategic Plan for Implementing the Reform

Following a notion of 'Learning by Doing'

Following a notion of 'Improving by Feedback'

Conditional Factors for the Successful Implementation of the Reform

Pointing out a danger of becoming all stakeholders unfriendly 17

Teachers' Role in Implementing the Reform and Enhancing Student Learning- Teachers can do everything as they possess enormous power and potential 18. Pointing out a need of making teachers a part of reform-31

Parents' Role in Implementing the Reform and Enhancing Student Learning

Effectiveness of the Monitoring System

Steps Forward for a Successful Implementation of the Reform

(Salient Issues that Need to be Addressed Immediately for the effective and successful implementation of the Reform)

Incompatibility of the Marks in the Practical and Theoretical Subject

Collection and Use of Feedback

Literacy Campaign for the Stakeholders- Need of Increasing Parent awareness

Need to Brainwash the Misunderstanding of about the 'No Fail' Assessment System

Managing for vocational and technical education- Vocational educational is taken as second class education (13)

Special programs for low grade holders

Provision of Grade Increment Exam for the Interested Students

Stream transfer Program- Two-way track is necessary-vocational to academic and vice versa

(c) Quandaries, Challenges and Opportunities Resulting from the Reform

Misunderstanding and Misinterpretation attached to the Reform

Perceiving as a 'No fail' System- Indirectly grade D and E are unacceptable . No fail system is not universally accepted 24

Effect of the Misunderstanding and Misinterpretation on the Reform

Misunderstanding is that university education is right of people 31- University is only for those who deserve

Paradoxical and Controversial Issues in the Assessment Reform

Commencement of the Reform in Grade 10

CAS and its Continuation- CAS is ritual in the government 16

Interval of 10 in the Grading System- The logic of making interval of ten is that the cognitive level of the student belonging to the range of ten is the same-31. The second logic is that more than ten grading system seems to be clumsy

Accommodation Programs for the Low-Grade Holders

Admission Criteria in Grade 11, CTEVT and Universities

Factors Contributing to Creating Confusion among Stakeholders

Amendment of the LGW Procedure

Frequently Amended Instructions and Regulations

THE ASSESSMENT REFORM OF THE SLC EXAM IN NEPAL

Eligibility Criteria for a Government Job

Debate on Access to University Education

Varied Effect of the Reform (System-wise, Location-wise and Group-wise)

Effect of the Reform in the Private, Public and Technical School System

Effect of the Reform in the Rural and Urban Area

Effect of the Reform on the High-performers and Low-performers

Short-term and Long-term Impact of the Reform

Positive Impact

Reduction of SLC Exam Related Fraud and Distress on Test-takers

Increase of self-confidence on low performers (14)

Improvement in the Livelihood of People

Negative Impact

Loss of Motivation for Learning

Fear of Decreasing the Quality of Education

Question of Worthiness of the Certificate

(d) Salient Features of the Reform

Transition from a Pass-fail to a No-fail System

Transition from a Numerical to a Letter Grading System

End of Stigma attached to the SLC Failures

Replacement of Competitive Learning by Co-operative Learning

Minimizing unfair competition among private Schools and Colleges

(e) Condemnation Attached to the Reform

Salient Criticisms Attached to the Reform

Influence of Political and Organizational Forces

Comparing the reform with camouflaging 18

Ending of merit based reward system

Decaying a Hard-Working Trend

Students Deserve the Right to Information

Lack of research on the relation between a subject and the area of study

Lack of Empirical Study for the Suitability and Sustainability of the Reform

Loss of Responsibility and Accountability of School and Teacher- Ending the accountability system for policy makers and teachers 19- Expressing the idea that social pressure forces teachers to be responsible 31

Putting students in limbo-midpoint- Making low graders future vague and uncertain 24

NEB is still unclear on what step to take for Grade 11 and 12 (25)

This provision (eligibility of admission in technical) is useless for rural and poor students 26

(f) Compatibility between the Demand of Change and the Reform

The 21st Century Model Assessment: The Type of Assessment Reform Nepal was Seeking

Total Reform of the Assessment system- Need of local need based curriculum and assessment

Assessment of Multi-abilities and skills-Concept of Whole Person Assessment- Knowledge is never zero- No student fails the exam-they have only different ability (13)

Need of formative assessments, remedial classes and standardized testing systems- teacher based assessment

Separate unit of testing and evaluation is needed 17

Equating zero marks with zero knowledge is a wrong concept 14

(g) Limitation of the Reform

Limitations of the Reform

Short Period of Time

Lack of Sufficient Funding/ lacking of financial resources, human resources, technical resources

Appendix L

Sample of Selective Coding

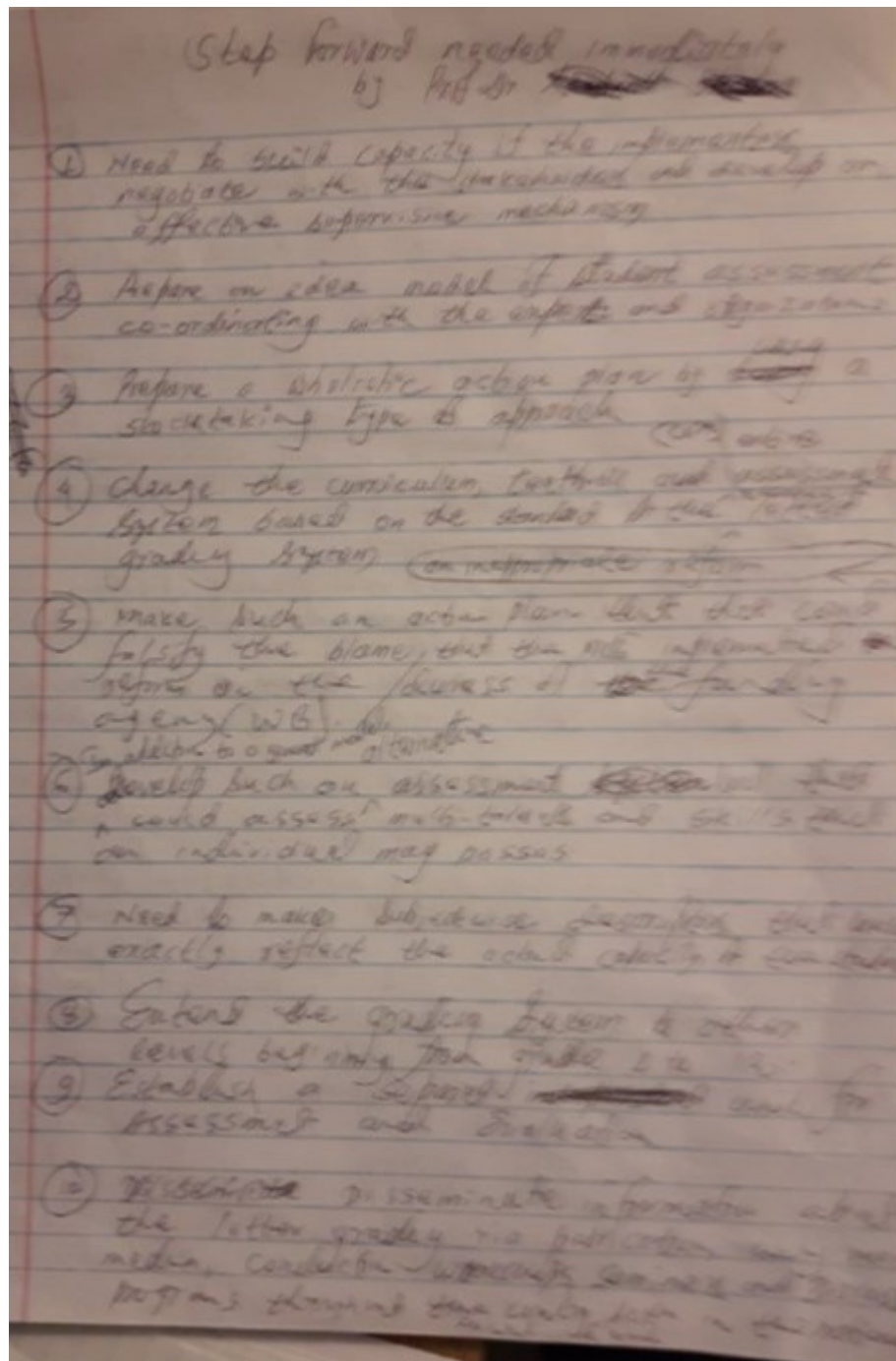
1

Targeting to medium level student to improve their learning
Increasing intake in the higher level- Reducing number of failure
Receiving information from teachers
Revolutionary change- No fail' means a drastic change
Changing students' mentality from hard working to laziness
Ending of merit based reward system
Lacking of detailed information about its aims and objectives
Need of public awareness- Lacking of GPA literacy
De-motivating for students due to lack of competitive assessment system: Discouraging competition that enhance learning
Lacking necessary preparation and homework
Implementing without necessary homework and preparation
Loose copy checking
Creating differences between private and public
Imposing reform without consulting lower stakeholders
Guessing as a bottom up reform
Motivating students as it has created a co-operative learning environment
Showing need of changing in curriculum
Providing opportunity to all for upgrading- Explaining about the provision of grade improvement
Low stakes assessment system
No fail system motivates weak students due to hope of better future
Increasing job opportunity even for low performers

2

Following international trends- Connecting to international assessment system
Opening doors to higher education for all (poor students)
Strength based continuous promotion- Continuous assessment system-non-stop promotion
Low graders seem to be satisfied with their grades- evidence of leaving re-exams by many students of low graders
Administering and marking system is same
'Pointing out a need of measuring multiple intelligence
Creating confusion among students and teachers
Defying rights of information
Non-beneficial and inefficient
Creating confusing environment
Receiving no clear instructions about admissions by colleges
Many changes brought after exam proved to be useless
Imposing from the State
Initiating from internal source
Initiating from the external source
More confusion in rural area
4-year piloting is essential
No training for teachers

Appendix M
Sample of Memo



Appendix N
Clustering

Clustering the theme categories



THE ASSESSMENT REFORM OF THE SLC EXAM IN NEPAL

Appendix O

Sample of Marksheet of the SLC Exam

(i) Front Page

ROLL NO.		SYMBOL NO.						
OF JANASEWA HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL, RAMAULO, BAYAZGAN								
IN THE ANNUAL SLC EXAMINATION OF 2072 BS (2016 AD) ARE GIVEN BELOW:								
SERIAL NUMBER	SUBJECTS	CREDIT HOUR ¹	OBTAINED GRADE ²		FINAL GRADE	GRADE POINT	REMARKS ³	
			TH	PR				
01	COMP. ENGLISH	4	D	B+	D+	1.6		
02	COMP. NEPALI	4	D		D	1.2		
03	COMP. MATHEMATICS	4	D		D	1.2		
04	COMP. SCIENCE	4	E	A+	D+	1.6		
05	COMP. SOCIAL STUDIES	4	D+		D+	1.6		
06	COMP. HEALTH, POP & ENV EDU	4	C	A+	C+	2.4		
07	OPT. I ECONOMICS	4	D+		D+	1.6		
08	OPT. II HEALTH & PHYSICAL EDUCATION	4	C+	A+	B	2.8		
GRADE POINT AVERAGE (GPA) : 1.75								
<p>1. One Credit Hour equals 32 Clock Hours. 2. TH : Theory, PR : Practical 3. *@ : Absent *T : Theory Grade Missing *P : Practical Grade Missing</p>								

(ii) Back Page

THE ASSESSMENT REFORM OF THE SLC EXAM IN NEPAL

Details of Grade Sheet

SN	Interval in Percent	Grade	Description	Grade Point
1	90 to 100	A+	Outstanding	4.0
2	80 to below 90	A	Excellent	3.6
3	70 to below 80	B+	Very Good	3.2
4	60 to below 70	B	Good	2.8
5	50 to below 60	C+	Satisfactory	2.4
6	40 to below 50	C	Acceptable	2.0
7	30 to below 40	D+	Partially Acceptable	1.6
8	20 to below 30	D	Insufficient	1.2
9	0 to below 20	E	Very Insufficient	0.8

Table 1: Intervals and Grades

Grade Description

A+ (Outstanding): Exceptional evidence of understanding and summarizing the subject matter; demonstration of extraordinary performance in problem-solving, creativity, critical expression and participation; exceptionally independent in learning and organizing contents with superior communication skills.

A (Excellent): Strong evidence of understanding and summarizing the subject matter; demonstration of exemplary performance in problem-solving, creativity, critical expression and participation; admirably independent in learning and organizing contents with advanced communication skills.

B+ (Very Good): Very good evidence of understanding and summarizing the subject matter; demonstration of higher performance in problem-solving, creativity, critical expression and participation; greatly independent in learning and organizing contents with sound communication skills.

B (Good): Good evidence of understanding and summarizing the subject matter; demonstration of reasonably good independent performance in problem-solving, creativity, critical expression and participation; very independent in learning and organizing contents with reasonable communication skills.

C+ (Satisfactory): Adequate evidence of understanding and summarizing the subject matter; demonstration of reasonably good but not particularly independent performance in problem-solving, creativity, critical expression and participation; reasonably independent in learning and organizing contents with sufficient communication skills.

C (Acceptable): Sufficient evidence of understanding and summarizing the subject matter; demonstration of acceptable performance in problem-solving, creativity, critical expression and participation; reasonably independent in learning and organizing contents with satisfactory communication skills.

D+ (Partially Acceptable): Some evidence of understanding and summarizing the subject matter; demonstration of limited performance in problem-solving, creativity, critical expression and participation; partially independent in learning and organizing contents with basic communication skills.

D (Insufficient): Minimal evidence of understanding and summarizing the subject matter; demonstration of deficient performance in problem-solving, creativity, critical expression and participation; needs close supervision in learning and organizing contents with minimal communication skills.

E (Very Insufficient): Negligible evidence of understanding and summarizing the subject matter; seriously deficient performance in problem-solving, creativity, critical expression and very minimal participation; needs constant supervision in learning and organizing contents with inadequate communication skills.