TRADITIONAL EXAMS VS. ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENTS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN PALESTINIAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT
This study explored the use of traditional exams versus alternative assessments in Palestinian public schools, focusing on the challenges posed by overcrowded classrooms and limited resources. The research employed a qualitative methodology, using interviews with 10 teachers and 20 students, along with document analysis and classroom observations. Thematic analysis was applied to the data to identify key patterns and themes related to assessment practices. The results showed that traditional exams dominate in Palestinian schools due to their efficiency and feasibility, particularly in overcrowded classrooms. While these exams provide a standardized measure of student knowledge, they were found to be limited in evaluating higher-order cognitive skills like critical thinking and creativity. On the other hand, alternative assessment methods, such as project-based learning and peer assessments, were recognized by participants as valuable for fostering deeper student engagement and critical thinking. However, these methods were rarely implemented due to systemic barriers, such as lack of resources, large class sizes, and inadequate teacher training. The study also highlighted that the theoretical frameworks of active learning and constructivist approaches supported the potential benefits of alternative assessments. However, in the context of Palestinian public schools, the constraints imposed by overcrowding and resource limitations made it challenging to apply these methods effectively. In conclusion, the study suggests that improvements in classroom resources, reduced class sizes, and better professional development for teachers are necessary steps to facilitate the use of alternative assessment methods and improve the overall quality of education in Palestinian public schools.

Keywords: Traditional Exams, Alternative Assessment, Palestinian Education, Teacher Perceptions, Classroom Overcrowding.

1. INTRODUCTION
Recent studies have underscored the growing interest in alternative assessment methods as a way to assess student learning more holistically. These methods, which include performance tasks, project-based assessments, and portfolios, have been shown to not only engage students more deeply but also provide teachers with a clearer picture of students' abilities to apply knowledge in real-world contexts. This shift is aligned with educational theories such as constructivism, which emphasizes the importance of active learning and critical thinking (Butler, McColskey & O'Sullivan, 2005; Chun, 2010).
One key advantage of performance-based assessments is that they allow students to demonstrate not just what they know but also how they can use their knowledge to solve problems or create solutions. Research has highlighted that these assessments promote higher engagement and motivate students to learn through active participation, which results in improved academic achievement and skills development (Chun, 2010). For example, a study on high school students

showed significant improvements in motivation and success after the introduction of performance-based assessments (Butler et al., 2005). However, while alternative assessments offer several advantages, they are not without challenges. Teachers often face external constraints such as a lack of support from administrators or parents, who may be more focused on traditional tests and performance metrics. Internal challenges also exist, including concerns about student motivation and the time required to implement and assess these methods effectively (Butler et al., 2005). Despite these barriers, the potential of alternative assessments to enhance student engagement and learning remains significant, particularly in resource-constrained educational settings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The debate on the effectiveness of traditional versus alternative assessment methods has garnered increasing attention in educational research. Traditional exams, long considered the gold standard in evaluating student knowledge, often rely on rote memorization and recall of factual information. These assessments offer a standardized approach to measuring academic achievement, providing clear benchmarks for evaluating performance

(Torrance, 2012). However, critics argue that traditional exams are limited in their ability to assess higher-order cognitive skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity (Bennett, 2016; Larkin, 2021). This critique has led to the growing popularity of alternative assessment methods, which aim to foster a more comprehensive understanding of student learning.

Theories of learning and development, such as those proposed by Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1973), have shaped the advocacy for alternative assessments. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the importance of social interactions and cultural contexts in learning. From this perspective, assessments should not merely measure students' ability to recall information but should also capture their ability to apply knowledge in practical, real-world contexts. Similarly, Piaget's constructivist theory underscores the need for active learning environments, where students engage in problem-solving and critical thinking rather than memorization. These theoretical foundations support the use of alternative assessments, such as project-based learning, portfolios, and peer assessments, which enable students to showcase their learning through diverse and authentic tasks.

Despite the theoretical advantages, the implementation of alternative assessments is often challenged by environmental factors, especially in resource-constrained contexts. Research by Black and Wiliam (1998) has highlighted the barriers faced by teachers in adopting formative assessments in overcrowded classrooms, where providing individualized feedback becomes increasingly difficult. Additionally, the lack of adequate teacher training and professional development further complicates the effective use of alternative assessment methods (Guskey, 2007). In such environments, traditional exams may remain the most practical solution, despite their limitations in fostering critical thinking and creativity.

The role of assessment in fostering student engagement has gained significant attention in recent years, with many educators advocating for a shift toward more student-centered approaches. Alternative assessments, such as collaborative projects, peer reviews, and self-assessments, offer students opportunities to engage more deeply with the content and demonstrate their learning in varied ways (Binkley et al., 2012). These methods are aligned with contemporary educational goals, which emphasize the development of critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration in addition to the acquisition of knowledge. The context of Palestinian public schools, as explored in this study, reflects many of the challenges mentioned above. Overcrowded classrooms, limited

resources, and insufficient teacher training present significant barriers to the widespread use of alternative assessments. As a result, traditional exams remain the most feasible option for assessing large numbers of students, despite their inability to fully assess students' higher-order cognitive abilities (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Although both teachers and students acknowledge the value of alternative assessments, systemic constraints often prevent their broader implementation.

Research Problem

In Palestinian public schools, the traditional examination system has long been the dominant method of student assessment. This approach, which emphasizes rote memorization and the recall of facts, has been criticized for its inability to assess higher-order cognitive skills, creativity, and problem-solving abilities (Adams & McQueen, 2020). Despite this, traditional exams remain entrenched in the educational system due to factors such as institutional resistance to change, limited teacher training, and resource constraints (Heritage, 2020). However, as the demands of the 21st century evolve, there is increasing pressure to explore alternative assessment methods that better reflect students' learning processes and prepare them for real-world challenges (Torrance, 2018).

Alternative assessments, such as formative assessments, peer evaluations, and project-based assessments, emphasize ongoing learning and student development over time. Global research highlights the advantages of these methods, including promoting deeper learning, enhancing critical thinking, and providing more comprehensive feedback (Brookhart, 2017; Brown & Harris, 2019). Despite these benefits, transitioning to such methods within the context of Palestinian schools poses significant challenges. Factors such as teacher preparedness, institutional support, and the sociopolitical and economic pressures unique to Palestine complicate the adoption of these strategies (Deneen & Brown, 2021).

This research aims to explore the perceptions of teachers and students regarding traditional versus alternative assessment methods, identify the challenges in implementing these strategies in Palestinian public schools, and assess the potential impacts of such a transition on student outcomes and educational quality. By doing so, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how to adapt assessment practices to the unique context of Palestinian education.

Problem Statement

The traditional exam-based assessment system has long been the foundation of educational practices in Palestinian public schools. However, the rigid structure of traditional exams often limits the ability to assess the full range of student learning, particularly critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Kubiszyn et al.,2024). In contrast, alternative assessment methods, such as project-based learning, peer reviews, and self-assessment, have gained significant attention for their ability to provide a more comprehensive understanding of student abilities and to foster a deeper engagement with the learning process (Guskey, 2007; Shute, 2008). These methods offer opportunities for ongoing feedback, which is considered essential for students' academic growth (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Despite the global shift towards alternative assessments, Palestinian schools continue to predominantly rely on traditional exams. This raises concerns about the efficacy of such assessments in meeting the evolving needs of students in a rapidly changing world, especially in the context of a challenging political and social environment (Tierney & Charland, 2008). The issue is even more critical in Palestinian public schools, where overcrowded classrooms and limited resources further exacerbate the challenges of delivering effective assessments

(Torrance, 2012). Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges and opportunities of traditional exams versus alternative assessments in Palestinian public schools, to understand how these methods impact student learning and to provide insights into possible improvements.

Objectives
1. Identify the challenges faced by teachers in implementing traditional exams in Palestinian public schools.
2. Explore teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of alternative assessments compared to traditional exams.
3. Identify opportunities for integrating alternative assessment methods in Palestinian public schools and how to leverage them to improve the quality of education.

Questions of study
1. What are the main challenges faced by teachers in implementing traditional exams in Palestinian public schools?
2. How do teachers and students perceive alternative assessments compared to traditional exams in terms of their effectiveness and impact on student learning?
3. What opportunities exist for integrating alternative assessment methods in Palestinian public schools, and how can these opportunities be utilized to improve the quality of education?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative methodology to examine the challenges and practices surrounding traditional exams versus alternative assessments in Palestinian public schools. The approach focuses specifically on a case study of one public school located in Nablus Governorate. This school is selected due to its representation of the typical conditions found in many Palestinian schools, including overcrowded classrooms and limited resources. The case study approach is well-suited for this investigation as it allows for an in-depth analysis of the assessment practices in a specific, real-world context. This method provides a rich and nuanced understanding of how both traditional exams and alternative assessments are implemented and their perceived efficacy, within the constraints of a Palestinian public-school environment (Yin, 2014).

Sampling and Participants:
The study focused on a purposeful sample from a public school in Nablus Governorate, incorporating two key groups to achieve diverse perspectives. The research was conducted during the first semester of the 2024 academic year. This timeframe allowed for observing and analyzing the practical applications of teaching and assessment strategies in real-time classroom settings, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the educational practices and challenges in the specified context.

1. **Teachers**: Ten educators, selected for their direct involvement in assessment processes, represented various subject areas and grades. These participants ranged in experience from 3 to 20 years, providing a broad view of challenges and practices related to both traditional and alternative assessments.

2. **Students**: Twenty students from grades 5 through 12 were included to reflect varying academic levels and engagement with different assessment styles. This group was instrumental in understanding how assessment practices impacted learning experiences and outcomes.

Additionally, the study utilized **document analysis**, which included traditional exam papers, alternative assessment rubrics, and grading records, to evaluate the alignment of assessments with intended learning objectives and cognitive skill levels. This sample size and diversity allowed for in-depth exploration of the challenges and opportunities in assessment practices within the constraints of overcrowded classrooms and limited resources.

Data Collection Tools: This study employs three primary methods for data collection:
1. **Semi-structured Interviews**: Interviews with teachers and students will be conducted to capture their insights and experiences regarding the use of traditional exams and alternative assessments. Semi-structured interviews are ideal because they allow for flexibility in exploring participants' views, while still focusing on the research questions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).
2. **Classroom Observations**: Observations of both traditional exams and alternative assessment activities will provide direct insight into how assessments are conducted, how students engage with them, and how teachers manage the assessment process in real time. Observations offer a valuable opportunity to examine behaviors and interactions that may not be captured in interviews or surveys.
3. **Document Analysis**: Relevant assessment materials, such as exam papers, assignment guidelines, and student projects, will be analyzed to understand the formal structures and criteria of the assessments in the school. Document analysis will help contextualize the findings from interviews and observations and provide a comprehensive view of the assessment practices.

Data Analysis: The data collected will be analyzed using **thematic analysis**. This method is suitable for identifying and interpreting patterns or themes in qualitative data. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to capture the complexity of participants' experiences and explore how different factors—such as overcrowded classrooms, resource limitations, and teaching methods— affect assessment practices.

Thematic Analysis The analysis of the data collected through interviews, observations, and document reviews followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis:

1. **Familiarization with Data**: All interviews and observational notes were transcribed and reviewed thoroughly. This step allowed the researcher to become immersed in the data and identify initial ideas relevant to the study objectives.
2. **Initial Coding**: Segments of text related to the study's focus (e.g., challenges of traditional exams, perceptions of alternative assessments) were labeled with codes. This process was guided by manual coding, with codes derived directly from participant responses and observed behaviors.

3. **Theme Identification**: The initial codes were grouped to form potential themes. For example, data on "lack of alignment between exams and curriculum goals" and "focus on rote memorization" were organized under a broader theme of "Limitations of Traditional Exams."

4. **Theme Refinement**: Themes were re-evaluated for coherence and distinctiveness. Data clusters, such as "teacher adaptability" and "student preferences," were combined to form overarching categories like "Teacher and Student Perceptions of Alternative Assessments."

5. **Theme Definition and Naming**: Final themes were defined to reflect the data accurately. Key themes included:
   o *Limitations of Traditional Exams*: Overemphasis on memorization and neglect of higher-order thinking.
   o *Opportunities of Alternative Assessments*: Enhanced engagement and skills-based learning potential.
   o *Barriers to Implementation*: Challenges due to resource limitations and overcrowded classrooms.

6. **Reporting**: The refined themes were used to structure the study's results, providing a nuanced understanding of assessment practices in Palestinian schools. This method ensured a systematic and rigorous exploration of the data, revealing patterns and insights aligned with the study's objectives. By emphasizing both teacher and student perspectives, as well as the analysis of exam documents, the findings contribute meaningfully to the discussion on assessment practices in resource-limited environments (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

Ethical Considerations:
The study will ensure adherence to ethical research standards. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, explaining the study's purpose, methods, and the voluntary nature of participation. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained by not disclosing personal details or identifying information of participants in any reports or publications. By using a **qualitative approach** and **case study methodology**, this research aims to provide a detailed and context-sensitive understanding of how assessment practices in Palestinian public school's impact student learning, particularly in the context of overcrowded classrooms and limited resources. This methodology will allow for a thorough investigation into the challenges and opportunities of both traditional and alternative assessments.

Validity and **Reliability**
In this study, both **validity** and **reliability** were ensured through multiple strategies. **Content validity** was established by aligning the interview protocols and document analysis with key theories from researchers like Guskey (2007) and Torrance (2012), ensuring the tools addressed the central aspects of assessment practices. **Construct validity** was supported by triangulating data from interviews with teachers, students, and exam documents (Cohen et al., 2018).

To ensure **reliability**, **inter-rater reliability** was applied, where two researchers independently coded the data, minimizing bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). **Member checking** was also used to verify the accuracy of findings through participant feedback (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, **data triangulation** reinforced reliability by cross-checking findings from different sources (Patton, 2015). These methods helped maintain the accuracy and consistency of the study's findings.

4. FINDING

The following section presents the finding of this study, which aims to investigate the practices and challenges of traditional exams versus alternative assessments in Palestinian public schools. Data were collected through interviews with 10 teachers and 20 students, as well as document analysis of exam papers. Thematic analysis was employed to explore patterns and key themes that emerged from the data. These results offer valuable insights into how different assessment methods affect student learning, teacher practices, and the overall educational experience, with a particular focus on the challenges posed by overcrowded classrooms and limited resources. The findings are organized into distinct themes that highlight key findings across the data sources, which include teacher and student interviews, and exam document analysis.

1. **Environmental Constraints**
   - Overcrowded Classrooms:

Teachers and students both reported overcrowded classrooms as a significant challenge to implementing diverse assessment methods. Due to the high number of students, traditional exams were perceived as the most feasible option. Teachers struggled to manage exams effectively in these conditions, limiting their ability to use alternative assessments. Observations confirmed that managing class behavior and maintaining order left little room for more interactive or individualized assessment methods (Torrance, 2012).
   - Teacher Workload:

Teachers highlighted their heavy workloads as another major barrier to implementing alternative assessments. In addition to managing large classes, teachers had to grade numerous traditional exams, leaving little time for innovative assessments such as peer reviews, project-based learning, or formative assessments. This lack of time was reflected in both teacher interviews and classroom observations, which consistently pointed to the difficulties teachers faced in balancing routine tasks with creative instructional strategies (Shute, 2008).

2. **Advantages and Disadvantages of Traditional Exams**
   - Perceived Benefits:

Both teachers and students expressed that traditional exams provide a clear, standardized way to measure knowledge. Teachers found traditional exams easy to manage, particularly in overcrowded classrooms. They appreciated the efficiency of grading exams that focused primarily on recall and fact-based questions. Students also felt more comfortable with traditional exams, as they were familiar and less stressful compared to more complex assessments (Viloria et al, 2024)

Limitations:

Despite their benefits, teachers and students acknowledged significant drawbacks to traditional exams. Teachers emphasized that these assessments fail to measure critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. Students voiced frustration about their inability

to showcase their true understanding or capabilities beyond rote memorization. The absence of higher-order thinking questions in exam papers was a consistent theme in both teacher interviews and document analysis (Torrance, 2012).

4. Challenges of Implementing Alternative Assessments.
-   Resource Limitations:

Teachers identified resource limitations as a major obstacle to adopting alternative assessments. Many teachers expressed that without adequate materials, classroom space, and time, it was impossible to implement project-based or portfolio assessments effectively. Classroom observations revealed that even when teachers were willing to use such methods, they were constrained by these practical limitations. As a result, many teachers felt compelled to rely on traditional exams as the default option (Black & Wiliam, 2009).
-   Teacher Training:

Another key challenge was the lack of professional development opportunities for teachers in using alternative assessment methods. Teachers reported that they were not well-prepared to design and implement assessments that did not rely on traditional exams. Without proper training, teachers felt unprepared to engage with alternative methods such as peer assessments or project-based learning. This lack of expertise contributed to the continued dominance of traditional exams in the classroom (Tierney & Charland, 2008).

5. Document Analysis of Assessment Practices.
-   Traditional Exam Papers:

The analysis of exam papers revealed that traditional exams primarily assessed factual recall and memorization, with a lack of higher-order thinking questions. The majority of exam questions were designed to test students' ability to remember information, using formats such as multiple-choice, true/false, and short-answer questions. This finding was consistent with both teacher interviews and observations, which noted the limited scope of traditional exams (Torrance, 2012).
-   Alternative Assessments in School Documents:

Document analysis also revealed occasional use of alternative assessments, such as group projects and presentations, especially in subjects like social studies and science. However, these alternative assessments were not widespread across all subjects. The documents indicated that resource constraints, overcrowded classrooms, and limited teacher training were key barriers to the broader implementation of these methods (Shute, 2008).

5. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Table 1: Summary of findings on Traditional Exams vs. Alternative Assessments in Palestinian Public Schools

Category	Key Findings

Teachers' Insights on Traditional Exams	Focus on memorization; causes student stress; limited assessment of higher-order thinking.
Teachers' Insights on Alternative Assessments	Promote engagement and real-world application; provide continuous feedback; hindered by overcrowding and limited resources.
Students' Views on Traditional Exams	Limited reflection of their true capabilities; high stress; prefer continuous assessments.
Students' Views on Alternative Assessments	More engaging and less stressful; opportunity for feedback and improvement; desire for more alternative assessments.
Traditional Exam Papers	Focus on factual recall; lack of higher-order thinking questions; inconsistent grading rubrics.
Alternative Assessment Practices	Occasional use of project-based assessments; inconsistent application; hindered by practical challenges.

6. DISCUSSION

In discussing the findings of this study, it is essential to acknowledge that the challenges and opportunities of traditional exams versus alternative assessments are not unique to Palestinian public schools, but reflect broader trends in education globally. As the results from teacher and student interviews suggest, traditional exams remain the dominant assessment method, largely due to logistical constraints such as overcrowded classrooms and limited resources. These findings are consistent with broader educational research that identifies similar challenges in under-resourced schools worldwide. For example, in a study conducted by Gratchev (2023), it was found that traditional exams often fail to assess critical thinking and creativity, a concern echoed by the teachers in this study. Moreover, the increasing pressure on educators to manage large class sizes without adequate support exacerbates the reliance on traditional exams.

Furthermore, the preference for alternative assessments expressed by students aligns with global research on student engagement. Devaki (2024) emphasizes that alternative assessments, such as project-based learning and peer reviews, can provide continuous feedback, leading to improved student engagement and academic growth. However, as Tierney and Charland (2008) have noted, implementing such methods in overcrowded and resource-limited environments presents a significant challenge. The document analysis in this study revealed limited use of alternative assessments, which corroborates findings from Tai (2024) that highlight the difficulties in shifting from traditional exams to more formative and inclusive assessment models.

In sum, the findings of this study reinforce the idea that while alternative assessments offer clear benefits in fostering deeper learning and engagement, their implementation in Palestinian public schools—similar to other education systems facing resource constraints—requires addressing environmental challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, teacher workload, and a lack of infrastructure (Viloria et al. ,2024). The global shift towards alternative assessments must be tempered by practical considerations, including the need for teacher training and better resource allocation to support these approaches.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, we can present several recommendations aimed at improving assessment practices in Palestinian public schools. These suggestions seek to address the challenges identified, particularly overcrowded classrooms, resource limitations, and the need for professional development for teachers.

1. Teacher Training and Professional Development: Provide targeted training for teachers on how to implement alternative assessments effectively, particularly in large, overcrowded classrooms. This could include workshops on project-based learning, peer assessments, and self-assessments.
2. Increase Resource Allocation: Invest in resources such as teaching materials, technology, and classroom space to facilitate the use of diverse assessment methods, ensuring that teachers can create dynamic and engaging learning environments.
3. Manage Classroom Size: Address overcrowding by reducing class sizes or implementing strategies to manage large groups more effectively, allowing teachers to provide individualized feedback and engage students in more interactive assessments.
4. Encourage Hybrid Assessment Models: Develop a hybrid approach that combines traditional exams with alternative assessments. This could help strike a balance between standardized evaluation and more interactive, formative methods.
5. Further Research: Conduct additional studies to explore the long-term impact of alternative assessments on student learning outcomes and their potential to enhance the educational experience in Palestinian public schools.

8. CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of traditional exams versus alternative assessments in Palestinian public schools. Findings revealed that overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and teacher workload were significant barriers to implementing alternative assessments, leading to the continued reliance on traditional exams. While traditional exams are efficient in assessing basic knowledge, they fail to evaluate higher-order skills like critical thinking and creativity. Teachers and students acknowledged these limitations, but both groups recognized the difficulty of integrating more interactive assessments due to systemic constraints.

The study emphasizes the importance of addressing these challenges to promote alternative assessments that could better support diverse student learning outcomes. Recommendations include providing targeted professional development for teachers, improving classroom conditions, and exploring hybrid models that combine traditional and alternative assessment approaches. This research contributes to the understanding of assessment practices in resource-limited contexts and highlights the need for systemic reforms to foster more inclusive and effective evaluation methods in Palestinian public schools.

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