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ARTICLE



## Fijian primary school leaders' beliefs and practices about assessment

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### ABSTRACT

School leaders have an important role in supervising learning and instruction. In these roles, they use a variety of assessment methods to measure and support student learning. Their beliefs about assessment can have an impact on how they perceive and use different forms of assessment. This study sought to explore assessment related beliefs and practices of a small group of Fijian Head Teachers. The findings suggest that they hold mixed beliefs about assessment. The findings also suggest that the Head Teachers made attempts to make formative use of written or other assessments they used. They registered little support for too much formal, standardized testing.

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## Introduction

Effective school leadership is not limited to administrative supervision but extends to ensuring improved learning and instruction. Research suggests that school leaders need to adopt effective leadership practices that support improved learning and instruction functions (Robinson, 2007). While administrative competence is imperative in effective school leadership, evidence suggests that those leaders who are actively engaged with their teachers in gathering and evaluating assessment information regarding students' learning, and using that information to guide future instructional decisions, tend to offer greater chances of improved educational gains (Brown, 2018). In other words, school leaders must be equipped with the necessary knowledge about assessment, including how and when to assess, which methods of assessments to use to gain relevant insights into students' learning, and how to use the elicited information in order to meet the diverse educational needs of students.

One of the important precursors to effective assessment practices is educators' beliefs about assessment (Barnes, Fives, & Dacey, 2015; Skott, 2015; Ashton, 2015; Buehl & Beck, 2015; Brown, 2015; Dayal, 2017). Differences in beliefs could imply that educators take relatively different perspectives on deriving and using assessment information. For example, Popham (2003) claims that teachers' beliefs tend to be reflected in the way US and UK teachers define formative assessment. He argues that US educators are likely to focus on the teachers' role in using assessment information, whereas UK counterparts are likely to stress what students might do with the elicited information. With respect to

teachers' conceptions of assessment, Brown (2018) notes how teachers "are squeezed between two major functions of assessment that both have legitimacy" (p. 7). Brown's work contrasts the beliefs of teachers in New Zealand, the US and the UK, finding that teachers in New Zealand strongly believe that assessments help improve student learning, while teachers in the US and UK focus more on the accountability role of assessment (Brown, 2018). While both conceptions of assessment could be helpful, it is imperative that educators make use of the elicited information in such ways that would eventually lead to improved student learning (Popham, 2003).

The major purpose of the study reported here was to explore the assessment-related beliefs and practices of a small number of Fijian primary school Head Teachers. For the purpose of this study, we took Philipp's (2007) understanding of the term beliefs. He broadly defines beliefs as "lenses that affect one's view of some aspect of the world," (p. 259). In light of our research aim, the research questions addressed in this paper are:

- (1) What are school leaders' beliefs about assessment?
- (2) What kinds of assessments do school leaders use the most?
- (3) Are school leaders' beliefs aligned to their assessment related practices?

While there are a growing number of studies targeting teachers' and learners' perceptions of assessment (Brown & Harris, 2012; Brown & Hirschfeld, 2007; Brown & Remesal, 2012; Cowie, 2005; Harris, 2008; Van de Watering, Gijbels, Dochy, & van der Rijt, 2008), there is a relatively limited body of research reporting on school leaders' beliefs of assessment. School leaders' beliefs about assessment are important because leaders, being tasked with the overall supervision of instruction, have a lot of influence on how assessments are conducted. Brown (2018) states that beliefs about assessment "filter and guide" educators' "interpretation and implementation of assessment" (p. 7). This means that school leaders' beliefs about assessment matter a lot because school leaders are tasked with the responsibility of implementing the assessment policy imposed by the management or government (Brown, 2018). There is certainly a dearth of literature on school leaders' views regarding assessment in the Pacific context. The topic is vital to understand because school leaders' beliefs about assessments are likely to have an impact on how they participate in the assessment process, and how they expect their teachers to implement assessment at the classroom level. In the Pacific Island country of Fiji, the role of assessment has typically been linked to determining how well schools are performing. Against this backdrop, this study aims to add to our understanding of how primary school leaders in Fiji view and use assessments within their schools.

## Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework of beliefs and practices of assessment was designed for this study by considering the various paradigms, criteria and continua presently used in the field of educational assessment.

The psychometric notion of student assessment, also referred to as the traditional paradigm of student assessment (Shepard, 2000; Wallace & White, 2014) involves measuring students' learning using quantitative methods. The quantitative method often translates to standardized achievement test or examinations, including mostly objective type items such

as multiple-choice items. Such methods of assessing student learning represents a narrower view of assessment, often putting assessment as independent of instruction (Popham, 2014). Such methods, often classified under the umbrella term “summative assessment”, happen at the end of the course of instruction, and are used to certify whether a person has passed or failed. According to Oliveri, Gundersen-Bryden, and Ercikan (2013) some of the major roles of examinations include: evaluating the effectiveness of school; guiding policy making; making decisions regarding students learning, and; certification of graduating students. Such assessments have come under much criticism from the wider education community due to their wide ranging side-effects. Critique of this type of assessment includes, but is not limited to: teachers teaching to the test; assessments having detrimental impact on pedagogy because such assessments narrow the curriculum; also, the assessment results provide insufficient information for teaching purposes since such approaches only assess lower-level thinking skills with heavy emphasis on test results (Klenowski, 2009).

The other paradigm of student assessment, often referred to as the socio-constructivist (Burton, 1992) or the emergent paradigm (Shepard, 2000), regards knowledge as fallible and a product of human creativity. This view of knowledge means that learning or knowledge creation is seen as a social process in which the learner is an active participant. Such a view of learning has important implications for assessment. According to Wyatt-Smith and Klenowski (2014) the traditional views of learning and knowledge are likely to be insufficient, or perhaps even irrelevant in the future. Popham supports this argument when he states that:

We must abandon traditional, comparatively oriented notions of educational measurement and adopt, instead, a conception of educational measurement that is unabashedly conducive to better instruction. We need to ‘break set’; that is, we need to look at educational tests in a fundamentally different way. (2014, p. 193)

This criticism points us towards a general term which directs educators to a take broader view of assessment, namely formative assessments, also called assessments for learning. Black and Wiliam (1998) define formative assessments as any assessment from which the elicited information is actually used to make changes to teaching and learning with the view to improve learning. Cowie and Bell (1999) and Shepard et al. (2005) hold a similar view but add that assessment information must be used to enhance learning during the time in which learning is taking place. According to the Black and Wiliam model of formative assessment (1998), four assessment actions help in improving student learning. These include effective questioning, feedback, peer-assessment and self-assessment. The current study inclines towards socio-constructivist views of assessment because it provides a complete view of assessment which could be widely applicable to improving learning.

Traditional and contemporary beliefs and practices of assessment are conceptualized using various criteria. Wallace and White (2014) provide a framework that uses seven criteria placed on an assessment continuum, with traditional assessment on one end and reform-based assessments on the other. They use criteria such as: purpose, use, timing, feedback, task, cognitive demand, and methods of assessment. They argue, for example, that at or near the traditional end, assessment purposes are mainly those of evaluation and certification, while the contemporary purposes end sees assessments being used to improve teaching and learning. Similarly, at the traditional end, the methods of assessments are rather limited compared to multiple methods available for use at the reform-based end.

Others, such as Waugh and Gronlund (2013) also provide a useful distinction between traditional or testing type assessments and modern or performance assessments. They use criteria such as realism of tasks, complexity of tasks and assessment time needed to distinguish between various types of assessment. Their continuum is characterized by testing on one end and performance assessment on the other. The terms beginning, during, and end of instruction are used to point out various purposes and uses of assessment. They state, for example that the traditional style of testing is low in realism in comparison to performance assessments. For example, traditional tests which require the selection of a correct response from a given set of responses do not simulate performance in the real world. This traditional style of testing is also most frequently employed at the end of instruction.

Barnes et al. (2015) use a continuum of beliefs and purposes of assessment that is characterized by extreme accounting and pedagogical ends. For example, at the extreme pedagogical end, assessments serve to regulate teaching and learning whereas the accounting end sees assessments as something used to merely grade students, teachers and schools. We have drawn upon the ideas suggested in the literature and use four categories to conceptualize the various beliefs and practices of assessment. These are captured in Table A1 and a succinct discussion on each of the criterion is provided below.

*Beliefs and purposes* – research suggests that beliefs play an important role in a teacher's instructional practice (Ashton, 2015; Buehl & Beck, 2015; Skott, 2015). Beliefs about assessment are usually explored by focusing on various purposes and/or uses of assessment. We take up the continuum proposed by Barnes et al. (2015) in this regard. We agree with the view that educators can, on one hand believe that assessments serve extreme accountability purposes (argued as irrelevant by Brown (2003, 2004)), while on the other end of the continuum of beliefs, they may see assessments as purely an activity with a pedagogical aim. Educators can hold mixed beliefs, representing any point on the traditional – contemporary continuum.

*Nature of assessment tasks and levels of cognitive demands* – on one hand, assessment tasks could be closed-ended (such as true-false items) and include short questions which mostly measure a single learning outcome. The learning outcomes could be of lower-order in terms of the cognitive demand it places on the learner. Such questions usually target the recall or retention of knowledge, and do not resemble any real-world situation. Students are provided a list of choices to choose from. At the other end of continuum are tasks that are open-ended with no fixed responses. Such open-ended tasks may target all levels of cognitive constraints right from lower-order *remember* to higher-order *apply* or *create* objectives. Assessment tasks of this nature may target multiple learning objectives in a single assessment task.

*Time/timing* – here, time refers to the actual amount of time it takes to develop and implement assessments, while timing refers to the frequency at which assessments take place. Assessments that are at or near the traditional continuum generally take lesser time to develop and implement. They often happen less frequently – mostly at the end of the period of instruction. In the Fijian context, these are represented by the end-of-year examinations. Assessments on the other end of the continuum usually take a lot more time to prepare and implement. This is mainly because of the complex nature of the assessment tasks.

*Methods of assessment and grading* – methods of assessment at the traditional end are limited. These normally include methods such as written tests that contain objective type, select-response items. Such assessments are usually easier to grade because of the limited range of answers that are expected. In contrast, methods of assessment at the contemporary end are multiple. Apart from the usual written tests, assessments at this end include open-ended tasks such as performance and portfolio assessments. Such assessments, however require greater skills in grading because of the complexity of the tasks and wide array of answers that students may supply.

## Literature about teachers' and head teachers' beliefs of assessment

Brown and colleagues have identified the following four teacher conceptions of assessment which serve four distinct purposes: improving teaching and learning; holding students accountable for learning; making schools and teachers accountable for student learning, and assessment serving no legitimate purpose in schooling (Brown, 2003, 2004; Brown & Hirschfeld, 2007). The first two hold that assessment is learner- focused and, for joint use by students and teachers in order to improve teaching and learning. The other two conceptions represent other roles of assessment that align with the use of summative assessments.

In a study involving Fijian teachers, Dayal and Lingam (2015) also revealed that teachers held various conceptions of assessment. While a majority of the seventy participants' initial understandings aligned to a traditional conception that involved measuring students' performance, some of the participants agreed that assessments could have formative functions when they were asked to list other major purposes of assessment. The study noted that a greater number of pre-service teachers held an "assessment of learning" conception of assessment in comparison to teachers who had some years of teaching experience. Of the practicing teachers, a majority held beliefs that assessment should be used to support students' learning. In another study involving Fijian teachers, Dayal and Lingam (2017) asked participants to note their preference of summative and formative assessments. Their findings articulated that pre-service and in-service teachers could hold beliefs which are in support of summative assessment, formative assessment, or both types of assessment. A majority of the pre-service and in-service group gave explicit support in favor of formative assessments. In both the studies, however, none of the participants noted that they found assessments to be irrelevant.

While the above studies deal with teachers, there seems to be a limited number of studies which focus on Head Teachers' beliefs about assessment. Work by Stiggins (2004) does go some way towards addressing Head Teachers' thoughts by highlighting ways in which public officials, including school leaders, apply assessments in a misguided way. By identifying four commonly held beliefs about the use of assessment, which he argues are false, Stiggins offers these "mistaken beliefs" and proffers alternative "more productive beliefs" in their place (Stiggins, 2004, p. 23). Two mistaken beliefs that are most relevant to the Fijian context are discussed here. One of the mistaken belief is that "high-stakes standardized tests are good for all students because they motivate them to learn" (p. 23). Stiggins (2004, p. 24) claims that high – stakes tests can be detrimental to struggling students, and offers a productive belief: "High – stakes tests without supportive classroom assessment environments harm struggling students." Another false belief is that the

teachers and administrators do not need more training on assessment policies. To counteract this, Stiggins suggests that teachers need more training to be able to implement assessments effectively at the classroom level. The mistaken beliefs and their corresponding productive beliefs provide a useful pair of lenses in understanding beliefs in the current study. Studies such as Timperley (2005, 2011) suggest that leaders need to work together with their teachers in order to use assessments to improve learning.

## Context and method of the study

### Context

Primary education in Fiji generally caters for Years 1 to 8 for students aged 6–14. In 2014, there were 732 primary schools that enrolled a total of 138,672 students. There were a total of 5,558 primary school teachers in Fiji in that year (Ministry of Education, 2014). Primary school level assessments are generally a mix of external and internal forms. Internal assessments include ongoing classroom assessments as well as mid-term, end-of-term, and annual examinations. External examinations in the form of Literacy and Numeracy Assessments (LANA) are held at Years 4, 6 and 8. From 2015, the external examination regime was extended to include Year 6, 7 and 8 National Examinations. This meant that Class-Based Assessments (CBAs) which had been part of the official assessment regime prior to 2015 had to be abolished. The LANA and external examinations are prepared by the Ministry of Education and are used mainly to gauge school performance by comparing percentage pass rates of all schools. It can be seen that the upper – primary education is heavily dominated by the examination culture. At the lower primary level, that includes Preschool as well as Years 1–2, the curriculum is guided by the Foundation Areas of Learning and Development (FALD) that encourages thematic teaching and curriculum integration. Assessment for learning is generally encouraged. With respect to assessment, for example, the Fijian Thematic Syllabi for Years 1 and 2 states that assessments must be continuous and based on individual performance and growth (Ministry of Education, 2014).

### Participants and instrument

The participants of this study were 30 primary school Head Teachers from different primary schools in the Western part of the Fiji Islands. There were 25 male and five female Head Teachers. While there is a relative gender – balanced primary teacher population, the gender imbalance in our study was due to a convenience sampling approach that we used. Most of these participants were known to us, and they volunteered to be part of this study. The participants had approximately 20 years of teaching experience on average, and this included 5 years on average of leadership experience. All the participants had a Bachelor of Education degree, with a few having post graduate qualifications in Education.

Our primary source of data collection was one – to – one semi structured interviews that lasted, on average, approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were held at the respective Head Teachers' schools, at a time convenient, and pre – arranged by the researchers. Only two of the researchers were involved in conducting interviews and we used a set of prompts to ensure that every interview elicited information that would be

consistent. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. We classified our interview questions under the themes summarized in [Table A2](#).

Our data collection and analysis processes were guided by pre-identified themes ([Table A2](#)), informed by the assessment beliefs and practices framework. In order to investigate the participants' assessment practices, the categories in the conceptual framework, including "nature of assessment", "timing of assessments" and, "methods of assessments and grading" were employed. This conceptual framework was furthermore useful in the analysis stage as it provided a broad, traditional-contemporary continuum against which to understand participants' beliefs and practices. The results, presented below, follow this sequence shown in [Table A2](#). Participant confidentiality has been preserved by the use of participant codes using alphabets HT and numbers 1 to 30. This ID is reflected in the following sections.

## Results

### *Assessment beliefs*

All the school leaders were able to explain what the term assessment meant to them. In addition, they were able to discuss what the major purposes of assessment were for their school. The majority of leaders defined assessment as a means to test students' knowledge about concepts and to analyze whether they have understood everything based on the learning outcomes. Some of the common terminologies used to define assessment were: *testing, measuring, gauging, analyzing, disseminating, evaluating, gathering information, obtaining results* and *weighing performance*.

Further analysis of interview data, including analysis of items related to major purpose and other purposes of assessment under our first theme revealed that our participants had mixed beliefs about assessment. While a majority had their initial responses that related to measuring how much academic knowledge and skills their students had learnt, all of them seem to have beliefs that could be classified toward the contemporary end of the assessment beliefs continuum. All the participants explicitly stated purposes such as assessment needs to be learner focused, assessment helps teachers and students improve teaching and learning. They all agreed that assessment is for joint use by students, teachers and parents. The assessment related beliefs of a selected group of participants as shown in [Table A3](#) below show how the Head Teachers beliefs seem to shift from a traditional perspective to a more profound, contemporary perspective.

In summary, all the Head Teachers claimed assessment to be a tool for understanding the weaknesses and strengths of a child in terms of their academic performance, from which teachers can devise strategies to work on these weaknesses. In addition, assessment also provides a means for teachers to achieve feedback on their teaching.

### *Assessment policy*

Out of the 30 participants, 14 had an assessment policy. A majority of the Head Teachers, whose school had an assessment policy, claimed that their school's assessment policy was guided by what was already prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Ten school heads reported not having an assessment policy, but that they are following the assessment plan given by the Ministry of Education.



Out of the 30, only nine Head Teachers had prepared a policy on their own with the help of the teachers and executive teachers in their school. However, four Head Teachers who made their own policies, derived these with the help from outside schools (neighboring schools) and utilized the policy which had been prepared by the former leader of their school. Only one leader interviewed was unsure which type of assessment policy was used in their school. The rest had a fair idea about the content of their assessment policies and the manner in which they had been planned.

The majority of leaders knew exactly how the school assessment policy had been developed and this was mainly by the teachers and executive teachers. The assessment policies were made at the beginning of the school term during staff meetings conducted by the Head Teacher and Assistant Head Teacher. Moreover, one leader highlighted that “the policy was made by one person only traditionally (by head teacher), however, three years ago the top bottom approach was used, giving teachers opportunity to create assessment policy”. Apart from using teachers in developing their assessment policy, one Head Teacher reported including a few parents in their policy development process. None of the Head Teachers said that they involved students in their policy development.

The aim of the policy was similar in all schools, that is, to achieve more than 50 percent overall pass rate at the end of the year, with some Head Teachers using 100 percent pass rates as their overall goal of assessment. They all agreed, however, that policy on assessment was to act as a guide only. Also, as reported by all the Head Teachers, the assessment policy contains written (summative assessment) tests and exams collectively. Assessments such as short tests, midterm exams, term end exams, trial exams and annual examination featured strongly in Head Teachers’ explanations of what kinds of assessments were in the school’s assessment policy. The formative assessment techniques were mentioned by a few Head Teachers only, and included literacy and numeracy assessments, short quizzes, morning talk, and, homework.

### *Assessment practices*

The most common assessment practices reported by the Head Teachers were written pen-and-paper tests. This was well summarized by two Head Teachers who said: “we use both summative and formative assessments – most common being summative” (HT 9); “Assessment methods used is mostly written tests – summative is more common” (HT 11). Head Teachers believed that these written tests differentiated between the high achievers and low achievers. All Head Teachers stated that they have different kinds of tests that had different names such as: unit tests, topic tests, mid-term tests, term – end tests, mid – year tests, annual examinations and trial tests. All these internal tests and examinations were developed by the class teachers, and checked by the Executive Teachers before being submitted to the Head Teachers for their approval. As one Head Teacher said “Teachers prepare assessment. They prepare blueprint and check it and type the paper” (HT 20). During the interviews, all the Head Teachers demonstrated awareness that the external examinations are created by the Ministry of Education.

A few of the Head Teachers reported that their school was part of a district “cluster schools” system that allowed their class teachers to exchange test and examination papers with other schools from the same district. This was referred to as the ‘cluster

method'. The cluster meetings are held regularly and one of the areas where class teachers benefit was through sharing of test and examination papers, as well as developing test and examination papers in cluster groups. Head Teachers whose schools are part of the cluster method agreed that this approach was a good way for teachers from different schools to collaborate through collaboratively writing short tests and examinations, as well as exchanging written tests and examinations. The interviews also revealed that these cluster meetings focused on written examinations rather than other forms of assessment. This method, however was used by only a third of the Head Teachers:

Our short test papers and examinations are mostly made through the cluster method. Class teachers from the five schools in my cluster have regular meetings and they can share their papers with others, or they develop their papers in groups. (HT 15)

We also borrow papers from our cluster schools to see whether our school's performance is in line with another school. This we mostly do in term three, for remedial purposes. (HT 2)

Assessment is made by teachers – teachers work in levels (year 1 and 2 work together, 3 and 4 and 5 and 6 etc.). Teachers help each other to prepare assessment in class. (HT 16)

Eighteen Head Teachers stated that they used formative assessment practices as well. They used the term 'formative assessments' to mean a wide range of assessments including homework, reading tests and spelling tests. Some saw larger, school-wide activities such as 'drug awareness week' as formative assessment because such events provided students an opportunity to learn as well.

Marking of books, homework and running records, that is, asking students to read a paragraph and assessing based on number of words read correctly (HT 1);

Students taking part in activities and celebrations such as drug awareness week (HT 4);

Teachers creating 10 marks worth of assessments such as short tests or morning talk (HT 10);

Daily routine assessments such as observations – in the form of log entries where attitude, discipline and behavior of the child is put (HT 12).

These Head Teachers claimed that formative assessment methods are much more effective compared to summative assessment techniques. An example of an effective formative assessment in literacy was reported by one Head Teacher:

Teachers test students reading skills every morning (8 – 8:30am). Students are promoted to the next level as they get better. At the beginning of this assessment, numbers (of students) were higher (more) at below average but over time, students have shown improvement. This form of assessment has 6 levels of learning (1 being the least or slow performers). Level 1 students are on basic alphabets whereas level 6 readers are able to read paragraphs and write compositions (HT 5).

While all the Head Teachers generally reported using written tests and examinations more compared to other forms of assessments that were higher in realism and open – ended in nature, all of them were of the view that formative assessments were more important than summative assessments. For all of them, using written tests and examinations was seen as a preparatory requirement for the external examinations. In other words, they used paper based examinations to prepare their students for the final examinations.

Assessment of learning has been the traditional way and is inbuilt in us. We, as students have been doing that, as teachers have been doing that, and as administrators we are after that as well. It should be more of assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning. Although we use a lot of tests now, we are really emphasizing on the remedial, and this has made our school's performance go up. Our education system is exam oriented – so we have to be exam – oriented because for underperforming schools (that have less than 50 percent pass rates), those teachers will be asked to attend workshops. (HT 25)

Formative assessment is better than summative assessment as it supports students' learning. (HT 5)

Finally, none of the Head Teachers reported involving students in their assessment planning and development. The students' role, as reported by the Head Teachers was to be the recipients of assessment. As one Head Teacher said, "students are not involved in assessments – they don't give ideas, they only sit for exams," (HT 13).

### **Effectiveness**

Ten out of the 30 Head Teachers perceived the current assessment practices as supporting students' learning and motivation to learn. This view was most common in reference to formative assessment practices such as remedial lessons, and increased students' performance on examinations. Various instances in their school environment have proved this notion. For example, the school that had early morning formative assessment on literacy noted effectiveness in terms of students showing up early to school and being eager to be part of the literacy programme:

Students are motivated by the formative assessment techniques for instance, students used to show up late to school (8:15–8:30am), however, now they arrive on time so that the assessment is not missed Teachers have seen remarkable changes in students' progress through this method assessment. Students' English has improved. (HT 5)

Another two Head Teachers valued the remedial actions taken at their schools. They reported that doing internal examination revision or providing 'trial tests' helped students to improve their scores on the next trial examination.

Current assessment techniques are working well. Students receive feedback and rectify their weaknesses. Assessments seem to motivate students. The failing students are given support by their teachers. My role is to provide resources that teachers require in order to support these students. It has been noted that that after guidance and support provided by teachers, our students are motivated and they are doing quite well. Current assessment practices give a true picture of the school. (HT 3)

Assessment practices are definitely working. Revision week before exams is a success. Our feedback graph tells us that performance on exams is improving. The assessment gives a true picture of the school. (HT 13)

However, five of the Head Teachers reported that the assessment system is only partially effective. This was due to a number of drawbacks that hinder student motivation and learning. One vital entity stated was that of lack of parental involvement in student learning. For instance:

Students are getting motivated to learn more but parental participation is lacking. For example, when sports meeting were held in school, parents showed up for meeting however, when class eight parents were called to discuss on performance of students nobody showed up. (HT 23)

Students who come from poor socio-economic backgrounds have difficulties in coping with tests however, students from good families enjoy the tests and are able to pass. This could be due to lack of support at home. (HT 10)

On the contrary, 15 Head Teachers believed that current practices to be unfavorable to support student learning and motivation because they believe summative tests can actually prove to be de-motivators for some students, as mentioned by some of the Head Teachers:

The current form of assessment is not favorable for all students. Too many tests are overwhelming. Students who fail, keep failing because they have developed a mindset of always being a failure. That mindset is a result of too many tests. Not all students perform well on tests, number varies based on literacy skills of the child. (HT 2)

The current system of assessment does not fully support learning. While children do try to learn, holistically they are not learning. They are learning only for the examinations – they forget what they learnt after exams. (HT 19)

The assessment practice only highlights on students' performance at the end of the term or at the end of the year after an exam. The current assessment does not give a true picture of a school, but academically it does. (HT 11)

In summary, while almost one third of the Head Teachers were satisfied that their current assessment practices were appropriate, some of their responses were linked to the formative assessment practices implicit in the assessments that they offered to their students. A majority of the Head Teachers saw their current assessment regime as problematic for some students.

### *Looking to the future*

At the conclusion of the interviews, each Head Teacher was asked to respond to the following statement: What would you do differently to enhance/improve assessment practices at your school? Why would you do this/that? A recurring suggestion from the Head Teachers was that schools should move away from too much testing towards more of continuous assessment that would come in form of formative assessments. All the Head Teachers called for more assessments such as LANA (Literacy and Numeracy Assessments) and CBAs (Class – Based Assessments), or in general, more contemporary forms of assessments. In their view, these assessments are important for effective learning. They reiterated that summative assessments have a negative impact on students as well as the perception of parents regarding their child's performance.

More formative assessment should be practised, not only in literacy but also in subjects such as mathematics. Not all students excel academically, but they are talented in other fields. (HT 5)

If somethings were to be done differently, I would suggest that the bench mark of 100 % pass rates to be reduced. Tests should remain, but be fewer in number. Reintroducing CBAs because it was a good form of assessment and students were not discriminated. We should have assessments in form of group work. Students can and will perform better once they develop a mentality that they are not failures. Students learn at their own pace, current assessments force students to keep up. This is not healthy for children in Fiji. (HT 2)

National exams should not exist – students are demotivated because they have different learning capabilities. National exams could be a source of failure of students – students after failing do not want to try again. Assessments at the classroom level are better. Assessments are good as long as it motivates students and does not demoralize them, telling them they have failed in life. (HT 1)

I would prefer to have more formative assessments because every individual child is different. We need to have different forms of assessment for every child. (HT 9)

We need to have assessments in other areas, not only theoretical but practical assessments as well. (HT 19)

Apart from the above call, one Head Teacher stated that the current regulation of automatic promotion to the next class should change. This Head Teacher argued that there was no harm in making students repeat a class if they have not performed well in their current level. Another area of suggestion from at least two Head Teachers was related to students' involvement in assessment, particularly at the design level. They argued that students should have some say in what kinds of assessments they want:

It is high time that we begin to consider ideas from students as to what they want to be tested on, because we are only focusing on limited things from our syllabi. (HT 8)

I think students should be involved in assessments. We should get responses from them, and we can get a fair idea on what to assess. (HT 16)

Moreover, in terms of their training needs, 28 out of the 30 Head Teachers agreed that their teachers need more training in terms of assessment. Some of their responses were:

There's a great need for more training for teachers and head teachers on assessment especially for the younger teachers so that we get the true picture of the ability of the child. (HT 9)

Teachers and students need training in the new forms of assessments. Times have changed and methods of assessments need to change. (HT 19)

In summary, all the Head Teachers were of the view that more contemporary forms of assessments need to be implemented. According to them, such assessments would ensure that each child is taken care of, instead of only the gifted children. In general, these Head Teachers called for assessments that help rather than hinder students' learning. Some Head Teachers were of the view that students need to be involved in assessment preparation. They agreed that new assessment would mean more training for teachers and students.

## Discussion

Head Teachers in this study held mixed beliefs about assessment. This meant that while they talked about using assessments to gauge their students' performance at the traditional end of the beliefs continuum, they often talked highly about the roles of assessment represented at the contemporary end by articulating assessment purposes such as supporting student learning, informing teachers and parents, and providing feedback. Previous studies on teachers' beliefs about assessment such as Brown (2003, 2004) and Dayal and Lingam (2015, 2017) have noted that teachers could hold different beliefs about purposes of assessment, and multiple beliefs simultaneously. Findings from Dayal and Lingam (2015, 2017) suggested that practicing teachers' beliefs could be mapped more frequently towards the contemporary beliefs end.

Findings from the present study confirm this position, with the rather experienced set of Head Teacher participants opting repeatedly for formative assessments instead of summative assessments. These patterns became obvious at the conclusion of each interview where all the Head Teachers made calls for more varied approaches to assessments that reflected a strong relevance and support to students learning. They rated formative assessments very highly because such assessments were seen to be helpful to parents, teachers and the students. In their calls for change, all our Head Teacher participants opted for more formative approaches to assessment. It could be argued that these experienced practitioners have seen the value of formative assessments, as supported by their wealth of experiential knowledge that excessive summative testing can be harmful. As one Head Teacher said, "Too many tests are overwhelming. Students who fail, keep failing because they have developed a mindset of always being a failure" (HT 2). Our findings suggest that the Head Teachers in this study held strong beliefs in favor of contemporary purposes of assessment, while showing some support for assessments that measure performance and keep teachers and schools accountable. Although the accountability purpose of assessment is a legitimate one (Brown, 2018), it is encouraging to note the Head Teachers in this study were aware of the detrimental effects of over emphasising this particular purpose of assessment.

With respect to assessment practices, our findings provide evidence that the Head Teachers' practices were influenced largely by the regulations of the Ministry of Education, rather than their own choices guided by their beliefs. This is reflected in the findings related to our second research question on policy and practices. We saw that the Head Teachers used more of 'tests and exams' and less of other contemporary methods of assessment. They reported doing this because it was a requirement that they must implement. However, we have tentative evidence that such practices related to summative testing did not have much influence on the Head Teachers' beliefs about assessment. They continue to hold beliefs that support contemporary approaches to assessment despite working in an environment dominated by traditional approaches to assessment. Instances of this were noted in their reported practices where the Head Teachers said that they supported the formative uses of such "tests and exams" in improving students' performance. Some responses seem to suggest formative use of tests, a notion taken as a formative assessment action by notable proponents of formative assessment such as Wiliam (2007) and Popham (2003). One respondent stated, "the failing students are given support by their teachers" (HT 2). And another commented that "revision week before exams is a success" (HT 13).

Our final research question was: are school leaders beliefs aligned to their assessment related practices? We have gathered limited support for this, and conclude that teachers' beliefs and practices are not aligned in a uniform manner. We iterate that the Head Teachers' self – reported assessment practices were seen to be affected more by official regulations than by their beliefs, but there is some evidence that may suggest that beliefs could have had an effect on Head Teacher's assessment practices. This is to be expected because assessment practices are an official requirement in Fiji, and trying to map assessment practices to Head Teachers' beliefs will result in some inconsistencies given that our participants were tasked to implement the policies of the Ministry of Education.

For the sake of discussion, if official testing requirements are not considered, then our findings would suggest a strong relationship between Head Teachers' beliefs and assessment related practices. We speculate that beliefs about assessment need to be considered as a special case because both traditional and contemporary beliefs can support assessment practices that could benefit students in one way or the other. In other words, both assessment perspectives have much benefits to offer, and both can be used to support meaningful learning (Popham, 2003; Stiggins, 2004), although we are of the view that contemporary assessment perspectives may prove superior in supporting learning needs of a diverse student population.

Using a small sample of Head Teachers, as shown in Table A4, we attempt to summarize their main beliefs and practices based on the entire interview dataset, with an aim to show the regularities and irregularities with beliefs and practices. The three cases presented below illustrate typical beliefs and practices of majority of the Head Teachers in our study. The cases demonstrate how the Head Teachers perceived both the traditional and contemporary roles of assessment. It further demonstrates and how they have managed to utilise practices that both served the accountability functions of assessment as well those which improve teaching and learning.

## Conclusion

The overall aim of the study reported here was to explore Fijian primary school Head Teachers' beliefs about assessment. The study also explored their self- reported assessment practices. The findings, analyzed using a traditional – contemporary beliefs continuum, suggest that while Fijian Head Teachers held traditional beliefs that assessments should measure students' learning and teacher performance, there was overwhelming support in terms of using the elicited assessment information to move learning forward. The Head Teachers' beliefs thus could be classified at the contemporary end of the beliefs continuum. Because Head Teachers' beliefs and practices about assessment are important for effective instructional improvements (Barnes et al., 2015; Brown, 2015), as well as for effective assessment – related professional development of teachers (Timperley, 2011), these findings appear to be encouraging, especially when considered in light of the "mistaken beliefs" identified by Stiggins (2004). Our Head Teacher participants showed that they generally agreed with the "productive beliefs" put forward by Stiggins (2004).

The findings about assessment practices suggested that the Head Teachers made attempts to make formative use of written or other assessments they used. They registered little support for too much formal, standardized testing. Head Teachers' practices seem to be dominated by official assessment policy of the Ministry of

Education, while they continued to hold strong contemporary beliefs about assessment despite working in a relatively examination oriented and accountability driven education context. Despite holding productive beliefs about assessments, the Head Teachers called for more training for their teachers to support their development of assessment practices. Future studies may consider involving designs that support professional development of school leaders as well as teachers.

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## Appendices

**Table A1.** Elements of assessment beliefs and practices.

	Traditional ←	→ Contemporary
Beliefs and purposes	Absolutist/Authoritarian Assessment is content-focused. Assessment is for accountability. Assessment is for recording and reporting individual's progress. Assessment is for <i>other</i> stakeholders.	Fallibilist/Humanist Assessment is learner focused. Assessment improves teaching and learning. Assessment is for joint use by students and teachers.
Nature of assessment tasks and levels of cognitive demands	Use of closed-ended tasks. Low in realism – assessment tasks do not simulate performance in the real world. Low in complexity – problem presented measures lower-level, single objectives. Skill mastery, passive reception of knowledge, individual learning.	Use of open-ended tasks. High in realism – assessments highly simulate performance in the real world. High in complexity – problems include higher-order questions and target more than one learning outcome. Autonomous exploration of own interest, questioning, discussing, and negotiating.
Time/timing	Requires less time to plan, develop, implement and assess. Occurs at the end of instruction.	Requires more time to plan, develop, implement and assess. Occurs frequently, during instruction.
Methods of assessment and grading	Limited methods of gathering information. Grading is objective.	Varied methods of gathering information. Grading is subjective.

**Table A2.** Interview themes and questions.

Interview Theme	Interview Questions
Assessment Beliefs	1. What does “assessment” mean to you? 2. In your view, what is the major purpose of assessment? 3. What are some other purposes?
Assessment Policy	1. Do you have an assessment policy at your school? 2. If yes, tell us how was it developed? And what are its aims? What is in the policy?
Assessment Practices	1. [Related to above] Can you tell us about the assessment plan that you use in your school? 2. What kinds of assessments do you use? 3. Which methods of assessment are commonly used? 4. Do you use assessment of learning/for learning? If yes, who makes these assessments? Do teachers get involved? How? 5. Do students get involved in any of these assessments?
Perceptions of Effectiveness	1. Do you believe the current assessment practices (you just mentioned that your school uses) support student learning? 2. Do you believe that these assessments work in terms of supporting student learning (and motivation to learn)? Why do you say so? 3. Do you believe that your current assessment practices give you a true picture of your school's performance? Why? Or why not?
Looking to the Future	1. What would you do differently to enhance/improve assessment practices at your school? Why would you do this/that? 2. Does your school (you, your teachers and students) need more training in assessment?

**Table A3.** Summary of assessment beliefs of some participants.

Participant	Traditional Beliefs	Contemporary Beliefs
HT 1	Assessment means how much students have learned, a measure of students' academic learning.	Assessment is about how much skills students have, both academic and outdoor – it is a holistic process that takes into account inside as well outside the classroom learning, for example, in sports, gardening, and the use of resources in school.
HT 3	Assessment means how much the students know in terms of academic learning.	It provides feedback to teachers in terms of lesson delivery. It provides feedback to parents as well. Parents become aware of their children's performance, their strengths and weaknesses.
HT 5	Assessment means how much students have learnt. Assessment means testing to know how much a child or any other person you are assessing, knows. Teachers are able to grade students (differentiate between low and high achievers).	Assessment tells us how teachers carry out their lesson. After grading, then teachers plan out their lesson according to the child's need.
HT 9	Assessment is about collecting information and submitting information to education office.	Assessment is a method whereby we can gather information in terms of a teacher, we are able to gather the strengths and weakness of students.

**Table A4.** Beliefs and self – reported practices of three head teachers.

Participant	Beliefs (Traditional – Contemporary)	Self-Reported Practices (Traditional – Contemporary)
HT 1	<p>(Traditional)            “Assessment means how much students have learned, a measure of students’ academic learning.”</p> <p>(Contemporary)            “Assessment is about how much skills students have, both academic and outdoor – it is a holistic process that takes into account inside as well outside the classroom learning, for example, in sports, gardening, and the use of resources in school. Continuous assessment should be done more frequently, content learnt in February should not be assessed in December. National exams should not exist, students are demotivated because they have different learning capabilities. National exams could be a source of failure, students after failing, do not want to try again. Assessment at the classroom level is better. Assessments are good as long as it motivates students and does not demoralize – that they have failed in life.”</p>	<p>(Traditional)            “Assessment policy is in line with Ministry of Education’s plan – similar types of tests and examinations are carried out. The current assessment is good, but to some extent only.”</p> <p>(Contemporary)            “Teacher made assessments are used such as topic tests, spelling tests. Teachers are given liberty to carry out their methods of assessment. Tests, marking of books, homework, running records (for example, number of words read correctly), other forms of formative assessments like art and craft, outdoor activities such as physical education classes. Current assessments do not motivate students to learn more. Students are not supported by these assessments.”</p>
HT 3	<p>(Traditional)            “Assessment means how much the students know in terms of academic learning. (Accountability) It reflects how we are doing our work.”</p> <p>(Contemporary)            “It provides feedback to teachers in terms of lesson delivery. It provides feedback to parents as well. Parents become aware of their children’s performance, their strengths and weaknesses. Some changes need to be made to assessment system – like having more interesting assessments, more continuous assessments, where certain weight should be given that add up to a final grade. Assessment is important, it reflects how we are doing our work. It is a form of feedback for students and parents. Assessment should create a holistic picture of the child.”</p>	<p>(Traditional)            “The school employs summative assessments, like end of year examinations.”</p> <p>(Contemporary)            “Formative assessments in the form of short tests and question – answer sessions are encouraged. Teachers are given resources to help underperforming students.”</p>
HT 20	<p>(Traditional)            “Assessment is a strategy used to assess children through examinations (formal or informal) Formal assessments give a true picture of our school whereas informal assessments does not (Accountability). Also, for promoting our students towards higher school and achieve scholarships (Certification).”</p> <p>(Contemporary)            “It helps us look at the strength of our teaching and improve on our teaching and learning. Assessments should shift from written work to more of practical work and group work – should go back to CBAs. Children can work independently and express their ideas. Other areas such as art and craft etc. to be assessed as well.”</p>	<p>(Traditional)            “Our school has no assessment policy. We use Ministry of Education’s assessment policy. Summative assessment is used.”</p> <p>(Contemporary)            “Assessment is done twice per term – beginning and end of term. Short assessments are carried out during teaching. Formative assessment is used. Current practices support learning to some extent. Analysis of students’ performance is done and weak points are noted, and remedial is organized.”</p>