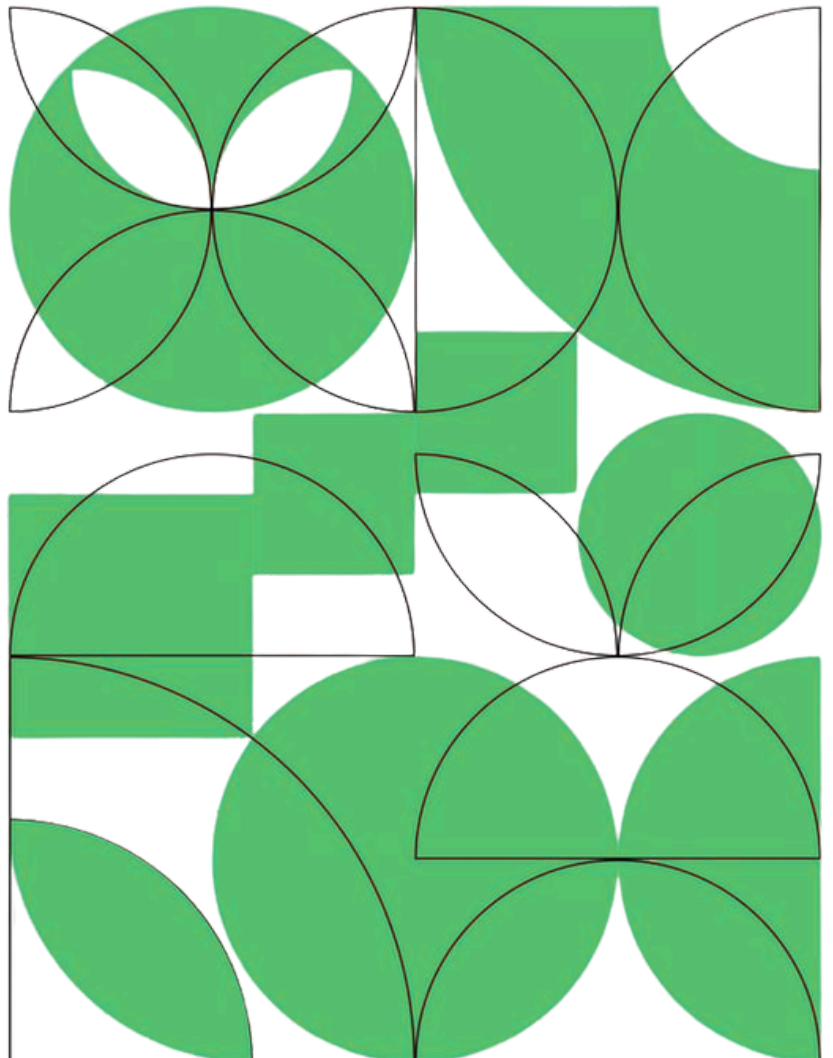




Elevating Education to
Excellence for Impact

Observing to Understand: Transforming Student Evaluation

*Transforming Assessment Through
Systematic Classroom Observation*



May 2026

PUBLICATION DETAILS

Report Title: Observing to Understand: Transforming Student Evaluation

Publication Date: May 2026

Version: 1.0

AUTHORS & CONTRIBUTORS

Author: Zista 3E4I Research Team

Editorial Team: Anand Krishnaswamy & Dr Puja Shrivastav

COPYRIGHT & ATTRIBUTION

© 2026, Zista 3E4I. All rights reserved.

This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). Please cite this publication as:

Zista 3E4I (2025), Observing to Understand: Transforming Student Evaluation, Mumbai, India.



CONTENTS

03

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

04

SUMMARY OF THE
RESEARCH

06

THE IMPERATIVE
FOR CHANGE:
WE MUST ACT NOW

07

IMPLEMENTATION
ROADMAP

09

ARTICULATING THE
VALUE PROPOSITION

Executive Summary

Everyone accepts that what we are currently assessing are not the most valuable elements of the human being. And everyone further declares that the most crucial facets do not lend themselves to exams – how do I measure honesty? How does one measure generosity? Or empathy? Exams have become more measurable but provide limited insight into how students think, reason, value, collaborate, and apply learning. As a result, essential domains for the 21st century, such as creativity, problem-solving, and social-emotional development, remain under-assessed. And yet we know an honest or diligent person when we meet one. The tools were available but have not been utilised properly in school education. Classroom observation is one such powerful tool.

Through a structured observation process, teachers capture not only learning outcomes but also the individual processes of learning, thereby developing a more comprehensive understanding of students' development and enabling responsive, differentiated instructional practices.

Research strongly supports observation-based assessment. Evidence from various studies indicates that observations in the classroom reliably observe and capture student development and outcomes more effectively than standardised tests. Teachers observe a student's engagement, behaviour, peer interaction, etc. while doing classroom observations.

"Students who score well in examinations often struggle to apply their knowledge in real-life contexts. Traditional assessments measure procedural recall rather than deep conceptual understanding."

Observation complements rather than replaces examinations. Integrating both approaches enables a balanced system aligned with NEP 2020's focus on holistic and competency-based learning. Its implementation requires investment in teacher capacity, structured documentation, and alignment with existing practices. This enables a more comprehensive understanding of how students learn and develop over time.

SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

Key Findings

Assessment practices in many schools continue to rely heavily on written examinations that primarily measure recall, procedural accuracy, and performance under timed conditions. While such assessments provide standardised scores, they often fail to capture how students think, apply knowledge, or engage with learning in authentic contexts. Given the “invisible” nature of learning, we tend to infer the completion of a learning transaction indirectly. But the right answer can hide incorrect understanding. Hence, it is important to validate learning through multiple modes. Through systematic classroom observation, the teacher can identify misconceptions, learning gaps, and dispositional issues and adapt instruction accordingly.

Research strongly supports the role of observation-based assessment in providing a deeper understanding of student learning. Traditional assessments frequently capture outcomes but overlook the cognitive and social processes involved in learning ([Shepard, 2000](#)). Observation, however, enables educators to examine how students reason, solve problems, collaborate, and apply knowledge in real situations ([Gronlund & James, 2013](#)). Studies further indicate that examination performance does not necessarily reflect deep understanding or long-term learning ([Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000](#)). A review of multiple empirical studies found that observational measures are more effective predictors of developmental outcomes such as problem-solving ability, self-regulation, and social competence ([Al-Hendawi, Hussein, & Darwish, 2025](#)). Additionally, structured observation methods supported by clear protocols and teacher training have demonstrated strong reliability and inclusivity across diverse learning contexts ([NAEYC, 2009](#)). Thus, observation-based assessment offers a more holistic, authentic, and developmentally appropriate understanding of student learning and growth.

Why Not Test-Based Assessment/Exams?

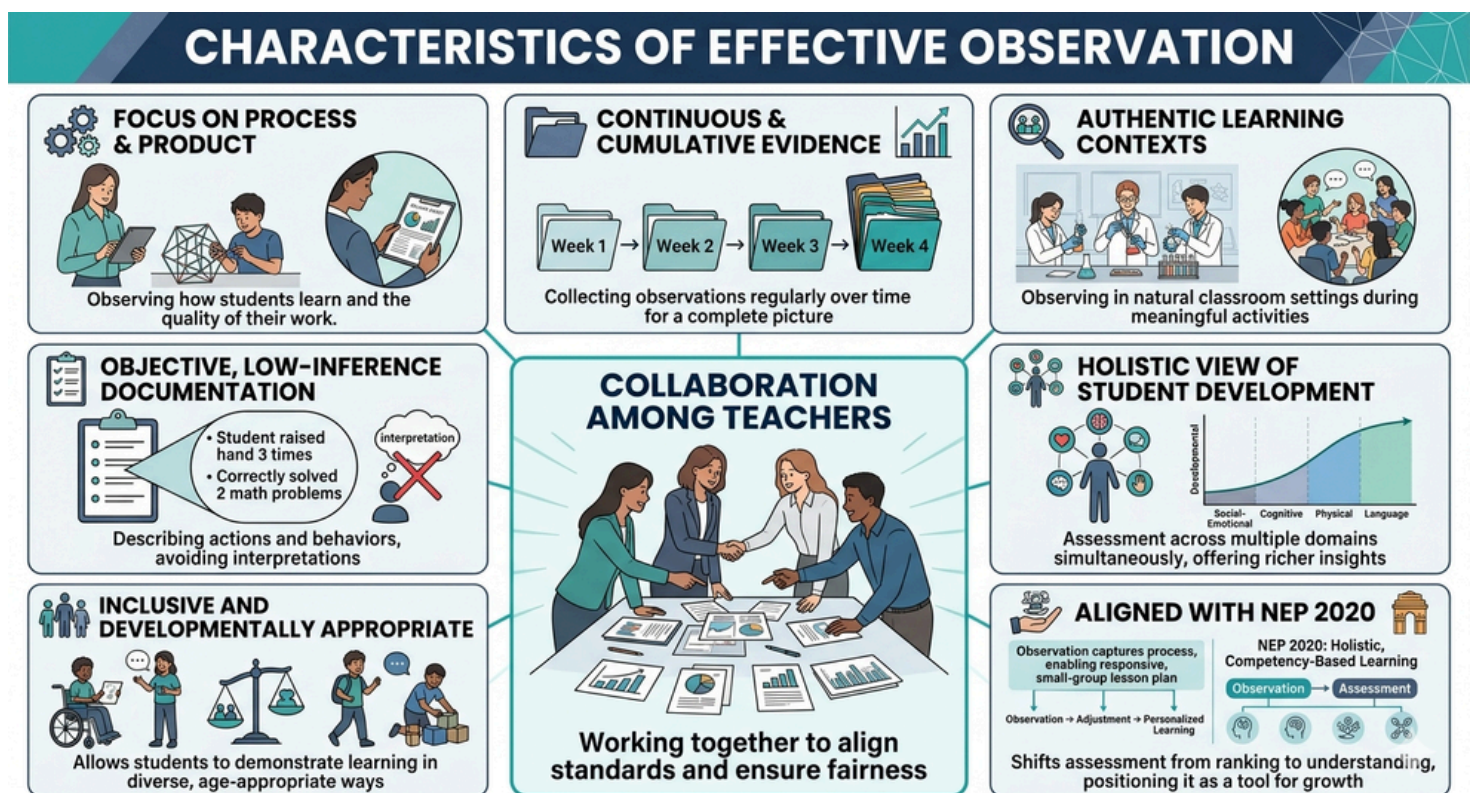
An exam-centric assessment system offers only a narrow view of student learning. Written examinations mainly measure memory, recall, and procedural accuracy, while providing limited insight into students’ thinking, reasoning, and application of knowledge ([Black & Wiliam, 1998](#); [Pellegrino et al., 2001](#)). As a result, exam performance often reflects surface-level preparation rather than deep understanding. Essential competencies such as collaboration, creativity, communication, and emotional intelligence also remain largely unassessed ([Gardner, 2011](#)). Additionally, test anxiety and systemic inequities can negatively affect student performance, especially in high-pressure educational settings ([Deb, Strodl & Sun, 2015](#)). Research further shows that excessive focus on examinations narrows curriculum experiences and reduce students’ intrinsic motivation toward learning ([Au, 2007](#)).

Observation as Assessment: A Transformative Alternative

Observation as assessment is presented as a systematic and research-backed approach for capturing authentic learning. It involves teachers intentionally observing students during natural learning activities. Teachers use multiple methods, such as anecdotal records, checklists, work samples, etc. (more about these in the Implementation Roadmap section), to collect the classroom observations related to students.

When six-year-old Sumant consistently avoided the building blocks corner, his teacher might have assumed disinterest, but by choosing unstructured naturalistic observation over a checklist or rating scale, she was able to watch him freely across contexts without the lens of predefined criteria. What she noticed over several days was quietly significant: Sumant would hover at the edge of group play, mimic the constructions of other children in the air with his fingers, and only engage with blocks when alone. A written assessment would have recorded an absence of skill; observation revealed the presence of anxiety. This single insight reshaped how his teacher designed entry points into collaborative activity – not through correction, but through gradual, low-stakes invitation. Observation, when chosen thoughtfully for the context, does not merely confirm what a child can do; it illuminates why they do or don't, and that is often where the real teaching begins.

The following figure shows the key characteristics of effective observations.



THE IMPERATIVE FOR CHANGE:

We Must Act Now

India's examination-driven culture has shaped what students learn and, perhaps more critically, what they choose not to learn. While the National Education Policy 2020 envisions a shift toward holistic, competency-based assessment, the deeper question is, are our schools creating thinkers or merely test-takers? The evidence for observation as assessment is compelling, and the direction is clear. What this moment calls for is the kind of reflective leadership that transforms vision into lived experience for every child.

- 1. The Educational Imperative:** Schools committed to deep learning must adopt multidimensional assessment approaches that mirror the complexity of learning itself.
- 2. The Wellbeing Imperative:** High-stakes exams create anxiety and pressure, making learning feel score-driven. Observation reorients assessment toward growth, fostering learner confidence and a more meaningful engagement with learning.
- 3. The Equity and Justice Imperative:** Standardised tests favour limited ways of showing learning, often missing diverse expressions. Fair assessment recognises varied ways students demonstrate understanding.
- 4. The Professional Development Imperative:** Observation reshapes assessment and teaching, helping educators become more reflective and intentional by focusing on learning as it happens.

The Challenge and the Opportunity

Adopting observation as assessment requires transformation like:

- Helping parents understand assessment beyond percentage marks
- Supporting teachers to develop new professional competencies by school authorities
- Adjusting institutional assessment systems along with reallocating time and resources

Governing bodies must understand that transitional discomfort yields long-term gains in student wellbeing and learning.

IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP

Embedding observation as assessment requires systematic, thoughtful implementation. This roadmap provides structured guidance for schools committed to assessment transformation.

Process for Conducting Effective Classroom Observation

Effective classroom observation is a structured process used to better understand student learning and development that requires intentional planning, careful recording, and meaningful follow-up.

PLAN WITH PURPOSE

Before observing, teachers should identify a clear focus area, such as problem-solving, participation, collaboration, or emotional development. Guiding questions can help direct attention toward specific learning behaviours. Observations should also take place across different classroom situations to gain a complete understanding of the learner.

USE APPROPRIATE OBSERVATION METHODS

Different observation methods serve different purposes. Teachers may use:

- Running records for detailed descriptions of student behaviour over a period of time
- Anecdotal notes for brief records of important learning moments
- Checklists or rating scales to track skills, behaviours, or milestones
- Work samples and portfolios to collect evidence of student learning and progress

Using a combination of methods provides a more balanced picture of learning.

MAINTAIN OBJECTIVITY

Effective observations should be factual and unbiased. Teachers should record what they directly see and hear without adding assumptions or personal opinions. Observations should capture actions performed, statements made, and body language indicators sans extrapolation, hyperbole or assumptions.

ANALYSE THE EVIDENCE

After collecting information, teachers should look for patterns in student behaviour, participation, understanding, and learning needs. Observations help identify strengths, challenges, and the type of support required for further growth. Collaborative discussions with colleagues can strengthen interpretation and consistency and check for biases, etc.

USE OBSERVATION TO IMPROVE LEARNING









Observation becomes meaningful when it informs action. Teachers can use findings to adjust teaching strategies, personalise instruction, and provide timely support. Sharing observation evidence with families also strengthens home–school partnerships and helps parents understand their child’s learning journey more clearly. Effective observation helps teachers move beyond marks and gain a deeper, more holistic understanding of how students learn, think, and grow.

ARTICULATING THE VALUE PROPOSITION

Why Observation Matters:

By focusing on how students think, interact, and grow, it transforms assessment into a tool for understanding rather than judgement. The research makes a compelling case that current assessment systems are insufficient for capturing the complexity of learning. While traditional testing provides limited and often misleading insights, observation-based assessment offers a holistic, accurate, and equitable alternative. It serves as the foundation for intentional teaching and effective home-school partnerships.

BENEFITS OF OBSERVATION AS ASSESSMENT

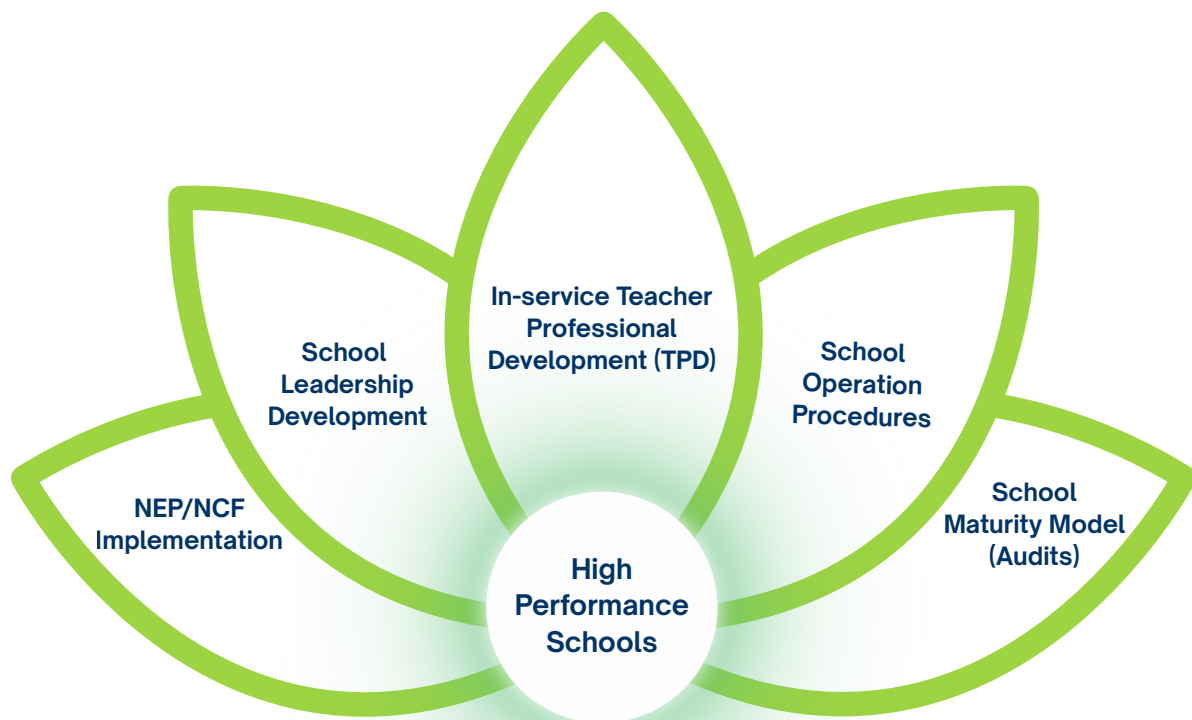
 STUDENTS	 EDUCATORS AND SCHOOLS	 PARENTS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates a more inclusive and low-stress assessment environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides direct evidence of how students learn, participate, and respond in classroom situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Makes learning visible beyond marks and grades 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows students to demonstrate learning through natural classroom activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helps teachers adapt instruction according to individual learning needs and developmental readiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides meaningful insights into a child's progress, interests, and development 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports personalised learning based on individual strengths and needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports early identification of learning difficulties or developmental concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthens trust and collaboration between families and schools 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourages student reflection, participation, and ownership of learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tracks student growth across cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural domains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helps parents understand the value of play, interaction, and everyday learning experiences 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognises diverse learning styles and cultural backgrounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourages reflective teaching and continuous professional development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourages shared support for learning goals at home and school 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Captures essential life skills such as communication, collaboration, empathy, and resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotes more consistent and evidence-based assessment practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers a holistic understanding of the child's academic, social, emotional, and creative growth 	
 OVERALL IMPACT			
 Promotes a more authentic and holistic understanding of learning	 Balances academic achievement with developmental growth	 Supports equitable and developmentally appropriate assessment practices	 Encourages schools to focus on deep learning rather than only examination performance

REFERENCES

1. Al-Hendawi, M., Hussein, E., & Darwish, S. (2025). Direct observation systems for child behavior assessment in early childhood education: A systematic literature review. *Discover Mental Health*, 5(1), 21.
2. Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Educational Researcher*, 36(5), 258-267.
3. Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, (2000). Early Childhood Development and Learning; NATIONAL ACADEMY PRESS 2101 Constitution Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20418
4. Bentzen, W. R. (2009). Seeing young children: A guide to observing and recording behavior (6th ed.). Delmar Cengage Learning.
5. Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (2009). Developing the theory of formative assessment. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 5-31.
6. Blagojevic, B., & Garthwait, A. (2020). Observing and recording growth and change: Guiding principles for observing young children. Scholastic.
7. Deb, S., Strodl, E., & Sun, J. (2015). Academic stress, parental pressure, anxiety and mental health among Indian high school students. *International Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences*, 5(1), 26-34.
8. Gardner, H. (2011). Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences (3rd ed.). Basic Books.
9. Gronlund, G., & James, M. (2013). Focused observations: How to observe young children for assessment and curriculum planning (2nd ed.). Redleaf Press.
10. Gullo, D. F. (2005). Understanding assessment and evaluation in early childhood education (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.
11. National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC]. (2009). Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8. NAEYC.
12. National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT]. (2021). National Achievement Survey 2021: Class III, V, VIII and X. Government of India.
13. National Education policy (2020), Ministry of Human Resource Development, government of India
14. Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2019). Framework for 21st century learning. A Network of Battelle for Kids.
15. Pellegrino, J. W., Chudowsky, N., & Glaser, R. (Eds.). (2001). Knowing what students know: The science and design of educational assessment. National Academy Press.
16. Seidel, T., & Shavelson, R. J. (2007). Teaching effectiveness research in the past decade: The role of theory and research design in disentangling meta-analysis results. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(4), 454-499.
17. Shepard, L. A. (2000). The role of assessment in a learning culture. *Educational Researcher*, 29(7), 4-14.
18. Shepard, L. A., Kagan, S. L., & Wurtz, E. (Eds.). (1998). Principles and recommendations for early childhood assessments. National Education Goals Panel.
19. Von der Embse, N., Jester, D., Roy, D., & Post, J. (2018). Test anxiety effects, predictors, and correlates: A 30-year meta-analytic review. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 227, 483-493.

PARTNER WITH US

We believe transformative educational change happens through collaboration. This report begins a conversation. We invite you to join us in reshaping assessment practices to serve every child authentically.



LET'S BUILD THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION, TOGETHER.

Contact Our Partnership Team Today:

Email: Partnerships@zistaeducation.com

Phone: +91 9152003567

Website: www.zistaeducation.com