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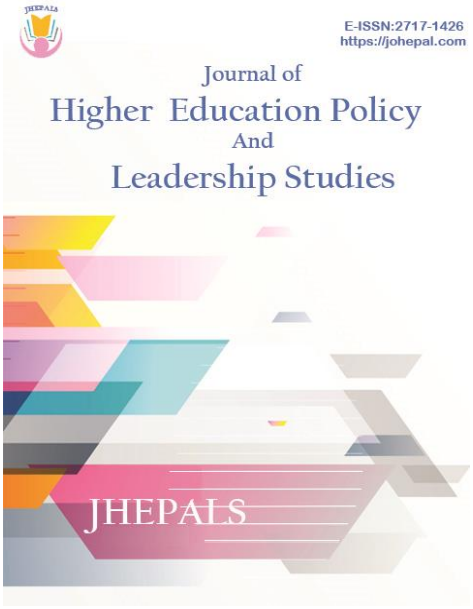
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Bridging the Gap: How K-12 Educational Policies Impact Students' Readiness for Higher Education

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Abstract

The K-12 educational system in Iran faces challenges in preparing students for success in higher education and beyond, including their future professional careers. This study examines whether students are solely responsible for their struggles at the higher education level, or if the current K-12 policies contribute to an environment that limits students' potential. A total of 317 undergraduates (aged 19-23) were purposefully selected to participate in this qualitative research, with data collected through interviews. The analysis was conducted using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) Constant Comparative methodology to explore the research question. The findings suggest that while the educational system in schools is largely test- and outcome-focused, the teaching environment does not adequately support students in developing the skills and mindset needed for success after school. Therefore, improvements in the educational system are necessary to better prepare students for their future endeavors.

Keywords: K-12 Education; Teaching Practices; Higher Education; Educational Reform; School improvement

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Introduction

As educators, we recognize that students vary in their abilities and talents. Some demonstrate exceptional aptitude, while others possess more average competencies that enable them to grasp basic concepts. A few may even struggle, facing challenges that result in poor performance on certain assessments. However, it is essential to acknowledge that even those students who may appear less capable in terms of academic achievement often possess unique strengths and potentials. These latent abilities must be identified and nurtured to help students thrive not only within the school environment but also in their future endeavors beyond school.

Effective teaching extends beyond merely delivering the prescribed curriculum and assigning grades. A key aspect of a teacher's role is to manage the learning environment in a way that facilitates students' growth, unearthing their hidden potentials. While teachers must adhere to institutional policies and regulations regarding teaching and assessment, their responsibilities go beyond these formal requirements.

Students who demonstrate exceptional abilities may feel disengaged by routine instructional methods that fail to challenge them. They often master the material quickly and may complete it ahead of schedule. To address this, it is crucial to create a dynamic teaching-learning environment that fosters dialogue and collaboration. Group work, such as assigning students to small groups with specific roles, can promote peer learning and critical thinking, and better align with the goals of preparing students for higher education and future societal roles.

The prevailing focus in the K-12 educational system in Iran, as well as in higher education, is centered on testing and outcome-based assessment. The structure of curricula and syllabi is primarily designed to prepare students for success on exams. However, this excessive emphasis on assessment has significant consequences, particularly for students' well-being. It can create a false sense of competence, where students believe that test performance alone equates to genuine knowledge.

This paper contends that the current approach to teaching and learning, which is heavily focused on testing, is a major contributor to students' difficulties in higher education. The overemphasis on preparing students for high-stakes tests, such as the nationwide exam for university entry, undermines their broader educational development. As a result, categorizing students as excellent, good, fair, weak, or poor based solely on test scores in an outcome-driven system is problematic. In this regard, the research question is:

- Do our teaching and learning practices in schools require improvement, or are students themselves responsible for their struggles in higher education?

Teaching and Learning in Schools: What Needs to Happen?

It is crucial to gain an accurate understanding of current teaching and learning practices in schools. The adoption of best practices, tailored to local priorities, can significantly improve the educational environment in Iran.

Who are the primary stakeholders in education? The obvious answers might be students and teachers. Who manages the classrooms? Teachers. Who leads the school? School principals. While these answers may seem straightforward, they fail to account for

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the broader influence of state-prescribed curricula and syllabi, which are imposed on the less empowered members of the educational system: students and teachers. These considerations remind us of one of the primary goals of education—helping students develop their identities and personalities. Schools are not just institutions for academic learning; they are spaces where students begin to prepare for life in a broader society, where they will encounter diverse ideologies and competing worldviews. As Torres et al. (2009) note:

> Social construction of identity occurs in different contexts on campus, such as in how student organizations are created and which students are drawn to them, or in the social identities among those in leadership positions and those not, as well as in issues of institutional fit within access and retention. One of the components of identity development that arises quickly on most campuses is the process of students learning how to balance their needs with those of others (p. 577).

In Iran, students undergo a twelve-year continuum of education (6-3-3) in the public education system. Public education is free of charge and accessible to all, regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, or language, easing the financial burden on families. However, the number of private and semi-private schools has been increasing at all educational levels. These institutions often offer enhanced facilities and amenities, such as state-of-the-art technology, overseas educational trips, recruitment of highly reputable teachers, and premium services like nutritious meals. These schools, with their lavish offerings and appealing missions, seek to attract students through high annual fees.

Despite these differences in facilities and resources, the educational policies in both public and private schools remain largely aligned with the overarching objective: preparing students to enter universities. This alignment underscores a problematic belief—that success in education is equated with gaining access to higher education. Consequently, nearly all educational policies are designed to ensure that students are adequately prepared for a high-stakes, one-time test in the final year of their K-12 education. This test, which lasts for 3-4 hours, has become the sole measure of student success, perpetuating an output-driven model of education that prioritizes test preparation over holistic development.

The Misleading Emphasis on Testing in Educational Practices

The prevailing focus on testing within the educational system is misleading, particularly in how it shapes primary school teaching practices. In many instances, the purpose of schooling is not to prepare students to be competent citizens of society but rather to ensure they are successful in assessments. This shift in focus, driven by testing, distorts the broader goals of education and undermines its true purpose. We argue that the overemphasis on testing is problematic because it overlooks fundamental questions about the roles of key educational stakeholders—students and teachers.

Students and teachers, as the primary stakeholders in the educational process, should have a voice in decisions regarding teaching materials, teaching loads, assignments, testing practices, classroom management, and the extent of cooperation between students and teachers. Teachers are responsible not only for managing the classroom environment but

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also for recognizing and fostering students' diverse competencies and abilities. Furthermore, teachers should be empowered to critique the leadership practices of school principals and the policies that govern their teaching practices. Such discussions should be central to both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs, where educators can collaboratively address challenges and opportunities encountered during teaching practice. However, these discussions are often absent from the regular meetings among teachers. Many teacher trainers themselves are constrained by the regulations imposed by the Ministry of Education, limiting their ability to critically engage with the issues that affect the teaching practice. Pinnegar (2005) underscores the importance of teacher educators in shaping the development of pre-service teachers, noting that:

> When a preservice teacher grants either an individual teacher educator or the institution preparing them moral authority for guiding their development as a teacher, then teacher educators have the greatest potential for impacting the belief, behavior, thinking, and development of teaching prowess. What this means is that teacher educators must be present as well as care about the critical events and learning of the preservice teacher's autonomy, identity, and intimacy development (p. 276).

Student teachers and novice teachers must have the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with each other, experienced teachers, school principals, and educational counselors. This dialogue is crucial for fostering successful teaching practices and addressing the tensions that Anspal et al. (2019) identify, including the "conception of self versus professional role expectations; role expectations versus university training; and multiple professional role expectations" (p. 685). Collaboration and cooperation among all members of the educational community—teachers, students, school principals, and education authorities—are therefore essential for improving teaching practices.

Safari (2018), in her narrative of professional development, highlights the importance of shaping and reshaping the professional identities of teachers, particularly in the early years of their careers. She emphasizes that the teaching community must aim to develop students' professional character, which is especially critical in the formative years of schooling. This perspective aligns with the understanding that the educational experience is not just about knowledge transmission, but also about the development of students' identities and character.

School principals also play a crucial role in the teaching process. They must be attuned to the needs of the broader community and be empowered to adapt school policies and practices to better serve their students. This includes making decisions about hiring practices, particularly in communities with minority populations, and adjusting course schedules to reflect the needs and potentials of their local context. However, principals often find themselves constrained by the rigid policies and regulations prescribed by the Ministry of Education and provincial educational authorities, leaving little room for modification or adaptation based on the unique needs of their school community.

Moreover, teachers, too, are often subject to policies created by educational authorities who may lack practical teaching experience. This disconnect between policymakers and classroom realities further exacerbates the challenges teachers face in

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providing a meaningful and relevant education to their students. It is imperative that educational policymakers recognize and respect the rights and needs of the primary stakeholders—students and teachers—in order to achieve the true mission of education. In the same vain Rich and Schachter (2012) suggest, the development of student identity is influenced by several factors within the educational environment. Their findings include:

> (a) Schools with identity-promoting features contribute to student identity development, (b) Teachers as role models are a more potent variable than teacher caring in predicting student identity development, and (c) Experiencing meaningful studies is an especially important contributor to student exploration and identity confidence (p. 218).

The growing emphasis on meeting deadlines and preparing students for various assessments has led to a noticeable decline in meaningful dialogue between students, teachers, principals, and among educators themselves. This shift is largely due to the pressure placed on educators and students to cover textbooks and ensure success in assessments, which often evaluate students' superficial knowledge rather than their deeper understanding and learning. It is crucial to acknowledge that, in the digital age, access to information can be acquired in mere seconds through online searches. Consequently, there is a pressing need to provide students with more practical education and training, rather than simply transmitting theoretical knowledge. In particular, primary school students are also facing increasing pressure from both in-school and extracurricular assignments, with a predominant focus on success in tests. Kaplan and Flum (2012) aptly highlight the evolving educational needs of societies globally, stating that:

> The increasingly rapid change in the content, volume, and accessibility of knowledge makes a sole emphasis on knowledge in education an almost futile endeavor. More important, perhaps, is the realization by educators, parents, employers, and students themselves, that they desire and need more from education than just knowledge—they want education to promote the development of students' identities: self-knowledge, values, goals, and orientation and skills for personal and social transformation that would help in coping with the rapid changes that characterize life in this century (p. 171).

In a similar vein, Enright et al. (1983) proposed a model that emphasizes the importance of identity development through cognitive strategies, noting that "identity can be achieved through considering the self in relation to one friend, one's family, the peer group, and society" (p. 247). More recently, Branch (2020) presented strategies for fostering ethnic identity development among students, suggesting the following key practices:

> 1. Engaging with students' families regarding ethnic identity,2. Encouraging discourse around ethnic identity,3. Providing opportunities for students to explore their ethnic histories, traditions, and customs, and 4. Introducing students to social justice role models within their ethnic communities (p. 9).

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K-12 Educational Policies & Success at College

Education in Finland, for example, can offer a model for educational policymakers in Iran, presenting a potential framework for integrating best practices into national educational policies while considering local priorities. As noted by Morgan (2014):

> Finland does not emphasize standardized testing, [so] there is no competition among schools and thus no unnecessary stress on students and teachers. The low level of accountability and testing allows teachers to guide students to discover their own ways of accomplishing curricular goals without fear; for most students, this type of environment encourages creativity and excellence. (p. 454)

In a similar vein, Sahlberg (2011) emphasizes that:

> while assessment practice is well grounded in the national curriculum, education policy in Finland gives a high priority to personalized learning and creativity as an important part of how schools operate. Therefore, the progress of each student in school is judged more against his or her individual development and abilities rather than against statistical indicators. (p. 37)

While there is general agreement on the importance of the community in which students live, the lack of meaningful dialogue often leads to the neglect of students' real competencies. This results in a narrow focus on preparing students solely for university entrance, with the prevailing belief that academic success is exclusively defined by higher education. Although this is not a universal perspective, the dominant teaching and learning environment is heavily centered on students' future academic success, which is primarily measured by their acceptance into universities and other higher education institutions.

Further, Tohidian et al. (2023) argues that the inclusion of subjects such as English, Law, and Entrepreneurship is a potential solution to the shortcomings of the educational system, particularly in preparing students for success not only in school and college but also in future careers and life. Additionally, the educational system's deficiencies—such as the lack of collaboration, academic dialogue, conversational skills, and tolerance—may be attributed to the excessive focus on testing and assessments (Tohidian, 2022).

Research Design

The present qualitative research aims to portray if the school improvement must happen for a more thriving and prosperous generation of students; or it is the students' fault which hinders their success in college studies and further in their life out of the schools.

To obtain an enriched source of data, we recruited a sample of 317 undergraduates over the state (19-23 years old; males: 123/ females: 194). So, the selection was based on the purposive sampling and it was administered with the help of the academic staff who were initially contacted by the researcher. Our data collection was administered through online focus groups with obtained consent form from the teachers, students, and the IRB of the universities that all data will be kept anonymous, and it will not be shared with any third-party organizations. Concerning the use of online focus groups, Stancanelli (2010, p. 761) indicates that "online focus groups are an extension of traditional focus groups, which have been utilized in qualitative research for decades and, for the most part, the principles are

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consistent with traditional focus groups". Data analysis was also administered through Strauss and Corbin's (1998) Constant Comparative method with its renowned steps of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Further, in order to meet the credibility of data, we adopted peer review or peer debriefing as Ary et al. (2010, p. 499) consider it as a stage when "colleagues or peers are provided with the raw data along with the researcher's interpretation or explanation. Discussions then determine whether the reviewer(s) considers the interpretation to be reasonable, given the evidence". The students could also include their perceptions/ feedback of their K-12 educational experience using drawing to help the researcher explore the teaching-learning environment at schools; and also to uncover the students' hidden voices and ideologies.

Findings

Table 1 gives a brief overview of the undergraduates' feedback. Some of our participating students also included a drawing to show their feelings towards the school practice and the urgent changes which must be included in their curricula and syllabi.

Table 1.
Analysis of Students' Responses to Interview Questions

Brief Overview of Students' Feedback		
Identified Keywords	Emerged Themes	General Theme
No time to talk; No time to walk; No time to laugh; Tests as Hercules; Defeat; Martial arts; Psychological pressure; Parents' orders; COVID-19 as key to freedom; …	Psychological pressure on students	Urgent Call to Improve Schools' Environment: Change of Focus in Teaching to Thrive beyond the Schools
Teachers' failure to teach; Incompetent teachers; No fair access to technology; No dialogue with teachers; No dialogue with school principals; Encouraging to succeed in tests; No thriving; Creativity killing; …	Emphasis on testing: Output oriented practice	
Denial of students' potentials; Success in test is appreciated; Students' other competencies are ignored; Memorization is acknowledged; …	Ignoring students' creativity	

Psychological Pressure on Students

Students experience an unbelievable load of psychological pressure due to the assignments as well as assessment practices which happen in their everyday classroom experience. It was disappointing to see that a large number of students were satisfied with the two-year-lockdown due to COVID-19. It seems participation in class is equal to an overwhelming load of assignments which must be submitted to the teacher (Figures 1 & 2).

> We just experience single study in the school context and in our home. It rarely happens to gather as groups of 4 or 5 to jointly work on our assignments. Each of us is bombarded with lots of assignments and quizzes. I just study to enter the university to have more free time so I can go shopping and entertain myself with things than assignments and assessments. You see the rubbish bin in my

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drawing. I fear to put all my dreams when I enter the university and experience the same as my study life in school. (Student #232)

We were fortunate enough to experience COVID-19 so we had enough time to spend with our friends through WhatsApp. We had more time to go for short visits to other cities. (Student #14)

Online assessments were not that much awful as they were in our classrooms. I was in my room, on my bed, with snacks behind the laptop. Though, it had its own difficulties; however, having much time to talk to friends is the blessing which cannot be denied. (Student #67)



Figure 1. Student #232: Portrayal of life as a student and dreams for future

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Figure 2. Student #100: Assignments & assessment and no time for her interests

The student #100 also illuminated that due to large assignments (as locked to her feet) and extensive reading materials for testing during the academic year; she has no time to spend according to her interest.

Emphasis on Testing: Output Oriented Practice

One of the challenges in teaching practices within our schools may be related to the new generation of teachers entering the profession. Teacher training in Iran is primarily conducted through participation in the nationwide high-stakes entrance exam (Konkour), which serves as a gateway for students seeking to pursue higher education in universities and other academic institutions. It is important to note that those aspiring to enroll in the University of Farhangian, the only institution focused on training future teachers, must also undergo additional interview sessions prior to the final selection of accepted applicants. Furthermore, the government administers recruitment exams throughout the year, providing university graduates with the opportunity to apply for teaching vacancies.

While there may be no inherent flaws in the teacher training process itself, the problem lies in the fact that the teaching syllabi and curricula are predominantly test-oriented. As a result, student teachers learn that they are unlikely to have the flexibility to adapt or modify materials, textbooks, and syllabi to better meet the diverse needs of their students. This test- and output-driven approach to teaching is familiar to them, as they themselves have experienced similar practices throughout their own educational journeys.

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There is no time to collaborate with the teacher in the class. We have to sit as passive recipients of our teachers' words. (Student #09)

What happens in our classes is that one comes to the class and meticulously reads what is written on the textbook pages. In most cases, it resembles as a self-service restaurant. COVID-19 was a chance to learn that we can also study at home. (Student #46)

What we see is the importance of memorization. We just memorize to pass our tests. If we fail a test or course, our parents must come to the school for some counselling sessions with the school principals and counsellor. It has no positive effect than more pressure on us as students. I hate memorization. … I also include a drawing (Figure 3.) to highlight that what happens is memorization and nothing else. (Student #301)

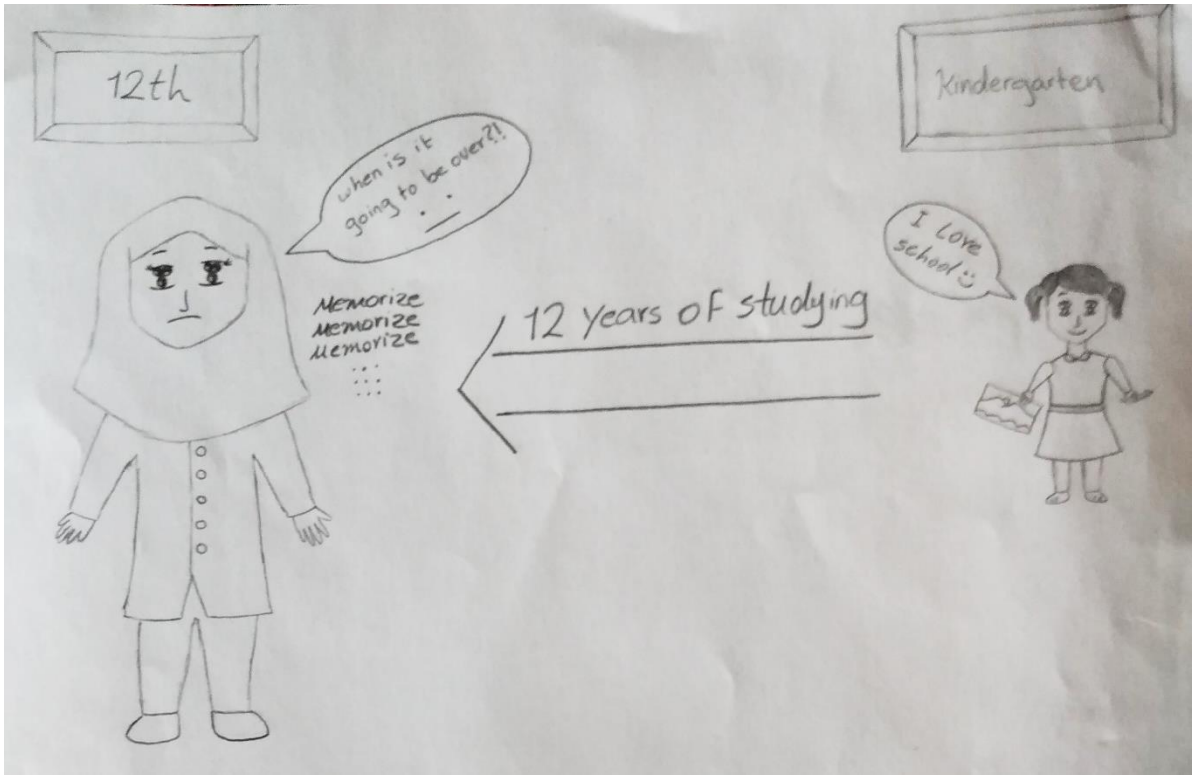


Figure 3. Student #301: The place of memorization in schools

I can do art works with leather. I can make shoes, school bags, or wallets. However, no one appreciates such an art. At the age of 16, I receive monthly payment as I sell my works through online platforms (Instagram or WhatsApp). Our teachers do not care about our prosperous, successful and thriving future; all school members – teachers and principals- emphasize success in tests and assessments. (Student #288)

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The student #79 portrays her feedback towards testing and assessment as a frightening Hercules and students who fear of being defeated (Figure 4.).

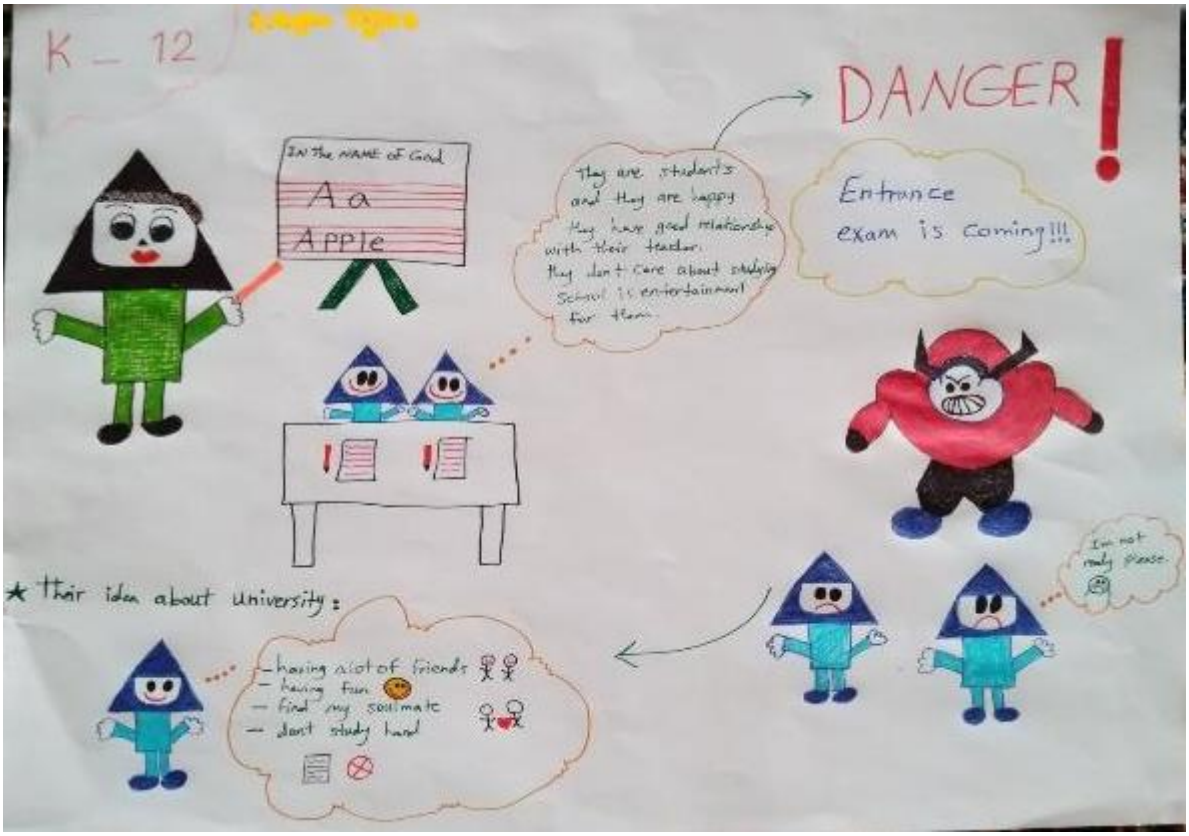


Figure 4. Student #79: Testing and assessment as a frightening Hercules

Ignoring Students' Creativity

Our review of literature related to school dynamics, combined with the researchers' expertise in the field and their participation in numerous national and international workshops, conferences, and webinars, consistently confirms that an excessive focus on testing and assessment leads to the suppression and neglect of students' creativity. Teachers must recognize that there are no inherently "excellent," "good," "fair," or "weak" students; rather, each student possesses unique potentials and capabilities. In most cases, these strengths should be identified and nurtured, particularly during the formative early years of education.

The student #11 shares his feedback about the student' unwillingness to sit as a silent and passive student in the class to receive his teacher's knowledge. His GPA is 19.34 out of 20; however, he does not consider himself as a competent student. He says "I am not proficient to speak in public". He believes he gets the high grades, but he even cannot handle an argument out of the school context. He mentions that "I do not consider myself as a creative student and it is evident in my drawing".

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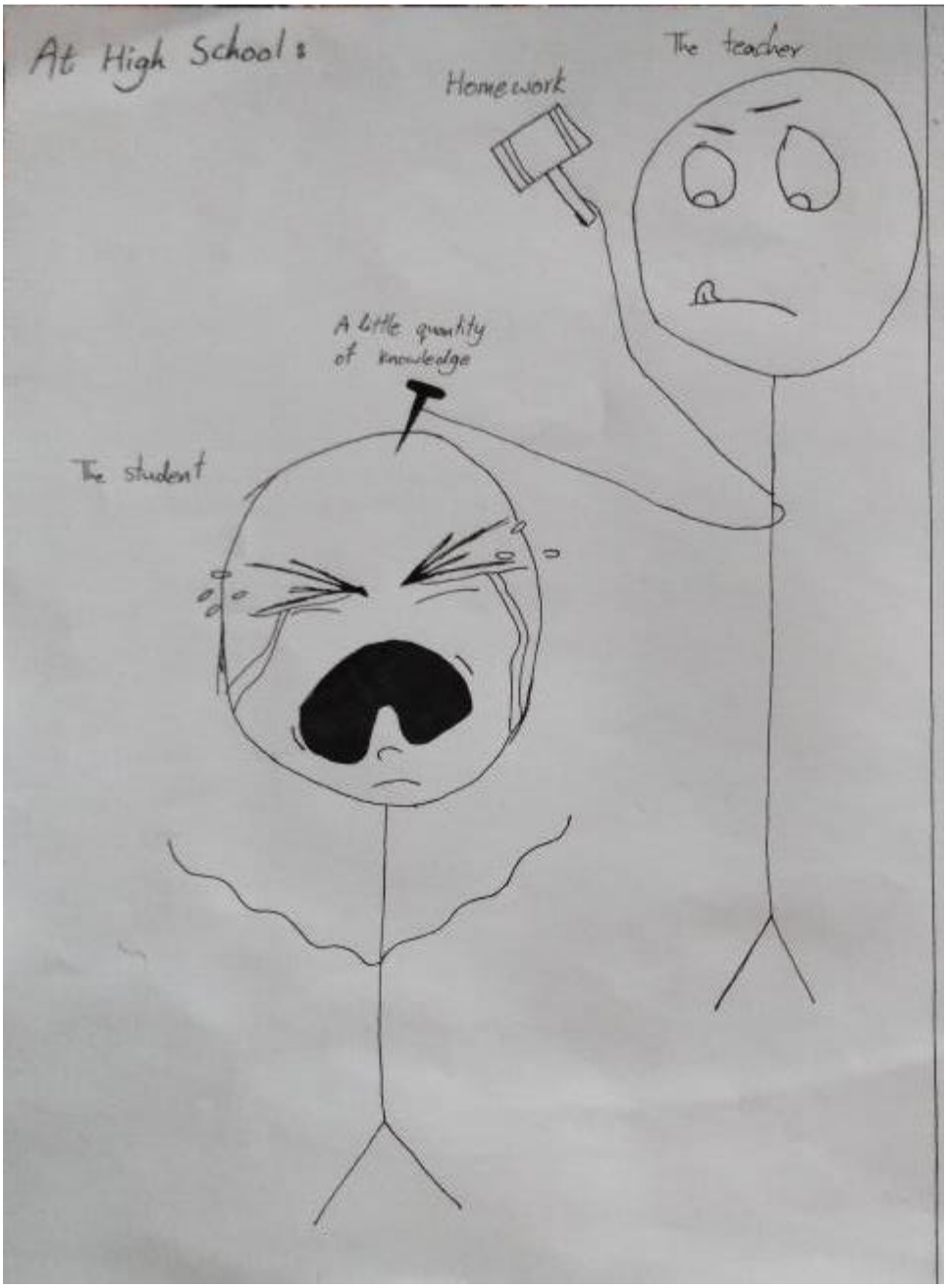


Figure 5. Student #11: The focus on transmission of knowledge

The student #223 provides a drawing (Figure 6.) with his feedback towards our interview questions. He mentioned that "I came to the school with a creative mind. I was participating in robotic classes held out of the school. But, the situation in the schools killed all my creativity". He tries to show that the teachers in the schools asked him to make a balance between his interests and competencies, and the materials in the school. He shows that not only a balance happened in the school; rather, "I totally forgot all my dreams due to the psychological pressure I experienced due to the tests and quizzes I had to pass, as well as the pressure that I must go to the university. I hate testing".

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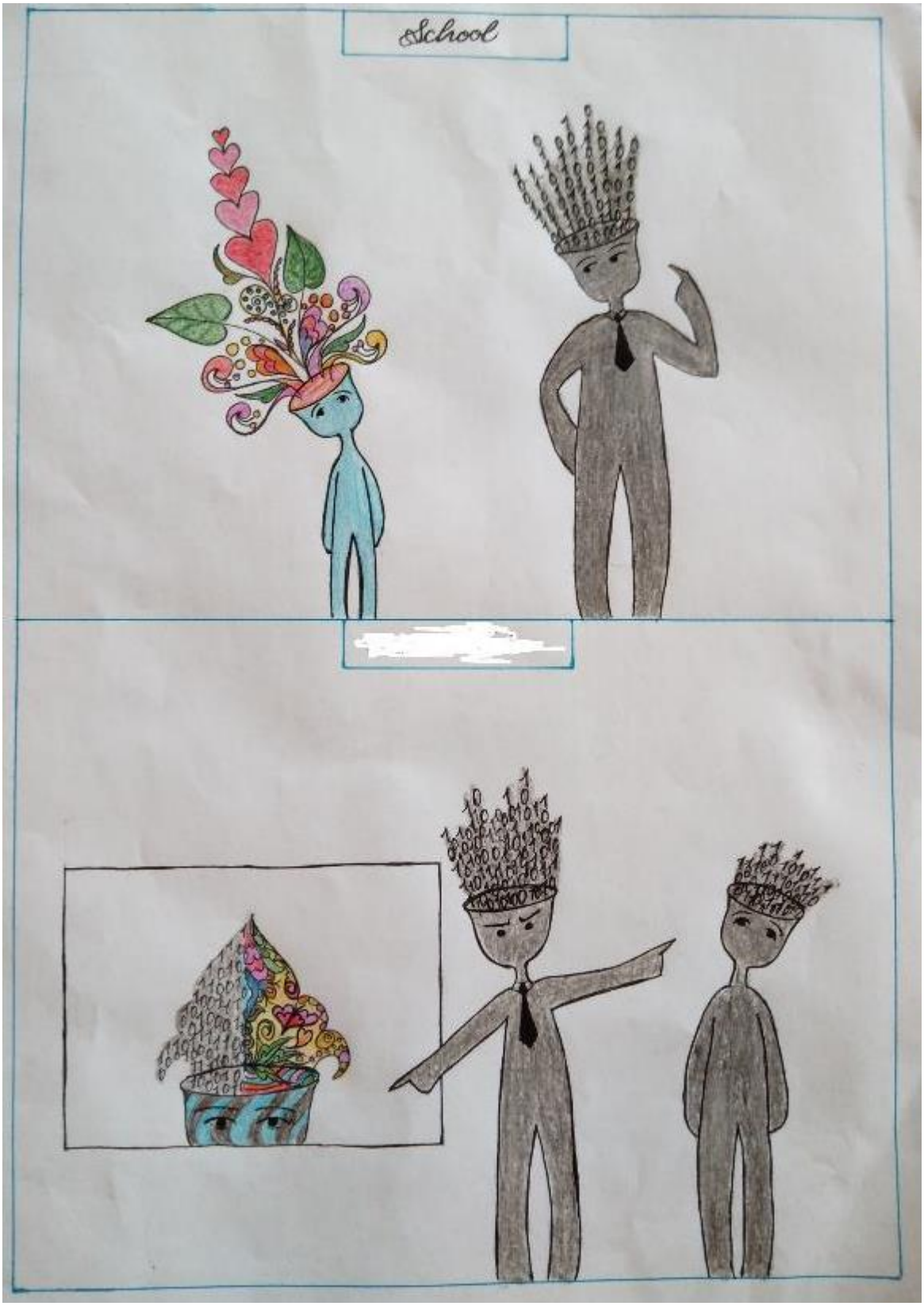


Figure 6. Student #223: You cannot make a balance between creativity and testing

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K-12 Educational Policies & Success at College

Unfortunately, teachers are often marginalized in the early years of primary education, a period when students' character and identity are being formed. The development of students' personalities should be supported through role modeling, as the school environment plays a central role in shaping the most significant aspects of their lives. Palmér's (2016) research demonstrates:

> how the professional identity development of these novice teachers becomes a pursuit in line with their image of a primary school teacher. To develop a sense of themselves as primary school teachers they need to establish their own criteria - individual (including graduation and personal knowledge) and social (the ability to work in one school, have colleagues and have a class of their own for which they do the planning and teaching). (p. 682)

This aligns with the findings of Anspal et al. (2019), who highlight that

> teacher identity development is shaped by various factors, including prior experiences and beliefs, personal biography and personality, motivation for entering the teaching profession, work environment, relationships with colleagues, mentorship, and emotional experiences (p. 680).

Concluding Remarks

The three primary themes emerging from this research can be categorized under the overarching theme: *"Urgent Call to Improve Schools' Environment: Shifting the Focus of Teaching to Enable Success Beyond the Classroom."* Over recent decades, our teaching syllabi and curricula have undergone numerous changes, modifications, and reforms. The challenges and concerns within our educational system, as well as prevailing educational trends throughout K-12 education, have been extensively discussed in various workshops, conferences, and webinars. However, despite these discussions, graduates entering colleges and universities often lack the proficiency required for higher education.

Our findings indicate an urgent need to shift the focus within K-12 educational policies. The current system remains predominantly test- and output-oriented, where curricula and syllabi are primarily designed with testing as the central aim. Student competencies and knowledge levels are assessed using numerical indices, and teaching and learning remain largely confined to theoretical frameworks. In many cases, memorization is both valued and rewarded. This approach fosters an illusion of understanding among students, as their primary focus becomes passing tests rather than developing deep, meaningful knowledge.

It is important to recognize that it is not the students' fault that they are often classified as "excellent," "good," "fair," or "weak." Rather, the issue lies in the structural limitations of our educational system, which fails to prioritize the holistic development of students. Our students possess a wealth of implicit skills and competencies that often go unrecognized and unsupported due to the rigid and testing-centric policies prevalent in schools.

The path to success in higher education begins long before students enter college; it is shaped by their 12 years of educational experiences. To ensure that students are truly prepared for the challenges of higher education and beyond, all aspects of the educational system—syllabi, curricula, and teaching materials—must be updated to reflect the best

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global teaching practices, while also taking into account the specific needs and potentials of each region.

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Human Participants

The author obtained necessary permissions prior to the interviews and other ethical approvals from corresponding IRBs of participating universities.

Originality Note

It is the author's original work and proper citations are included where others' works are used.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The author claimed that there is **"No Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies"** in preparing this research.

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