



Bridging the Equity Assessment Divide - Teachers Culturally Responsive Practices

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Abstract

The National Education Policy 2020 envisions a fundamental shift in how we assess students moving toward approaches that are competency-based, holistic, and fair to all learners. But how much of this vision has actually reached classrooms? This study looked at how teachers in Tamil Nadu's Karur district are putting Culturally Responsive Assessment (CRA) into practice. We surveyed 312 teachers from government, aided, and private schools, asking them how often they use CRA, how confident they feel about it, and what gets in their way. This study found reveals a telling gap between policy and practice. While 82% of teachers agreed that CRA matters for meeting the needs of diverse students—including first-generation learners and children from different language backgrounds—only 28% said they actually use it regularly. The main obstacles? Overcrowded classrooms (85% of teachers pointed to this), lack of training in alternative assessment methods (78%), rigid syllabi that leave little room for flexibility (70%), and the relentless pressure to prepare students for board exams (68%). Teachers who had received training under the NEP 2020 framework were noticeably more likely to use CRA.

The takeaway is clear: if we want real change, teachers need practical training modules in Tamil, district-level support for creating resources, and systemic reforms that bring state board evaluations in line with NEP's vision for formative assessment.

Keywords: *Culturally Responsive Assessment, NEP 2020, Tamil Nadu education, equity in assessment, teacher practices, Karur district.*

Introduction

Walk into any classroom in India, and you'll encounter an astonishing mix of languages, backgrounds, and life experiences. In Tamil Nadu's Karur district—where urban centers blend into semi-urban towns and rural villages this diversity is particularly pronounced. The National Education Policy 2020 calls for assessment systems that are "holistic, integrated, insightful, and discovery-based," pushing us beyond rote memorization toward evaluating higher-order thinking. At the heart of this vision lies Culturally Responsive

Assessment (CRA)—an approach that designs evaluation methods to be meaningful and fair within each student's cultural context.

But here's the challenge: between lofty policy documents and the daily reality of Tamil Nadu's classrooms lies a considerable gap. Several factors unique to the state widen this "equity assessment divide." The dominance of Tamil and English as instructional languages contrasts with home dialects like Kongu Tamil. The pressure to perform well in State Board examinations looms large. Resources vary dramatically between different types of schools. This study, grounded in Karur district, set out to map this divide empirically—to understand whether teachers are truly equipped and supported to bring NEP's equitable assessment vision to life for the diverse learners sitting before them.

Review of Related Literature

The global conversation around culturally responsive teaching and assessment has been developing for decades. Scholars like Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1995) laid important groundwork. In India, researchers have long advocated for evaluation approaches that consider context and center on the child (Kumar, 2004; National Curriculum Framework, 2005). The NEP 2020 and the subsequent National Curriculum Framework for School Education (2023) have given this conversation fresh momentum, with clear mandates for "formative," "adaptive," and "multilingual" assessment.

Recent Indian studies highlight persistent challenges. Batra (2020) observes a systemic reluctance to move beyond high-stakes summative tests. Research focused on Tamil Nadu (Geetha & Suresh, 2021) points to an uncomfortable dissonance: primary schools embrace activity-based learning, but secondary education remains stubbornly textbook-centric and exam-oriented. What's missing, though, is granular, district-level data on what teachers actually do and how ready they feel. This study addresses that gap by examining the ground-level realities in Karur, offering insights that resonate both within the state and across India.

Objectives

1. To understand how often in-service teachers use Culturally Responsive Assessment practices and what those practices look like.
2. To identify the main barriers—whether training-related, systemic, or infrastructural—that prevent teachers from implementing CRA in line with NEP 2020 guidelines.
3. To explore whether professional training, particularly NEP 2020 orientation, makes a difference in teachers' use of CRA.
4. To examine whether the type of school (government, aided, or private) is associated with different levels of CRA implementation.

Hypotheses

- There is no significant pattern in how frequently in-service teachers report using Culturally Responsive Assessment practices.
- There is no significant difference between systemic barriers and other types of barriers in how much they hinder CRA implementation.

- There is no significant difference in CRA use between teachers who have received formal NEP 2020 assessment training and those who haven't.
- There is no significant difference in CRA use between private school teachers and government school teachers.

Methodology

Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. From 30 schools across Karur district, we purposively sampled 350 in-service teachers (teaching Classes 1 through 12), stratifying by school type: government (120), aided (110), and private (120). We received 312 complete responses, an 89% response rate. The sample was 65% female and 35% male, with teaching experience spanning 2 to 30 years.

Tools Used

The experts developed the Culturally Responsive Assessment in Tamil Nadu (CREAT) survey, which three experts from Tamil Nadu universities validated. Available in both Tamil and English, the survey had four sections:

1. Demographics: School type, medium of instruction, years of experience, grade level, and whether teachers had received NEP 2020 training.
2. Frequency of CRA Practices ($\alpha = .82$): A 12-item, 5-point Likert scale covering practices like "I design projects that let students incorporate local history or culture (for example, Karur's weaving industry or Noyyal river ecology)," "I allow students to respond in their home dialect without penalizing them," and "I use peer and self-assessment rubrics."
3. Perceived Competence ($\alpha = .79$): An 8-item scale measuring how confident teachers felt about designing and grading alternative assessments.
4. Perceived Barriers: A ranked list of 10 context-specific obstacles, developed from pilot interviews with Karur teachers.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data using JASP. Descriptive statistics summarized all variables. An independent samples t-test tested the first hypothesis (comparing NEP-trained and non-trained teachers). A one-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey test examined differences across the three school types. Descriptive ranking analyzed the barriers.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 1: Independent Samples t-test for CRA Use by NEP 2020 Training

Group	N	Mean CRA Use	df	SD	t-value	p-value
Received NEP Training	145	3.68	310	0.62	4.12	<.001
No NEP Training	167	3.21		0.71		

An independent samples t-test to check whether teachers with formal NEP 2020 assessment training differed from those without it in how often they used Culturally Responsive Assessment.

The results showed a statistically significant difference ($t(310) = 4.12, p < .001$). Trained teachers reported using CRA more frequently (mean = 3.68, SD = 0.62) compared to their untrained colleagues (mean = 3.21, SD = 0.71). The effect size was moderate (Cohen's $d = 0.71$).

So, reject the null hypothesis. The evidence strongly suggests that NEP-oriented professional development makes a real difference—teachers who've participated in such training are significantly more likely to bring equity-oriented assessment practices into their classrooms. This points to formal training as an important lever for translating policy into practice.

Table 2: One-Way ANOVA for CRA Use by School Type

School Type	N	Mean CRA Use (SD)	F-value	p-value	Post-hoc (Tukey)
Government	105	3.18 (0.70)	6.87	.001	Private > Government*
Aided	98	3.42 (0.65)			
Private	109	3.65 (0.60)			

A one-way ANOVA tested whether CRA use differed by school type (government, aided, or private).

School type did make a difference ($F(2,309) = 6.87, p = .001$). Follow-up tests using Tukey HSD revealed that private school teachers (mean = 3.65, SD = 0.60) reported significantly more frequent CRA use than government school teachers (mean = 3.18, SD = 0.70), with $p < .05$. Aided school teachers (mean = 3.42, SD = 0.65) fell in the middle, not significantly different from either group.

So, reject the null hypothesis. The institutional context—what kind of school a teacher works in—clearly matters for CRA implementation. Private schools' advantage might reflect factors like greater autonomy, smaller classes, or different resource allocations that make it easier to try innovative assessment approaches. Aided schools' intermediate position suggests a more complex picture, where policy mandates and institutional capacity interact differently than in fully public or private settings.

Table 3: Top Five Ranked Barriers to CRA Implementation

Rank	Barrier	% of Teachers Endorsing (n=312)	Category
1	Overcrowded Classrooms (High Pupil-Teacher Ratio)	85%	Systemic
2	Lack of Practical Training in Formative Assessment Tools	78%	Training
3	Pressure to Complete Prescribed Syllabus for Board Exams	70%	Systemic
4	Lack of Time for Designing Customised Assessments	67%	Systemic
5	Absence of Ready-made Resources/Templates in Tamil	61%	Resource

Descriptive analysis examined whether systemic barriers were perceived as more hindering than other types of obstacles.

Teachers ranked systemic barriers as their biggest challenges. Overcrowded classrooms topped the list, cited by 85% of respondents. Syllabus pressure for board exams followed at 70%, and lack of time for designing assessments at 67%. Together, these three systemic constraints formed the most frequently mentioned obstacle cluster. While a training-related barrier ("Lack of Practical Training") came in second at 78%, barriers related to personal attitudes—like "Lack of belief in CRA"—ranked last, endorsed by only 8% of teachers.

Hence reject the null hypothesis. The pattern is clear and striking: systemic and structural barriers are the primary impediments to CRA implementation. When teachers overwhelmingly point to class size, exam pressure, and time constraints—while rarely citing reluctance on their own part—the spotlight shifts from individual teacher shortcomings to organizational and systemic limitations. This finding suggests that initiatives focused solely on changing teacher attitudes or skills, without addressing these deeper structural constraints, are unlikely to bridge the equity assessment divide.

Major Findings

1. A substantial gap exists between policy vision and classroom practice—regular CRA use remains low despite NEP 2020's emphasis.
2. Professional development focused on NEP 2020 matters: trained teachers use CRA significantly more often.
3. School type influences practice: private school teachers report more flexibility to implement CRA than their government school counterparts.
4. Systemic constraints—particularly large class sizes, syllabus pressure, and the lack of Tamil-language resources—pose the most formidable barriers.

Discussion

What emerges from these findings is a picture of teachers who are willing but constrained. The positive correlation between NEP training and CRA use (Hypothesis 1) shows that directed policy dissemination can make a difference. But the barriers teachers face are real and substantial. When classrooms regularly hold 50 or more students—especially in government schools—individualized or alternative assessment becomes practically overwhelming (Hypothesis 2).

The study also highlights a critical resource gap that's easy to overlook from a policymaker's perspective: teachers lack ready-made, culturally relevant assessment examples in Tamil. They're being asked to innovate, but they haven't been given a toolkit. Meanwhile, the State Board syllabus's rigid timeline directly conflicts with the time-intensive nature of formative, responsive assessment. Teachers are caught between competing demands, and right now, the demands that carry immediate consequences covering the syllabus, preparing for exams—are winning.

Conclusion

If NEP 2020's assessment reforms are to move from policy documents into actual classrooms in districts like Karur, we need action on multiple fronts:

For Teacher Educators and DIETs: Develop intensive, hands-on workshops in Tamil that focus on creating CRA tools relevant to Tamil Nadu's culture and syllabus. Build and share a digital repository of sample assessments that teachers can adapt.

For School Administrators: Push for policies that ease syllabus burden and carve out time for teachers to collaborate on assessment design. Protect this time as essential, not optional.

For State Policymakers: Take a hard look at Board examination formats and weightages—how can they be redesigned to incentivize formative assessment at the classroom level? And address the pupil-teacher ratio as the fundamental barrier to equity that it is. This study, grounded in Karur's specific context, offers a window into the broader challenges and opportunities facing equitable assessment reform across Tamil Nadu and India. The policy vision is clear; now the work of making it real begins.

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