

Reframing Assessment as Social Justice Praxis: A Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Perspective on Authentic Assessment in Rural Higher Education Contexts

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This conceptual article explores how assessment in School Management and Leadership education can be re-envisioned, through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), as a socially just and context-responsive pedagogical praxis in rural higher education contexts. Responding to persistent critiques of assessment practices that privilege standardisation and compliance, the study foregrounds assessment as a value-laden, relational, and ethical practice with significant implications for equity, leadership formation, and learning opportunities. The article is theoretically anchored in SoTL, learning-oriented assessment, constructive alignment, authentic assessment, and social justice-oriented assessment. Methodologically, the study adopts a conceptual research approach, prioritising critical synthesis and theoretical development over empirical measurement. It is informed by a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2020 and 2025, purposively selected journals in higher education, assessment, and educational leadership to ensure scholarly rigour and conceptual relevance. The analysis is guided by key conceptual categories assessment, SoTL, social justice, and rurality alongside related constructs such as inclusivity, digital inequality, authentic assessment, and professional learning. A thematic synthesis was employed to identify recurring patterns, conceptual tensions, and underexplored intersections in contemporary scholarship. The analysis demonstrates how innovative assessment strategies, including authentic leadership tasks, reflective portfolios, collaborative simulations, and technology-mediated feedback, can enhance validity, reliability, and equity while remaining aligned with institutional and regulatory expectations. By theorising assessment as a socially just SoTL praxis that mediates between institutional imperatives and contextual realities, the article contributes to international SoTL discourse. It offers conceptual insights for educators, institutions, policymakers, and researchers seeking to design assessment practices that prepare ethically grounded and contextually responsive educational leaders in rural higher education environments.

Key words: *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning; assessment; social justice; rural higher education; educational leadership; authentic assessment*

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Introduction

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has increasingly positioned assessment as a site of critical pedagogical inquiry rather than a neutral mechanism for measuring achievement. Within this scholarly tradition, assessment is understood as a formative, ethical, and epistemic practice that shapes learning trajectories, professional identities, and the distribution of educational opportunity (Bovill, 2020; Tai et al., 2022). In contexts marked by rurality and historical disadvantage, assessment assumes heightened significance, as pedagogical choices may either disrupt or reproduce structural inequalities. This conceptual paper argues that assessment design in School Management and Leadership education can be reconceptualised as a form of social justice praxis when examined through a SoTL lens that foregrounds context, authenticity, and equity.

Rural higher education contexts are characterised by intersecting challenges, including socio-economic marginalisation, constrained institutional infrastructure, linguistic diversity, and uneven access to digital technologies (Duma et al., 2021; Mwansa et al., 2025). Students entering professional education programmes in such settings often bring rich experiential knowledge alongside varied levels of academic preparedness and digital fluency. However, dominant assessment regimes in higher education frequently privilege standardisation, abstract knowledge reproduction, and high-stakes summative evaluation, practices that can marginalise rural students and obscure the contextual dimensions of leadership learning (Heiser & Levy, 2023). SoTL scholarship cautions that assessment models detached from learners lived realities risk undermining both educational quality and social justice aims, particularly in leadership-oriented disciplines where judgment, ethics, and contextual responsiveness are central.

Within School Management and Leadership education, assessment plays a pivotal role in shaping how future leaders understand policy, governance, and professional responsibility. Leadership competence in rural schooling environments requires more than technical compliance with policy frameworks; it demands critical interpretation, adaptive problem-solving, and ethically grounded decision-making in contexts of scarcity and inequality. Assessment practices that remain narrowly focused on content recall or procedural compliance are therefore insufficient for preparing graduates to navigate the complex social, cultural, and political realities of rural schooling. In contrast, authentic, practice-oriented assessment has been shown to foster deeper learning, professional agency, and reflective capacity by engaging students in tasks that mirror the demands of real educational leadership contexts (Gulikers et al., 2021; Maphosa et al., 2024).

Anchored in contemporary assessment theory, this paper conceptualises an integrated assessment framework that combines formative, authentic, and summative approaches as a socially just pedagogical response to rural higher education conditions. Drawing on principles of assessment for, as, and of learning (Wicking, 2022), constructive alignment (Hamdoun, 2023), and inclusive assessment design, the framework foregrounds coherence between learning outcomes, teaching strategies, and assessment tasks. Technology-enhanced assessment is positioned not as an end, but as a mediating tool that can extend feedback, support reflection, and broaden participation when implemented with sensitivity to contextual constraints and access inequities (Madland et al., 2024). This conceptual paper contributes to SoTL scholarship by theorising assessment as a deliberate social justice intervention within rural School Management and Leadership education. It advances the argument that when assessment is intentionally designed to be authentic, scaffolded, and context-responsive, it can function as a transformative pedagogical practice that both enhances learning and cultivates ethical, critically conscious educational leaders. By situating assessment at the intersection of rurality, leadership preparation, and social justice, the paper responds to international calls for SoTL research that moves beyond effectiveness metrics to interrogate the normative, political, and equity dimensions of teaching and learning in marginalised higher education contexts.

1.1. Problem Statement

Despite sustained policy commitments to equity and inclusion in higher education, assessment practices in School Management and Leadership programmes remain largely examination driven. These approaches prioritise decontextualised knowledge reproduction over professional judgement and contextual reasoning (Tai et al., 2022). Such assessment models are poorly aligned with rural education contexts, where future school leaders must respond to structural inequality, resource scarcity, linguistic diversity, and digital exclusion. When assessment ignores these realities, it risks reinforcing epistemic injustice by marginalising students situated knowledge and leadership experiences (Heiser & Levy, 2023). Students in rural higher education contexts often enter professional programmes with diverse academic literacies and uneven access to institutional and digital resources. However, dominant assessment regimes frequently assume uniform preparedness and stable connectivity. This assumption obscures structural disadvantage and limits meaningful engagement with learning (Duma et al., 2021; Mwansa et al., 2025). Although assessment scholarship advocates for authentic, formative, and inclusive designs, such approaches are inconsistently enacted in leadership education (Gulikers et al., 2021). As a result, assessment continues to function as a gatekeeping mechanism rather than a developmental practice aligned with learning and professional growth (Bovill, 2020). This tension highlights a critical scholarly problem. There is no coherent, theoretically grounded assessment framework that explicitly integrates rurality and social justice in School Management and Leadership education. Without reconceptualising assessment as a socially just pedagogical praxis, leadership preparation risks reproducing inequitable learning outcomes. It also limits the development of critically conscious leaders capable of advancing transformation in rural schooling systems.

1.2 Research Question

How can assessment in School Management and Leadership education be reconceptualised, through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, to advance social justice in rural higher education contexts?

2. Methodology

This article adopts a conceptual methodological approach to explore how assessment in School Management and Leadership education can be re-envisioned, through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), as a socially just and context-responsive practice in rural higher education. The methodology prioritises conceptual development and critical synthesis rather than empirical measurement or hypothesis testing. The study is informed by a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2020 and 2025. The analysis is guided by key conceptual categories, including assessment, SoTL, social justice, and rurality, alongside related constructs such as authentic assessment, constructive alignment, inclusivity, digital inequality, and professional learning. Scholarly sources were purposively drawn from journals in higher education, assessment, and educational leadership to ensure conceptual robustness and academic credibility. A thematic synthesis was employed to analyse the literature, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, conceptual tensions, and underexplored intersections in existing scholarship. This analytic process foregrounds assessment as a value-laden and relational practice that shapes learning experiences, leadership formation, and equity outcomes, particularly in resource-constrained rural contexts. Rather than seeking generalisable findings, the study aims to deepen theoretical understanding by conceptualising assessment as a socially just SoTL praxis that mediates between institutional expectations and contextual realities. Through this reframing, the article contributes to international SoTL discourse by positioning assessment as a transformative pedagogical strategy for preparing ethically grounded and contextually responsive educational leaders in rural higher education settings (Khanyile, 2025; Owens, 2024).

2.1 Key Concepts

2.1.1 Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

SoTL is a reflective, evidence-based approach to understanding and improving teaching and learning. It foregrounds systematic inquiry by educators into their own practices to generate knowledge that is publicly shared and critiqued within academic communities (Healey & Healey, 2023). SoTL frames assessment not as a technical requirement but as a scholarly practice that interrogates how assessment designs shape student engagement, meaning-making, and equitable learning outcomes in diverse contexts.

2.1.2 Social Justice in Assessment

Social justice in assessment emphasises fairness, equity, and epistemic recognition, challenging practices that privilege dominant forms of knowledge, language, and access (Tai et al., 2022). It promotes inclusive assessment designs that move beyond deficit-oriented and standardised approaches to recognise diverse learner identities and contextual realities. In rural higher education, where socio-economic marginalisation and digital exclusion persist, socially just assessment enables flexible and multiple ways of demonstrating learning, thereby supporting equitable participation and valuing contextual knowledge (Heiser & Levy, 2023; Padayachee & Naidoo, 2023).

2.1.3 Rurality

Rurality is conceptualised as a socio-structural and historical condition rather than a purely geographical descriptor, shaping access to resources, digital participation, and academic engagement in higher education (Divan et al., 2022). When employed as an analytical lens, rurality reveals how assessment practices intersect with place-based inequities and how conventional approaches may inadvertently reproduce disadvantage by overlooking the lived realities of rural students, including constrained technological access and competing community obligations (Duma et al., 2021; Chaka, et al., 2022). Within this study, rurality is thus central to understanding how assessment practices influence leadership learning in marginalised higher education contexts.

2.1.4 Authentic Assessment

Authentic assessment involves tasks that mirror complex, real-world challenges and professional practices, requiring students to apply knowledge, exercise judgement, and engage in contextual problem-solving rather than rote recall (Gulikers et al., 2021). In School Management and Leadership education, authentic assessment commonly takes the form of policy analysis, leadership simulations, and reflective portfolios, which align assessment with the realities of professional practice. Such tasks foster deeper learning by integrating theory and practice, while also supporting professional identity formation through ethical reasoning, decision-making, and contextually responsive leadership action.

2.1.5 Constructive Alignment

Constructive alignment is a pedagogical framework that ensures coherence between intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks, on the assumption that assessment should directly evaluate the competencies learners are expected to develop (Biggs, 1996; Biggs & Tang, 2011). When effectively implemented, constructive alignment ensures that assessment meaningfully reflects the knowledge, skills, and dispositions the curriculum seeks to foster. In this study, constructive alignment underpins the design of assessment practices that support socially just outcomes and contextually responsive leadership preparation, a consideration that is particularly critical in rural leadership education where misalignment can exacerbate inequity (Padayachee & Naidoo, 2023).

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks on Assessment

This conceptual paper is underpinned by a multi-layered theoretical framework on assessment that integrates the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), social justice theory, and contemporary assessment scholarship. Together, these perspectives provide a robust lens for examining how assessment in School Management and Leadership education can be reconceptualised as a socially just, context-responsive pedagogical praxis within rural higher education contexts. The framework is informed by, and analytically grounded in, the assessment design principles and practices articulated in the uploaded module document, particularly its emphasis on constructive alignment, authentic assessment, formative feedback, and equity-oriented implementation. At the core of the framework is **learning-oriented assessment**, encompassing assessment *for*, *as*, and *of* learning. This tripartite model positions assessment as an integral component of the learning process rather than a post-instructional judgment (Wicking, 2022; Tai et al., 2022). In the assessment design, formative tasks such as case-based policy analysis and peer feedback explicitly operationalise assessment for learning by providing structured opportunities for feedback, dialogue, and conceptual refinement. Assessment as learning is reflected in reflective components, leadership simulations, and portfolio-based tasks that require students to engage in self-regulation, metacognition, and professional sense-making. Summative assessment, while retained for accountability purposes, is reframed as a synthesis of learning rather than its sole determinant. This theoretical positioning aligns with SoTL's emphasis on evidence-informed pedagogical coherence and developmental learning trajectories.

Constructive alignment constitutes a second foundational pillar of the framework. Constructive alignment theory asserts that meaningful learning occurs when intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment tasks are coherently aligned (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Therefore, deliberate alignment is required between leadership-oriented learning outcomes and assessment tasks that demand applied judgement, ethical reasoning, and contextually grounded decision-making. Within rural leadership education, constructive alignment assumes heightened significance, as misalignment often results in assessments that privilege abstract knowledge at the expense of contextual competence. By ensuring that assessment tasks directly reflect the professional realities of school leadership, the framework advances both pedagogical validity and social relevance. The framework further draws on **authentic assessment theory**, which foregrounds the assessment of applied competence through real-world, complex, and ill-structured tasks (Gulikers et al., 2021). Authentic assessment is reflected in leadership simulations, policy analyses grounded in contemporary educational contexts, and e-portfolios that consolidate learning artefacts over time. From a theoretical standpoint, authentic assessment is particularly aligned with social justice and rurality, as it legitimises contextual knowledge and challenges deficit constructions of rural learners. Rather than measuring students against abstract norms, authentic assessment recognises leadership capacity as situated, relational, and ethically grounded.

A critical dimension of the framework is **equity-oriented assessment**, informed by social justice theory. Social justice perspectives conceptualise assessment as a value-laden practice that can either reproduce or disrupt structural inequality (Heiser & Levy, 2023). This orientation is reflected through flexible submission modes, scaffolded tasks, multilingual support, and sensitivity to constraints related to digital access. Theoretically, such practices align with inclusive assessment scholarship, which argues that fairness is achieved not through uniformity, but through responsiveness to differential conditions of learning (Tai et al., 2022). In rural higher education contexts, equity-oriented assessment is essential for addressing epistemic injustice and ensuring that assessment functions as an enabling rather than exclusionary mechanism. Finally, the framework situates assessment within SoTL as scholarly praxis. SoTL frames assessment design as an iterative, reflective, and research-informed process through which academics inquire into the relationship between assessment practices, student learning, and contextual realities (Healey & Healey, 2023). The assessment framework exemplifies this orientation by explicitly linking theory, practice, evaluation, and continuous improvement. Within this theoretical framing, assessment is not merely aligned to learning outcomes but is itself a site of knowledge production, professional identity formation, and institutional transformation. Collectively, this theoretical framework conceptualises assessment as a socially just SoTL practice that is constructively aligned, authentic, and contextually grounded. It provides a coherent theoretical foundation for advancing leadership education that is responsive to rural realities while meeting the scholarly and quality imperatives expected of high-impact higher education research.

2.3 Innovative Strategies of Assessment in School Leadership and Management

Innovative assessment in School Leadership and Management should extend beyond compliance-driven evaluation to operate as a socially just pedagogical praxis aligned with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Within SoTL, assessment innovation is defined not by technological novelty alone, but by the deliberate redesign of assessment to enhance learning, professional judgement, and equity (Healey & Healey, 2023; Tai et al., 2022). Drawing on the assessment architecture, this section argues that innovation emerges through the integration of authenticity, learning orientation, and contextual responsiveness, particularly within rural higher education contexts. A key innovative strategy is the adoption of **authentic, practice-based assessment** that reflects the real demands of school leadership. Case-based policy analysis, leadership simulations, and cumulative e-portfolios central features require students to engage with policy enactment, ethical dilemmas, and problem-solving in contextually grounded ways. Such approaches align with authentic assessment theory, which emphasises the evaluation of applied competence through complex, real-world tasks rather than abstract knowledge recall (Gulikers et al., 2021; Maphosa et al., 2024). In rural contexts, these strategies are particularly powerful because they validate situated knowledge and disrupt deficit-oriented assumptions about learners' capabilities.

A second innovation lies in the **integration of assessment for, as, and of learning** within a coherent assessment ecology. Formative digital tasks and structured peer feedback support assessment for learning by providing iterative opportunities for feedback and conceptual refinement (Wicking, 2022). Reflective components embedded within leadership simulations and portfolios enact assessment as learning by fostering metacognition, self-regulation, and professional reflexivity. Summative assessment functions as a synthesis of learning rather than a singular high-stakes judgment. This integrated model aligns with SoTL's emphasis on developmental learning trajectories and supports equity by reducing over-reliance on terminal examinations (Tai et al., 2022). Technology-enhanced assessment constitutes a further innovative dimension when implemented with sensitivity to context. Digital platforms are used to facilitate collaboration, feedback, and portfolio development, thereby extending opportunities for engagement and documentation of learning over time. Importantly, these tools are accompanied by flexible submission options and scaffolded support, recognising persistent digital inequalities in rural higher education (Madland et al., 2024; Mwansa et al., 2025). Such an approach reflects an equity-oriented understanding of innovation, where technology mediates access rather than amplifying exclusion.

Innovation is further reflected in the **assessment of collaborative and relational leadership competencies**. Group-based simulations and digital collaboration projects assess communication, teamwork, and ethical deliberation capacities central to effective school leadership but often marginalised in traditional assessment regimes. By assessing both process and product, these strategies foreground leadership as a relational and socially situated practice, aligning assessment with the study's social justice orientation (Heiser & Levy, 2023). Collectively, these innovative strategies reposition assessment in School Leadership and Management as a scholarly, ethical, and context-responsive practice. Grounded in SoTL and responsive to rural realities, the assessment approaches demonstrate how innovation in assessment can simultaneously enhance learning quality, promote equity, and prepare critically conscious educational leaders for complex schooling environments.

2.4 Analysis of Alignment Between Strategy and Theory

The assessment strategies analysed in this study demonstrate a high degree of coherence with the theoretical frameworks informing the conceptualisation of assessment as a socially just pedagogical praxis within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Rather than functioning as isolated techniques, the strategies collectively operationalise theoretical principles through deliberate pedagogical design choices that foreground learning, context, and equity. Alignment with SoTL is evident in the systematic structuring of assessment as an iterative and reflective learning process. Assessment tasks are designed to generate evidence of learning over time, enabling ongoing feedback, reflection, and refinement of leadership understanding. This design logic translates SoTL's emphasis on inquiry and pedagogical intentionality into assessment practices that support scholarly engagement with learning rather than compliance-driven evaluation (Healey & Healey, 2023). The strategies further operationalise learning-oriented assessment by embedding formative feedback loops and reflective activities across the assessment cycle. These elements enact assessment *for* and *as* learning by positioning students as active participants in meaning-making and professional sense-making. Summative assessment consolidates this process by synthesising learning rather than terminating it, thereby aligning assessment practice with developmental and equity-oriented pedagogical goals (Tai et al., 2022).

Constructive alignment is materialised through the close correspondence between leadership learning outcomes and assessment tasks that require applied judgement, ethical reasoning, and contextual decision-making. This coherence ensures that what is assessed reflects what is pedagogically valued, thereby strengthening validity and relevance in leadership preparation (Biggs & Tang, 2011). The assessment strategies also give concrete expression to authentic assessment by requiring engagement with complex, contextually embedded leadership challenges. These tasks translate theoretical commitments to authenticity into practice by valuing situated knowledge and contextual problem-solving, which are central to leadership in rural educational settings (Gulikers et al., 2021). Finally, social justice-oriented assessment principles are enacted through flexibility, scaffolding, and responsiveness to differential access conditions. These design features operationalise equity not as uniform treatment but as contextual responsiveness, reinforcing assessment as an ethical intervention rather than a neutral measurement practice (Heiser & Levy, 2023). Through this alignment, assessment emerges as a theoretically grounded and practically enacted SoTL praxis. The analysis thus extends the theoretical framework by demonstrating how theory is translated into assessment design capable of advancing socially just leadership education in rural higher education contexts.

2.5 Logical Alignment with Module Structure and Institutional Policy

The assessment structure should demonstrate a high level of internal coherence between institutional assessment policy, module design, and contemporary assessment theory. A balanced weighting model is adopted, combining continuous assessment and summative evaluation in equal proportion. This configuration reflects widely endorsed principles of assessment balance and transparency, ensuring that student performance is evaluated through both developmental and integrative measures. Continuous assessment is strategically distributed across formative and application-oriented tasks, while summative assessment consolidates learning outcomes through integrative evaluation. The structured blend of assessment types encompassing formative activities, authentic application-based tasks, and summative evaluation aligns with contemporary assessment principles that emphasise fairness, validity, and learning progression (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2013). Formative components support ongoing feedback

and conceptual development, while authentic tasks enable the assessment of applied leadership competencies within contextually grounded scenarios. Summative assessment functions as a synthesis of learning rather than a singular measure of competence, reinforcing a learning-oriented assessment ecology. Alignment is further strengthened through the integration of school-based activities and digitally mediated assessment platforms. These strategies support experiential learning by situating assessment within professional practice while leveraging digital environments to facilitate engagement, feedback, and documentation of learning over time. Such integration is particularly significant in advancing socially just assessment within rural contexts, as it expands access, supports flexibility, and values contextual knowledge. Collectively, this alignment ensures that assessment practices are pedagogically coherent, policy-compliant, and theoretically grounded, thereby reinforcing assessment as a socially just praxis within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

2.5 Ensuring Validity, Reliability, and Equity through Technology

Within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), the pedagogical value of technology-mediated assessment lies not in technological innovation per se, but in its capacity to enhance the validity, reliability, and equity of assessment practices. In School Leadership and Management education, particularly within rural higher education contexts, digital technologies function as critical mediating tools that can either reproduce structural inequalities or deliberately advance socially just assessment. This section advances a refined conceptual analysis of how technology can be mobilised to strengthen assessment quality while remaining aligned with the social justice and rurality-oriented focus.

Assessment validity is strengthened when digital technologies enable the design of tasks that authentically represent the complex, relational, and ethical dimensions of educational leadership. Technology-supported assessment formats such as scenario-based leadership simulations, digitally mediated policy analyses, and cumulative e-portfolios allow for the evaluation of applied judgement, contextual reasoning, and reflective practice. These approaches enhance construct validity by ensuring that assessment evidence aligns with the leadership competencies the curriculum seeks to develop, rather than privileging decontextualised knowledge reproduction (Gulikers et al., 2021; Madland et al., 2024). In this sense, technology supports validity by expanding the range of assessable learning outcomes and enabling more nuanced representations of professional competence.

Reliability is enhanced through the strategic use of digital assessment infrastructures that promote transparency, consistency, and accountability in evaluative judgement. Analytic rubrics embedded within learning management systems, moderated online marking processes, and digital audit trails contribute to more consistent interpretation of assessment criteria across markers and cohorts (Pastore, 2023). Importantly, reliability is conceptualised as principled consistency rather than rigid standardisation. Technology enables shared interpretive frameworks while still allowing assessors to exercise contextual and professional judgement, a balance that is particularly important in leadership education.

Equity is advanced when technology-mediated assessment is designed with explicit attention to differential access, digital literacies, and contextual constraints. Flexible assessment timelines, asynchronous participation, and multiple modalities for demonstrating learning mitigate structural barriers commonly experienced by students in rural and under-resourced contexts (Tai et al., 2022; Mwansa et al., 2025). Furthermore, technology-enabled feedback mechanisms such as audio feedback, dialogic online commentary, and iterative draft submissions support learning progression and reduce the punitive effects of high-stakes assessment. Such practices align with social justice-oriented assessment by recognising that fairness is achieved through responsiveness to learners' conditions rather than uniform treatment (Heiser & Levy, 2023). Taken together, the intentional integration of technology enhances assessment validity and reliability while simultaneously expanding opportunities for equitable participation. When embedded within a SoTL framework and guided by social justice principles, technology functions not as a neutral tool but as a pedagogical resource capable of transforming assessment into a credible, transparent, and context-responsive praxis. This reconceptualisation positions technology-mediated assessment as central to preparing ethically grounded and contextually responsive school leaders in rural higher education systems.

2.6 Student Preparation for Assessment

Student preparation is conceptualised as a critical component of socially just assessment within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), particularly in School Leadership and Management education situated in rural higher education contexts. Preparation activities are intentionally designed to develop students' cognitive, digital, and collaborative capacities while promoting equity, academic integrity, and readiness for complex assessment tasks. Rather than treating preparedness as an individual responsibility, the approach foregrounds institutional and pedagogical accountability for enabling meaningful participation in assessment.

2.6.1 Pre-assessment Orientation

At the commencement of the module, a structured orientation establishes clarity regarding assessment purposes, expectations, and criteria. Early engagement sessions introduce students to the assessment structure, weighting, and performance standards, thereby reinforcing constructive alignment between learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment tasks (Hristov et al., 2023). This orientation is complemented by guided induction into the digital learning environment, providing step-by-step support for accessing tasks, submitting assignments, and participating in online discussions. Such technology-focused preparation aligns with scholarship on technology-enhanced learning, which emphasises the importance of early digital familiarisation in promoting equitable participation (Nzuzi,

2025). Academic integrity is foregrounded through explicit engagement with scholarly conventions, including ethical authorship, referencing practices, and originality verification tools, reinforcing the role of assessment in upholding validity, reliability, and ethical conduct (Heiser & Levy, 2023).

2.6.2 Skill Development and Capacity Building

Targeted skill development workshops further prepare students for assessment demands. Digital literacy sessions support engagement with online platforms and portfolio-based assessment, while academic writing and referencing workshops strengthen scholarly communication and argumentation. Collaborative leadership competencies are developed through simulated leadership activities and role-play, preparing students for group-based assessments that foreground relational and ethical leadership practice. Guided reflective exercises embedded across formative tasks cultivate metacognitive awareness and self-assessment capacity, aligning with assessment-as-learning principles.

2.6.3 Ongoing Support and Scaffolding

Preparation is sustained through continuous academic support and scaffolding. Iterative formative feedback provided through digital platforms enables students to refine their work progressively, strengthening assessment for learning (Wicking, 2022). Peer mentoring structures promote collaborative learning and shared expertise, while regular consultation opportunities provide spaces for dialogue around conceptual and procedural challenges (Tuilomaet al., 2022). Inclusivity is further supported through linguistically accessible task descriptions and multilingual resources, aligning with universal design and equitable assessment principles (Priyadharsini & Mary, 2024). To address persistent digital inequities in rural contexts, flexible submission modalities are accommodated, ensuring that assessment participation is not constrained by infrastructural limitations (Duma et al., 2021). Collectively, these strategies support progression across cognitive levels, from comprehension to critical analysis and evaluation, thereby enhancing the depth and quality of learning.

2.6.4 Readiness Verification

Prior to submission, readiness verification mechanisms support student confidence, independence, and accountability. Self-assessment checklists enable learners to confirm alignment with task requirements and assessment criteria, fostering self-regulatory capacity associated with assessment as learning (Wicking, 2022). Originality verification processes reinforce ethical scholarship and assessment credibility (Heiser & Levy, 2023). For collaborative assessments, structured readiness engagements support coordination, shared responsibility, and collective accountability, reflecting research on the value of collaborative learning in developing leadership-related problem-solving and communication skills (Petre, 2020). Overall, student preparation is positioned as an integral dimension of socially just assessment practice. By embedding orientation, skill development, scaffolding, and readiness verification within the assessment design, the module advances equitable participation, academic rigour, and professional learning.

3. Figure 1: Conceptual flow chart for Socially Just Assessment in School Management and Leadership Education

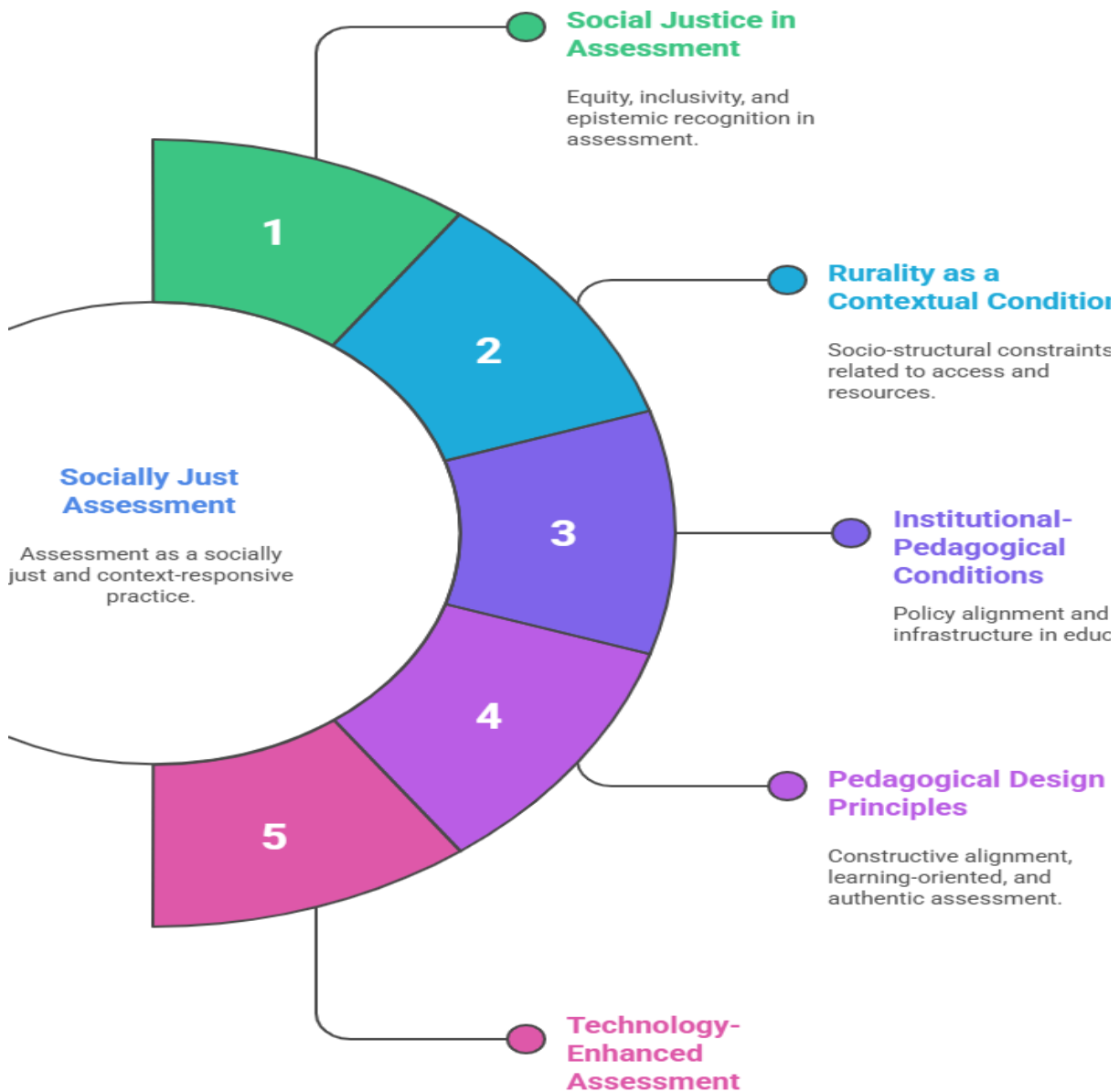


Figure 1 presents a conceptual flow chart that reconceptualises assessment in School Management and Leadership education as a socially just and context-responsive pedagogical praxis within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). SoTL constitutes the overarching epistemological lens, framing assessment as a scholarly and reflective practice. Three interrelated mediating dimensions—social justice in assessment, rurality as a contextual condition, and institutional–pedagogical conditions—shape assessment design and enactment. Social justice foregrounds equity, inclusivity, and epistemic recognition; rurality highlights socio-structural constraints related to access, resources, and place-based realities; and institutional–pedagogical conditions encompass policy alignment and digital infrastructure. These mediating dimensions inform pedagogical design principles, specifically constructive alignment, learning-oriented assessment, and authentic assessment. Technology-enhanced assessment practices further mediate the framework by enabling formative feedback, reflection, collaboration, and flexible participation. The interaction of these elements culminates in assessment as a socially just pedagogical praxis that promotes validity, reliability, equity, and leadership formation in rural higher education contexts.

4. Conclusion

This conceptual paper has argued that assessment in School Leadership and Management education can be reconceptualised, within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), as a socially just and context-responsive pedagogical praxis, particularly in rural higher education contexts. Moving beyond technicist and compliance-oriented approaches, the article foregrounds assessment as a value-laden practice that shapes learning opportunities, professional identity formation, and equity outcomes. By integrating SoTL, learning-oriented assessment, constructive alignment, authentic assessment, and social justice–oriented assessment, the paper offers a coherent theoretical

foundation for rethinking how leadership learning is assessed. The analysis demonstrates that when assessment strategies are deliberately aligned with theory, institutional policy, and contextual realities, they can promote validity, reliability, and inclusivity without compromising academic standards. Innovative assessment practices such as authentic leadership tasks, reflective portfolios, collaborative simulations, and technology-mediated feedback are shown to support deeper learning, ethical judgement, and applied competence. Importantly, the paper highlights that technology, when used critically and equitably, can enhance assessment quality while mitigating structural constraints associated with rurality.

The study further emphasises student preparation and scaffolding as integral to socially just assessment, repositioning preparedness as a shared pedagogical responsibility rather than an individual deficit. Through orientation, skill development, formative feedback, and readiness verification, assessment becomes a developmental process that supports learning progression and epistemic justice. As a conceptual contribution, this paper advances SoTL scholarship by theorising assessment as a transformative praxis capable of addressing persistent inequities in leadership education. It invites educators and institutions to critically examine their assessment designs and to adopt context-sensitive, theoretically grounded approaches that prepare critically conscious leaders for complex and unequal educational environments. While empirical research is needed to test these propositions, the conceptual insights offered here provide a robust foundation for future inquiry and pedagogical innovation.

4. Implications of the Study

This conceptual study carries significant implications for multiple stakeholders within higher education, particularly those engaged in the design, governance, and experience of assessment in School Leadership and Management education. By framing assessment as a socially just and context-responsive praxis within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), the study offers insights that inform pedagogical practice, institutional strategy, policy development, student learning, and future research. The implications are discussed in relation to five key constituencies: academic practitioners, higher education institutions, policy and regulatory bodies, students and learners, and future researchers.

4.1 Implications for Academic Practitioners

For academic practitioners, the study highlights the importance of approaching assessment as a scholarly, reflective, and ethically grounded practice. Lecturers are encouraged to design assessment that authentically reflects leadership practice, is responsive to rural contexts, and is aligned with learning-oriented and socially just principles. The findings suggest that sustained engagement with SoTL can enable practitioners to critically interrogate their assessment decisions, integrate formative feedback more effectively, and strengthen coherence between pedagogy, assessment, and leadership outcomes. Such engagement also contributes to professional growth by reinforcing academic identity as pedagogical scholarship.

4.2 Implications for Higher Education Institutions

At the institutional level, the study underscores the need for coherent alignment between assessment policy, digital infrastructure, and pedagogical support systems. Institutions are encouraged to create enabling conditions that support innovative and equitable assessment practices, including professional development opportunities, flexible assessment regulations, and inclusive digital platforms. These measures are particularly salient in rural and resource-constrained contexts, where institutional responsiveness can significantly influence assessment participation and success. Recognising and valuing assessment-related SoTL work further strengthens institutional cultures of quality enhancement.

4.3 Implications for Policy and Regulatory Bodies

For policy and regulatory bodies, the study suggests a reorientation of assessment frameworks towards greater contextual sensitivity without compromising academic standards. Regulatory approaches that move beyond compliance-driven models and acknowledge the legitimacy of authentic, learning-oriented assessment can better support institutions in addressing inequality and preparing educational leaders for diverse contexts. The study contributes conceptually to policy debates on balancing accountability, quality assurance, and pedagogical innovation in higher education.

4.4 Implications for Students and Learners

For students and learners, the study implies a shift towards assessment practices that are transparent, inclusive, and developmentally supportive. Socially just assessment enables learners to engage with meaningful tasks, demonstrate learning in diverse ways, and develop reflective and self-regulatory capacities. Such approaches are especially beneficial for students in rural settings, as they acknowledge varied learning conditions and reduce structural barriers to participation. Assessment thus becomes a mechanism for empowerment rather than exclusion.

4.5 Implications for Future Researchers

For future researchers, the study provides a conceptual foundation for empirical investigations into assessment as a socially just SoTL praxis. Researchers are encouraged to examine how context-responsive assessment frameworks are enacted across disciplines and institutional settings, and to explore their impact on learning quality, leadership development, and equity outcomes. Longitudinal and comparative studies may further illuminate assessment's transformative potential within higher education.

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