



Editorial

Assessment of Learning in Mathematics Education: A Neoliberal Root of Colonialism

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Abstract

Assessment of learning (AfL) has been taken as one of the significant tools for assessing the students' learning outcomes in the educational landscape of Nepal and possibly other countries as well. However, it generally segregates the learners into two mutually exclusive groups of success and failure rather than exploring teaching-learning status for the grand purpose of improving it. AfL isolates the assessment from the learning because it is executed at the end of the academic session by external authorities in the name of maintaining the reliability and validity of the test to ensure quality standards of education. Against these backdrops, this argumentative paper tries to uncover how AfL becomes a tool in the hands of colonial power centres and supports indoctrinating neocolonial agendas of open markets backed by economic rationality. I have realized that AfL not only focuses on competition and efficiency without considering the sociocultural, historical and economic backgrounds of the learners but also neglects other aspects of education—collaboration, interdependence, mutual respect and empathy. Likewise, it supports for instigating blaming culture and a winner-takes-all approach mentality in practitioners contribute to perpetuating and legitimizing social, economic and epistemic injustices. I have also found that most of these attributes are the product of the neoliberal economic policy of the state that does nothing but hand over everything to the open market. From this perspective, AfL has promoted the agenda of neoliberalism, which is backed by colonialism. The implication is that before assessing the learning outcomes of the learners, we must take into consideration the sociocultural, historical and economic backgrounds of the learners and their ways of seeing, knowing and valuing the outer world; otherwise, the assessment becomes meaningless.

Keywords: Blaming culture, Colonialism; Competition; Efficiency; Epistemic injustice; Neoliberalism

Introduction

Mathematics education practices in Nepal after the establishment of the Durbar school fell into the colonial grip (Lamichhane & Luitel, 2023a). Most of the literature in

the history of education in Nepal, in general, and mathematics education in particular, unconsciously created a narrative of the modernity of schooling through the endorsement of Western-Eurocentric thought and practice (Shrestha, 2008). Western-Eurocentric thought has a colonial root in education that affects the curricula, pedagogy, and assessment system of mathematics education (Luitel & Taylor, 2010). It becomes the most powerful as well as a dangerous weapon in the hands of colonial power centres (Bishop, 1990) support for perpetuating the unidimensional view of mathematics that celebrates universal and singular reality, objective epistemology, and value-free axiology (Luitel, 2013). It engulfs multiple realities, diverse epistemology, and value-laden axiology that have been practiced and emanated from the practitioners' prolonged sociocultural and historical engagement in solving real-world problems. The conception of universal reality in mathematics education helps develop a homogeneous way of thinking and seeing the mathematical constructs and outer worlds that can hinder creative, critical and imaginative thinking and actions because the rigid, incorrigible and noninterpretive form of reality demands the actions that can bring the reality into the formal schooling. When schooling does not require creativity, criticality and imaginative actions, it indeed prepares the grounds for fostering the one-size-fits-all pedagogical approach (Freire, 2005) that only brings the already existing body of knowledge into schooling. A celebration of singular reality and objective epistemology in schooling contributes to germinating the idea of value-frees, acultural and ahistorical practices in mathematics that have created mathematical othering (Abtahi et al., 2020).

Mathematical othering occurs when the practitioners fail to relate their formal mathematical knowledge to their day-to-day lives. There is a massive gap between formal mathematical knowledge and out-of-school mathematics practices. I have encountered many events during my journey in mathematics education. For instance, when I ran into the concept of exponential and logarithmic functions, I was really baffled because I was not able to connect these constructs to real-world problems. I was taught that a function, which is in the form of a^x , where a is a non-negative real number and x is a variable, is called an exponential function, and its inverse is called a logarithm function. They are denoted by $f(x) = a^x$ and $f(x) = \log x$ respectively. A particular form of an exponential function is $f(x) = e^x$, where e is a constant whose value is approximately 2.718281. I had not been familiar with the genesis and implacability of these functions in real-world situations and remained ignorant regarding their values, utility, and necessity in real-life circumstances. However, I obtained the highest marks

(grades) in the final examination by means of rote memorization and endless replication of algorithms to seek solutions to bookish questions. It gave the impression that I was an intelligent, talented, and competent student; however, I was rarely satisfied with learning mathematics and could not be enthusiastic about engaging in mathematical activities. It has happened because our mathematics education practice did and still does not focus on conceptual, relational and cultural understanding and has not incorporated the other aspects of learners—emotion, beliefs, affection, pain, and the learning environment (Lamichhane & Luitel, 2022).

Most of the time, teaching-learning activities focus on preparing for the final examination that counts in formal schooling and thus, all other aspects fall into shadows. It signifies that an assessment system that has been deployed from the very beginning of the so-called modern schooling in Nepal has produced a deep-rooted mindset in Nepali practitioners, including curricular experts, policymakers and other concerned authorities, that educating the children means indoctrinating or inculcating prespecified body of knowledge into the empty vessel like minds of students which can be easily measurable for the purpose of labelling them into two mutually exclusive domains of success and failure. In this regard, I would like to explore how an uncritical implementation of the assessment of learning (AfL) can perpetuate the neoliberal political-economic policy that has a colonial connotation.

Assessment of Learning in Mathematics Education

An AfL culture in mathematics education in the Nepali education landscape traced back to the beginning of so-called modern schooling after the establishment of Darbar High School in 1853. Before the establishment of so-called modern education, Nepal adopted multi-educational systems that were underpinned by the people's sociocultural and ethnic backgrounds (Lamichhane & Luitel, 2023a). Nepal is the homeland of more than 120 ethnic groups and approximately 125 different linguistic groups (Rai, 2018). These groups have their worldviews, sociocultural values, norms, ways of living, and ways of learning, even though these ways of knowing and living have not had an opportunity to flourish to their full strength. Most of them are on the verge of extinction because of the domination of modern schooling (Lamichhane & Luitel, 2023a). It is regrettable for Nepali students who were/are graduated from the university to remain ignorant regarding their ways of seeing, ways of knowing and living. The Western-Eurocentric domination in education not only prevents the Nepali

learners from becoming familiar with their worldviews, sociocultural and historical perspectives and learning from their own ways but also teaches them to condemn their practices by blaming their worldviews, perspectives and ways of knowing and doing as primitive, unproductive, unscientific and uncultured (Lamichhane & Luitel, 2023b). The Western-Eurocentric ways of knowing and doing are far from the lifeworld of Nepali learners, which are legitimized through the AfL.

AfL is an approach to assess the learning outcomes that separate the assessment from the teaching-learning activities. It is a technique that is executed by external authorities in the name of maintaining the reliability and validity of the student's results. AfL does nothing but create an unethical hierarchy and demarcates the students into two groups—competent, intelligent, talented and, incompetent, unintelligent and untalented. Moreover, an evaluation is based on three hours of paper-pencil tests, which can measure the capabilities of remembering and reciting mathematical facts and concepts of learners and their ability to reproduce mathematical theorems. Likewise, it produces unhealthy competition among the practitioners rather than developing collaborative cultures.

An unhealthy competitive environment, without due consideration of sociocultural, historical and socioeconomic factors, negatively contributes to tagging some students as winners and others as losers. I do not mean to eradicate the competitive environment among the learners in educational institutions, but my argument is that without considering the cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), affective dimensions, ways of seeing and knowing, and socioeconomic backgrounds that significantly affect students' achievement in mathematics (Lamichhane, 2018; Nieminen & Ketonen, 2023) is meaningless and lifelessness. It indicates that the unidimensional form of AfL that tags the students as winners and losers underpin social, epistemic and economic injustices that detriment the teaching-learning activities and contribute to the failure of the educational systems. Moreover, labelling the students based on their achievement scores on the tests as winners and losers has neoliberal colonial connotations that do nothing but reinforce competition and individualism rather than collaboration and interdependence (Regmi, 2024).

Neoliberalism and Assessment of Learning

A neoliberal political-economic policy of the state governs every sector of the nation based on the market-driven economy. It promotes the vision of privatization,

competition and individualization, thus supporting the commodification of education as goods that can be bought and sold in the market. Competition and standardization in education do not take into account the social-cultural and economic backgrounds of the learners, hampering students' creativity and innovation. It emphasizes individual responsibility for success or failure (Gormley, 2020; Regmi, 2024). Neoliberal schooling's hidden curriculum teaches students that competition and winning are morally good; however, it potentially undermines the development of complex understanding and personality growth (Tebaldi, 2023). The AfL culture has legitimized this approach by means of its fallacy narrative of standardization, unbiasedness, and effectiveness. The hidden and unspoken interest of the nexus of the neoliberal political economy and assessment of learning (AfL) culture is to establish competition, efficiency, and success as individual entities. The individual learners are responsible for their learning. It is not necessary to call on other social, cultural and economic backgrounds of the learners for their intellectual development. Moreover, the mere competition in educational sector distrust critical, creative and inventive thinking in one hand and helps flourish winner-takes-all approach to curriculum and assessment in the other. It has further established the winner-takes-all approach as the natural outcomes and individual variation in learning and achievement are due to the inherent intelligence and thus hegemonize the learners through the instigation of the concepts of Social Darwinism (Au, 2015; Martini & Robertson, 2022).

Social Darwinism in an educational milieu promotes the conception of meritocracy in the name of competition, achievement and effectiveness in terms of particular employability skills and knowledge necessary for global corporate houses to increase their profit rather than enhance the teamwork, diversity, equity and social justice (Wint, 2022; Regmi, 2024). It signifies that the present curriculum field, either in school or university, goes hand in hand with international organizations such as the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) etc., that promotes mercantilist thinking and consumerism as the necessary condition to succeed in the 21st century (Regmi, 2017; 2024). The economic rationality driven by the open market devalues moral, ethical, social, and cultural values. These values have played significant roles in promoting a culture of mutual respect, collaboration, and empathy. The indication is that the instigation of mere competition from the very beginning of schooling to be a winner instinctively inculcates dominant

culture into the minds of the learners, leading them to be greedier for the fulfilment of their desires and instincts for the expanses of social well-being and benefit for all. That is, modern schooling becomes the greatest weapon in the hands of colonial power centres that perpetuates the notion of managing, controlling, and exploiting other humans who are at the bottom of the pyramid of wealth and income distribution of the world (van Stam, 2017; World Inequality Lab, 2022) and nature for the fulfilment of their worldly desires disrupts the ecological balances, healthy environment and habitats. More precisely, Mignolo (2021) argues that modernity is nothing more than a self-fashioned meta-narrative of Western civilization. These narratives were constructed not only to hide the distortions made by colonial power centres but also to blame the people from the global south and tricontinental (Asia, Africa and South America) regions as ignorant, barbaric and uncivilized and thus devaluing and ignoring their ways of knowing and doing as unscientific, unproductive and primitives (Lamichhane & Luitel, 2023b).

Basically, AfL measures those attributes of learning that are prespecified in the curricula, which seems far from the cultural capital of the learners from the global south and tricontinental regions because modern school curricula incorporate Western-Eurocentric thoughts and ways of knowing. These views and ways of knowing and doing are familiar to those who are from the same culture. Those who are from other cultures have not cracked and grasped the meaning and cannot relate to real-world problems. Likewise, students from different cultures do not understand the mathematical concepts that are expressed or presented in a second language, particularly in English, which further disrupts the teaching-learning activities and, hence, negatively affects the achievement of the learners (Tebaldi, 2023). When they do not perform well in the so-called achievement tests, they are blamed for being unintelligent.

Students from other cultures who have rich knowledge and skills for livelihood—weaving clothes, erecting walls, constructing houses, knitting a Doko (bamboo basket), Namlo, Gundri (straw mat), Bhakari (bamboo basket used for storing the grains), Mandro (bamboo mat uses for drying grains), construction of Halo (plough) and Juwa (yoke), etc. need enough mathematical knowledge, concepts and skills. The so-called modern schooling does not recognize these knowledge, skills, and ideas as worth including in the curriculum. This has happened because there are no uniform and standardized procedures or rational scientific logic. These knowledge, skills, and concepts have emerged from the lived experiences of the people, which are contextual,

flexible, and multipronged, and people can freely revise, reconstruct, improvise, and use constructively in their lifeworld. Because of their nature of flexibility, emergence and corrigibility, there are no rigid, uniform, standardized procedures, ultra-scientific rationality and logic. The condition of inflexibility, rigidity, and incorrigibility of knowledge, skills, and concepts demands imitation, reproduction, and recitation capabilities in learners, which ultimately destroy creative, critical, and imaginative thinking. Generally, AfL promotes memorization and endless repetition of the algorithm for solving the bookish questions for the purpose of segregating learners into mutually exclusive domains of winners and losers.

Moreover, when creative, critical, and imaginative thinking evaporates from the learners, they become objects that can be easily manipulated, distorted and shaped according to the interests of the external authorities. In this regard, there are some propelling questions in my mind. Why do our schools adopt AfL as a significant tool to assess students' learning outcomes? Whose interests are being served by AfL? Why do our experts, curricular designers, educational administrators, and other concerned authorities become unconscious eyewitnesses towards AfL? These questions should be helpful for future research in the field of assessment of mathematics education. In my opinion, the AfL approach is helpful in measuring technical knowledge, concepts, and skills that have been obtained in particular training sessions for the fulfilment of the requirement of industrial workers to handle particular machines and complete the jobs effectively.

In the industrial sectors, efficiency, accuracy, and rapidity are needed to perform mechanical works or accomplish machinery tasks for the mass-scale production of goods to make the maximum profit for the owner of the industry. AfL is necessary because these skills are easily measurable with reference to the given standards, norms and rules. Those who meet these standards are selected and promoted as employees to maximize industrial productions that secure maximum profit for the master. There is no alternative way of performing or conducting machinery tasks because machines are designed in a particular way, and workers must acquire that knowledge and skills to operate machines accordingly; otherwise, machines do not function well. To accomplish the routine work, it is not necessary to consider factors other than the efficiency of operating the machines. However, to assess the student learning outcomes, we need to consider the sociocultural, historical, and economic background of the learners because learning by isolating them from the context in which the learners grow up seems

impossible. It signifies that there are hidden interests of the neoliberal educational agenda underpinned by colonialism that could commodify education according to industrial necessity and thus produce the human resources that do not have a questioning power and perform their routine duties so that the industrial and corporate business house owners are on the safe side and thus could continue their exploitation throughout the world by hegemonize the people from the global south and tricontinental region because they seem successful to objectify the learners as non-cognizing, asocial, acultural, unemotional and unspiritual beings by inculcating AfL as one of the most significant approaches to access the students' learning outcomes. In this regard, we can argue that the colonial power centres strategically seem successful in indoctrinating their perspectives and ways of learning through modern schooling in which AfL becomes supportive tools for perpetuating epistemic injustice in mathematics education through the measurement of unmeasurable human attributes or traits according to the standards set by Western-Eurocentric powers aiming to hold learners as enslaved labours by hegemonize them.

The colonial power centre has strategically, cleverly and slyly introduced AfL into the field of education in which they want to incarcerate the education system of the global south and tricontinental regions within a form of training and urge to operate according to their preferences. The Western European developing countries who hold the global power enforce global south and tricontinental region countries to do so by threatening to cut off aid and subsidies to educational sectors (Regmi, 2021). These countries opted to implement decontextualized educational policies and practices because of the pressure of receiving continued aid and subsidies in educational sectors (Regmi, 2021).

The developed countries that had already entered the industrial era wanted to produce human resources who obediently performed their duties without questioning the domination, exploitation, and absurdity of Western-Eurocentric hubris for taking control over the world and making maximum profit. The hidden interest beyond this is that they want to push the people from the global south and tricontinental region into the veil of an uncreative, uncritical and unimaginative world so that they can always celebrate their enslavement as the natural outcome. In so doing, they create a meta-narrative of education as a neutral, ahistorical, acultural and apolitical phenomenon by keeping aside the neo-liberal political-economic system and its brutal exploitation over other humans and nature through the shadows of competition, unbiasedness, efficiency and

effectiveness that AfL legitimizes. An unacknowledged of the social, cultural and historical backgrounds of the learners in the name of competition and efficiency is promoted by AfL and contributes to instigating an epistemic injustice in education (Fricker, 2007; Nieminen & Lahdenperä, 2021).

Epistemic injustice is pervasive in schools and universities in many ways; one of them is an AfL (Nieminen & Lahdenperä, 2021). An epistemic injustice has occurred in mathematics classrooms through closed-booked teacher-made tests at local and national levels and standardized tests in an international arena. These tests do not provide enough space for the students to reflect on their learning critically, do not acknowledge other forms of knowledge and ways of knowing, and silence the voices of pupils by blaming them as unintelligent. More precisely, through the so-called standardization, unbiasedness, efficiency, and rapidity, students are treated as machinery objects that they are urged to perform technically without bringing their feelings, emotions, and sociocultural and historical intricacies into formal schooling (Nieminen & Lahdenperä, 2021). This means that modern schooling is underpinned by neoliberalism and/or neocolonialism and explicitly uses modern schooling to mould children—their minds, bodies, and behaviours so that learners can easily believe that the current social ills, economic inequalities, environmental degradation, climate changes, violence, and catastrophic natural disasters are neutral and natural. In this context, many researchers (Slattery, 2006; Apple, 2019; Valero, 2023) have claimed that the problems mentioned above are the products and footprints of the past two centuries shreds of evidence of modern education (Taylor & Taylor, 2019) and there is no hope for the future correction that should help for creating the better world not only for human beings but also for all other living creature and planet earth. From the above discussed, we can easily see the attachment of AfL to neoliberal economic rationality that sheds light on a culture of mutual respect, empathic relation among humans, all other living creatures and non-living things that simultaneously contribute to the well-being of a society, nation and the planet earth at large.

Final Remarks

From the above discourse, I have realized that educational institutions, in general, and mathematics education programs, in particular, seem to unconsciously adopt the AfL approach for assessing the student's learning outcomes, which has not truly captured the learning status of learners. AfL was or still is implemented at the end

of the academic session with the grand purpose of segregating students into two groups—success and failure- rather than improving the teaching-learning activities. In the context of Nepal, the history of AfL is traced back to the establishment of Darbar School, which aimed to modernize and uniformize the country's diversified educational practices. It has not only altered the performance-based individual, authentic and contextual assessment system for the improvement of teaching-learning activities but also disrupted the academic practices that have celebrated the diversity of reality, multiple ways of knowing, and ethical and value-based education. AfL only focuses on enriching competition, efficiency and rapidity in the practitioners aiming to win their colleagues for grasping the opportunity for their own greed and worldly desires rather than promoting the culture of mutual respect, collaboration and well-being for all, nature and planet earth.

Competition, efficiency, and consumerism are the principal constructs of the neoliberal-political economic system of the state, which is backed by economic rationality. It advocates that everything is determined by the market in which individuals are assumed to have equal opportunity to participate or compete in free and open markets to determine their status in society and nation without taking into account the sociocultural, historical and economic backgrounds of the individuals. Moreover, it established the notion that if you can buy, then you are. Later on, it was translated into education by Western industrial and developed countries by creating the narrative of a winner-takes-all approach in which students are encouraged to be the winner by defeating their colleagues or counterparts to grasp the opportunity in the global marketplace for the fulfilment of their worldly desires to have so-called standard lives. It was made possible by the developed countries by means of controlling and managing the education systems of the global south and tricontinental regions through the unintended supply of aid, subsidies and technology by blaming the other education systems pervasive in these regions as primitive, unproductive and unscientific. It is nothing but the colonial mentality of dominating the people of the global south and tricontinental regions.

In this regard, AfL becomes a significant tool in the hands of colonial power centres in which competition, efficiency, and rapidity are legitimized in the name of maintaining the reliability and validity of the test for the assurance of quality standards of education. Through the uncritical implication of the AfL for assessing the learning outcomes of the learners, the colonial power centres have converted the educational

institutions into training centres aiming to train the practitioners through the specific skills and knowledge necessary for industrial productions. From this perspective, I have claimed that AfL has a neoliberal root of colonialism that implicitly instigates the neoliberal value of competition in which the market determines everything. The implication is that before assessing the learning outcome of the learners, we must take into consideration the ways of accessing. Without considering the sociocultural and historical situatedness and economic backgrounds of the learners, the tracking of students into success or failure is meaningless and could hamper rather than improve the teaching-learning status.

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