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Comparative Study of Formative Assessment in Government vs. Private Schools

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Abstract— Formative assessment (FA) is widely recognized as a powerful lever for improving teaching and learning because it embeds feedback loops, clarifies success criteria, and promotes student self-regulation. Yet, how FA is conceptualized and enacted varies substantially across school types. This study compares formative assessment practices in government and private schools in India (with relevance to other low- and middle-income contexts) to understand similarities, divergences, and underlying causes. Using a mixed-methods design—teacher and student surveys (n = 240 teachers; n = 1,120 students), classroom observations (n = 40 lessons), and semi-structured interviews (n = 32 administrators)—we examine six FA dimensions: clarity of learning goals, use of questioning and discussion, feedback quality and timeliness, student self- and peer-assessment, data use for instructional planning, and systemic supports.

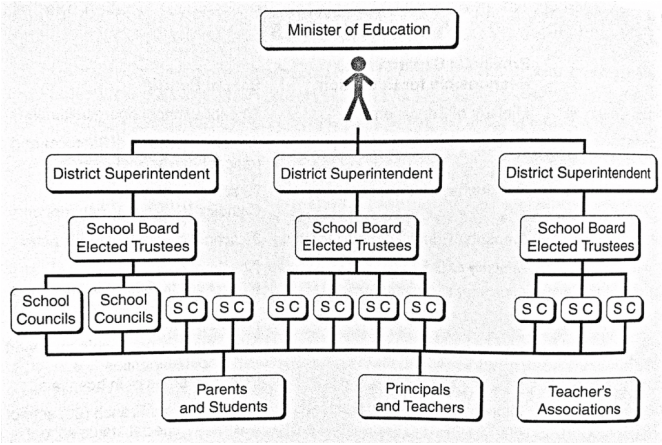


Fig.1 Comparative Study of Formative Assessment,Source([1])

Results suggest that private schools outperform government schools in routine use of exit tickets, quick quizzes, and digital tools to capture evidence of learning; however, government schools demonstrate richer collegial moderation and community-based remediation practices fostered by state-mandated training. Both systems struggle with actionable feedback and student metacognition. Key enabling factors include manageable class size, continuous professional development (CPD), leadership emphasis on feedback culture, and assessment literacy. The study concludes with recommendations: embed FA in teacher appraisal and mentoring, standardize simple FA templates, leverage low-cost technology for data capture, and cultivate student agency. Implications for policy, school leadership, and teacher education are offered.

Keywords

formative assessment; feedback; government schools; private schools; assessment literacy; student agency; India; mixed methods

Introduction

Assessment has traditionally been synonymous with summative tests that certify learning, rank students, and hold schools accountable. Over the last three decades, however, formative assessment—defined as assessment for learning rather than of learning—has gained prominence as an instructional strategy that enhances student achievement, equity, and motivation. Black and Wiliam's (1998) meta-analysis sparked global interest by demonstrating substantial learning gains when teachers systematically use evidence of student understanding to adapt instruction. In India, policymaking documents such as the National Curriculum Framework (2005) and the National Education Policy (2020) also emphasize continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE) and competency-based learning, echoing formative principles.

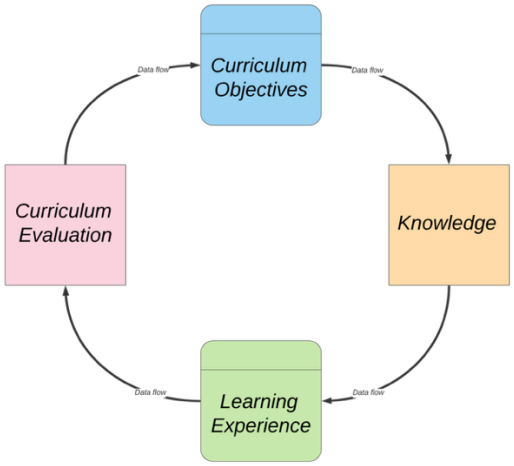


Fig.2 Comparative Study Worldwide,Source([2])

Despite this rhetorical emphasis, the ground reality differs by school type. Government schools often grapple with large class sizes, limited resources, and policy overload, while private schools face market-driven accountability and parental expectations for high performance in standardized exams. Both contexts generate distinct pressures that shape how teachers perceive and practice FA. This study seeks to unpack these dynamics through a comparative lens, answering the question: *How do formative assessment practices differ between government and private schools, and what factors explain these differences?*

The study is significant for three reasons. First, it provides empirical evidence on FA implementation in two dominant school sectors in India. Second, it identifies systemic supports and constraints that can inform policy for equitable quality education. Third, it synthesizes practical strategies that teachers and leaders can adopt irrespective of resource levels. The sections that follow present a review of relevant literature, the methodological approach, the results, and a concluding discussion with actionable recommendations.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Formative Assessment

Formative assessment encompasses practices that generate evidence of learning during instruction and use that evidence to modify teaching and learning activities. Core components include clear learning intentions and success criteria, effective questioning, descriptive feedback, peer- and self-assessment, and adaptive instruction. While some scholars treat FA as a set of discrete techniques, others conceptualize it as a pedagogical mindset or a feedback culture within classrooms.

Global Evidence Base

Research across diverse contexts has consistently shown positive effects of FA on student achievement, especially for low-achieving learners. Studies in the UK, US, and New Zealand document how frequent feedback, learning goals, and student self-assessment lead to gains equivalent to several months of schooling. However, evidence also warns of superficial adoption—teachers may use quizzes without following up with targeted remediation, thereby diluting FA's impact.

Indian Policy Context

India's CCE framework, introduced widely in CBSE and many state boards in the 2010s, aimed to replace rote-focused summative testing with continuous, qualitative checks for understanding. Critiques indicate that CCE was often reduced to paperwork, with teachers struggling to translate policy documents into meaningful classroom action. The new NEP 2020 reaffirms competency-based assessment and proposes technology-based tracking of learning outcomes, but effective enactment still depends on teacher assessment literacy, time, and support structures.

Government vs. Private School Ecosystems

Government schools serve the majority of rural and lower-income urban students and operate within bureaucratic systems that mandate uniform assessment formats and reporting. Professional development is often top-down, periodic, and compliance driven. Class sizes can exceed 50, limiting individualized feedback. However, government schools may benefit from cluster resource centres, peer observation mandated by state programs, and collaborative lesson planning under flagship schemes.

Private schools—especially mid-fee and high-fee institutions—enjoy relative autonomy in curriculum and assessment. They often have smaller classes, greater access to technology, and parental pressure for demonstrable learning outcomes. Yet, this pressure can skew assessment towards test preparation and league tables, constraining risk-taking with open-ended formative tasks. Low-fee private schools, on the other hand, may lack trained teachers and rely on rote methods, mirroring government school constraints.

Dimensions of FA Practice

This review organizes FA practice along six dimensions, serving as the analytic framework for this study:

1. **Clarity of Learning Intentions and Success Criteria:** Teachers articulate what students are expected to learn and how success will be judged.
2. **Eliciting Evidence Through Questioning and Tasks:** Inclusive questioning, quick checks (exit tickets, clickers), and diagnostic probes capture real-time understanding.
3. **Feedback Quality and Timing:** Feedback is specific, actionable, and timely, guiding next steps rather than merely judging performance.
4. **Student Involvement (Peer/Self-Assessment):** Students assess their own work and that of peers, fostering metacognition and ownership.
5. **Data Use for Instructional Adjustment:** Teachers analyze formative data to group students, reteach concepts, or enrich instruction.
6. **Systemic/Structural Supports:** Leadership commitment, CPD, resources, and policy frameworks nurture or inhibit FA.

Gaps in the Literature

Comparative studies that simultaneously examine government and private sectors in India are scarce, and those that do often focus on summative performance. Few studies delve into the micro-practices of feedback, questioning, and student agency. Moreover, student perspectives on FA (how they perceive and use feedback) are underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by integrating teacher, student, and administrator voices.

Methodology

Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, allowing quantitative and qualitative data to be collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and integrated for interpretation. This approach captures both breadth (surveys) and depth (observations, interviews) of FA practices.

Sample and Context

- **Schools:** 12 government and 12 private co-educational schools across two urban districts and one peri-urban block.
- **Participants:** 240 teachers (120 government, 120 private) and 1,120 students from grades 6–10. Additionally, 32 school leaders/administrators participated in interviews.
- **Selection:** Stratified purposive sampling ensured representation of low-, mid-, and high-fee private schools and varied government school sizes.

Instruments

1. **Teacher Survey:** 45-item Likert-scale instrument on FA beliefs and practices across the six dimensions; Cronbach's alpha = 0.86.
2. **Student Survey:** 24-item scale on feedback perception, engagement, and self-assessment habits.
3. **Observation Rubric:** Adapted from international FA frameworks to rate clarity of goals, questioning strategies, feedback moments, and student participation.
4. **Interview Protocols:** Semi-structured guides for administrators and focus groups with teachers to explore systemic supports and constraints.

Data Collection and Analysis

- Surveys were administered in person; response rate exceeded 85%.
- Classroom observations totaled 40 lessons (20 in each sector).
- Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and inferential tests (independent t-tests, Mann–Whitney U where assumptions failed). Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were computed.
- Qualitative transcripts were coded inductively and then mapped to the six FA dimensions. Triangulation enhanced validity.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants and assent from students. Identities were anonymized. The study received approval from an institutional ethics review board.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Across the six FA dimensions, private schools scored higher on average in four areas, while government schools led in two. Key highlights:

- **Clarity of Goals:** Private teachers reported more frequent sharing of learning intentions (M = 4.1 vs. 3.5 on a 5-point scale, $p < .01$, d = 0.55).

- **Questioning and Evidence Elicitation:** Private schools more often used quick quizzes and digital polling (M = 3.9 vs. 3.2, $p < .01$). Government teachers relied on oral questioning but less on structured checks.
- **Feedback:** Both sectors struggled; mean scores hovered around 3.0 with no significant difference ($p = .18$). Observations revealed feedback often lacked specificity ("good job", "revise again").
- **Student Self/Peer Assessment:** Low in both sectors (M < 2.8), with slight advantage to private schools. Students reported limited opportunities to use rubrics or reflect on work.
- **Data Use for Planning:** Government schools surprisingly showed higher collaborative data discussions during cluster meetings (M = 3.4 vs. 3.0, $p < .05$). Private teachers tended to keep data individual, citing time constraints.
- **Systemic Supports:** Government schools benefited from state-provided FA templates and periodic trainings; private schools from technology and autonomy. Differences were not statistically significant.

Qualitative Insights

Government Schools: Teachers described FA as "CCE paperwork" in the past but noted a shift towards competency-based worksheets. Large classes and multitasking (mid-day meal supervision, administrative tasks) limited detailed feedback. However, cluster-level peer observations and state-led diagnostic tests (e.g., Prerna Prayas) encouraged data-based remediation. Students appreciated remedial camps but desired more individualized feedback.

Private Schools: Teachers emphasized parent expectations for weekly test scores, which sometimes overshadowed formative goals. Technology—learning management systems, Google Forms—facilitated quick checks and analytics. Yet, teachers reported fear of negative parental reactions if feedback highlighted weaknesses. School leaders who championed FA cultivated weekly "feedback clinics" where teachers shared annotated student work.

Common Challenges: Time, assessment literacy, and student agency. Many teachers equated any short test with FA, overlooking the need for feedback cycles. Students often saw assessments as grades rather than growth tools. Peer assessment was resisted due to fear of ridicule or grading bias.

Integrative Summary

The quantitative and qualitative strands converge on three patterns:

1. **Technique vs. Pedagogy:** Private schools employ more FA techniques, but without always closing the feedback loop. Government schools have fewer techniques but more collaborative reflection.
2. **Structural Enablers Matter:** Smaller classes, technology, and leadership focus enable FA. Mandated trainings and templates also help when accompanied by mentoring.
3. **Student Agency is the Missing Link:** Both sectors underutilize self- and peer-assessment, limiting metacognition.

Discussion and Conclusion

This comparative study demonstrates that neither government nor private schools hold a monopoly on effective formative assessment. Instead, each sector exhibits strengths and blind spots shaped by contextual realities. Private schools, driven by market accountability and supported by technology, integrate frequent checks for understanding but risk superficiality if feedback does not guide next steps. Government schools, constrained by resources yet supported by systemic collaboration, can develop reflective practices but need to simplify tools and protect instructional time.

Implications for Policy and Practice

1. **Embed FA in Professional Learning Communities:** Both sectors should institutionalize teacher-led moderation of student work, feedback calibration, and lesson study focused on evidence of learning.
2. **Simplify and Standardize Tools:** Provide concise FA templates (learning intention, evidence, feedback, next steps) to reduce paperwork and focus on pedagogy.
3. **Cultivate Student Agency:** Introduce age-appropriate self- and peer-assessment routines (traffic lights, two stars and a wish, rubric co-construction) to normalize metacognitive dialogue.
4. **Leverage Technology Judiciously:** Low-cost tools—WhatsApp polls, QR-coded exit tickets—can democratize FA in government schools; private schools should pair analytics with feedback action plans.
5. **Align Accountability with Learning:** Shift parental and administrative focus from weekly marks to growth indicators. Include formative evidence in teacher appraisals and school reviews.

Limitations and Future Research

The study is limited to three districts and grades 6–10; results may not generalize to primary or senior secondary levels. Self-reported survey data can inflate positive practices. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of FA training, student-led assessment models, and comparative cost-benefit analyses of digital FA tools.

Conclusion

Formative assessment's promise lies not in isolated techniques but in a culture of continuous feedback, reflection, and instructional responsiveness. Government and private schools can learn from each other: the former's collaborative ethos and the latter's agility and resourcefulness. By converging on shared principles—clarity, evidence, feedback, and student voice—schools can transform assessment from a bureaucratic requirement or marketing device into a genuine engine of learning. The path forward requires coherent policy, empowered teachers, engaged students, and leadership that values growth over grades.

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