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Assessment in schools in Pakistan

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**The examination and assessment system in Pakistan**

The concept of examination is as assessment of ability, achievement or present performance in a subject. Instruments of assessment can log in to easy or mixed form of assessment, may be used for qualifying for entrance to professions and higher education (Page and Thomas (1978:17)

Since the time of Pakistan‟s independence, seven different education policies have been implemented in the country. The main thrust of all these policies was to promote quality education and the improvement of pedagogy. Yet, the improvement in these areas has not been achieved and is quite unsatisfactory (Rizvi, 2000). In Pakistan, assessments do not judge real competence or genuine educational accomplishment of the students. Instead, the Pakistani educational system encourages those who can best reproduce what they have learnt during lessons and fails those who are unable to do that. It seems as if the whole system of education revolves around examinations. Such types of assessment and evaluation are narrow in scope (Khan, 2006).

Examinations and assessments are an integral part of pedagogy which determines the destiny of students and learning for their life career. Assessments are usually held annually, and they are the main criteria to promote the students to higher grades or to retain them in the same grade. However, recently, a system of automatic promotion up-to grade-III has been introduced in some primary schools but not officially implemented. In the primary schools, assessments are conducted by the respective schools for each grade (I-V). However, at the end of the fifth year of the primary stage, a public examination is conducted by the Education Department for promotion to the next grade. Another examination is held for the outstanding students to compete for the award of merit scholarships. Similarly, the assessment in middle schools (lower secondary (VI-VII) is held by the individual schools but there is a public examination at the end of grade VIII conducted by the Education Department for promotion to the next grade and awarding of scholarships. But a study conducted by UNESCO (2007) criticized the primary educational assessment system in Pakistan as it is failing in its primary mandate of teaching children basic skills. The primary reason is, of course, poor teaching and assessment. This is itself a consequence of poor education and training of the teachers, and poor management and supervision. There is no on-going assessment of children in state primary schools. Whatever assessment takes place is sporadic, subjective, and provides little feedback to children for improvement.

Regional BISE conducts the examinations for the assessing of secondary and higher secondary students. Secondary schools begins from grade VI to X (most of the high schools cover middle and secondary education) and students are required to pass a national examination. Upon completion of grade IX, students are expected to take a standardized test in each of the first parts of their academic subjects. They again conduct these tests of the second parts of the same courses at the end of grade X. At the successfully completion of these two examination assessments; students are awarded a Secondary School Certificate (SSC). This is known as the 'matriculation certificate' or 'matric' for short.

Thus, for stakeholders such as schools the objective is to „pass the examination with good grades and to bring a good name to the school. For some schools, teachers, and students, passing examinations with highest positions becomes a question of prestige‟ (Rehmani, 2003:3). To be very specific, Rehmani (2003) identifies the problem that, „teachers teach for testing, rather than for learning. The assessment system of examinations reinforces approaches to teaching that reward memorization. The more the reproduction, the better and higher are the scores or marks awarded by the examiners‟. Consequently, it is presumed that in the current examination system, learners‟ learning outcomes are absolutely ignored. However, testing of memorization is measured extensively. Accordingly, it is apparent from the above excerpts that the assessment system suffers from multiple deficiencies such as fostering rote-learning, and not adopting critical or analytical approaches for assessing learners. The Ministry of Education (2009: 41), has declared that student performance shall, in future, be based on assessing competence in a specialized area that requires a given skill set. There shall be periodic reviews of the assessment system. Multiple assessment tools in addition to traditional examinations shall be explored, to ensure the right balance between the uses of formative assessment approaches combined with the summative approach of high-stake examinations.

In 2003, BISEs in Pakistan replaced the „composite scheme‟ of SSC examination with the „split scheme3‟, these are two different types of prevailing examinations in the country. (In the composite scheme, examinations are conducted after two years while in the split scheme, the same examination is split into two parts, Part-I (Grade IX) after first year and Part-II (Grade X) after completion of second year. Under the composite scheme of examination the total marks were 850 and now in the split system of examination the total marks are 1050).

Ahmad and Malik (2011:132) quoting Dar and Bethel (1995), draw attention to the shortcomings of the public examination and assessment system. They argue that the assessment system in Pakistan is defective due to the following: (a).No single body is responsible for assessment at secondary level, and examinations at this level are the responsibility of many Boards. This results in a lack of co-ordination among the working of these Boards. (b) Papers of different subjects can be scheduled to be written at the same time. (c) Results are not reliable because students use deceitful and indulge in malpractices in the examination. (d) Deficiencies in marking takes place. Qureshi (2005) mentioned that there is some substantiation for the claim that the more regularly the evaluations take place, the more will be the level of student achievement.

Christie and Afzaal (2005) and Shah and Afzaal (2004) revealed that there has been an increase in the incidence of the recurrence of questions and selected material is tested again and again in our pubic examinations. This leads toward selective studies because the understanding of a little content helps the students to get good marks in the final examination and nobody seems to take this fact seriously. Assessments in examinations mainly focus on easy, straight and very simple questions and they ignore high levels of cognition involved in such items as comprehension, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. In this situation, students keep focusing on retention and rote memorization as examination tactics. Christie and Khushk (2004) stated that in Pakistan only one text book is provided to the primary and

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Secondary school students for each subject that‟s why the quality of teachers is not satisfactory and the worth of our output at this level is inadequate. They also suggested that to assess the learning outcome special skills are required.

Although in theory MoEGP (2009) valued the students‟ performance based on specific skills that should be measured through multiple assessment techniques, in practice there are no such assessing criteria. For example assessing the English language in Pakistan is subjective and it measures pupils' knowledge of the language rather than their performance in it (Warsi, 2004, cited in Khan, 2011). However, the MoEGP (2009) has stated that language teachers should employ both formative and summative forms of assessment. Secondly, teachers should explore the cause of students‟ strengths and weaknesses and provide helpful and effective feedback to them. Moreover, the teachers should do an item analysis to find out the validity and reliability of the test.

In addition, Khan (2006:6) observes that research in testing highlights the decline in the examination system, its ineffectiveness, and unreliability in diagnosing students‟ weaknesses and in assessing their abilities. He reiterates that the design and content of the test papers is such that students only have to rely on their memories, and this does not have a beneficial effect, on syllabi and teaching practice. Above all, tests lack validity and reliability (Khan, 2011). Similarly, Ahmad and Malik (2011) also note that testing is not viewed as a vital component of teaching and is considered quite distinct from teaching and learning as well as practice. In terms of reliability and validity of assessment procedures, Rehmani (2003) pinpoints that reliability and validity of examination papers in terms of coverage of curriculum, selection of paper setters, and lack of training or otherwise of the paper setters and examiners, marking system and preparation of results, are considered dubious. Moreover, Khan (2011), Shah and Saleem (2010) also point-out that textbook materials are prescribed by the teacher for their learners to be learnt and explained word by word and sentence by sentence and confined to only one text book. Due to this approach to teaching and learning, students become passive recipients of prescribed content knowledge of the textbooks. Khan (2006) also states that the questions after each lesson of the textbook are based on literal levels that measure only low order thinking skills.

Khan (2006:11) maintains that: Comprehension questions are useful for checking understanding particularly if they are of the type which requires the students to actively seek-out the answer and formulate it themselves, rather than simply repeat a section of the text – moreover the questions do not encourage the personal involvement of the learner which is an important factor in motivating students.

Accordingly, it is presumed that in order to measure students‟ comprehension, question types have to test high order instead of low order thinking skills. This will not only require students simply to locate the answer in the set texts using only low order skills, but also to read between and beyond the lines in order to become independent and proficient readers. In addition, they will become proficient in interaction with texts, such as, narrative, expository, argumentative, persuasive, and informative or a combination of text types (Khan, 2011).

Assessment can be used to evaluate the overall system‟s efficiency as well as students‟ performance. Secondly, it provides feedback for improvements at all tiers starting from changes in the classroom to improvements in the national systems (MoEGP, 2009: 41). In addition, keeping in view the crucial role in determining the impact of pedagogy, public examinations and assessment in Pakistan have more demerits than merits (Rehmani, 2003). Moreover, modern assessment techniques are not being used to measure students‟ achievements and hence dependency on traditional learning processes yields a low quality of education in the country (Christie and Khushk, 2004).

Examination questions are repeated at least every three to five years and hence questions can be predicted. There are „model papers‟, or „guess paper guides‟ available in the market with readymade answers based on the question papers of the previous five years. Teachers and students tend to rely on such guides and students commit their content to memory. Assessment questions in the papers contain only a combination of objective and subjective types of questions. Regurgitation seems to be the only key for students to pass the examinations rather than creative thinking and independent analyses. The irony is that those students who can reproduce better score higher marks and this affects lecture methods and curriculum-based teaching approaches.

Moreover, Gipps (1994) suggests that the major purpose of assessment is to support the teaching and learning process (cited in Rehmani, 2003). However, in Pakistan only a few teachers have had proper training in designing tests and modern approaches to assessment (Mirza et al., 1999). Kamrani (2010: 7) in an analysis of the present assessment system maintains that we need to over-haul our examination and assessment system at many levels: a) by introducing a variety of assessment tools for evaluation of students‟ learning and for their capacity for further growth and development. b) by a drastic revision of the present school-based examination and assessment system from grade IV to XII by introducing uniform (across the provincial level at least) and quantitatively verifiable qualitative indicators for the assessment system at primary (grade V), lower secondary (grade VIII), secondary (grade X) and higher secondary stages (grade XII). Assessment of students should cover f academic excellence along with analytical and decision-making skills incorporated with the indigenous moral value system.

Assessment in the educational system in Pakistan

**National Assessment System**

Dissatisfaction with the performance of the schools is ubiquitous and in most countries, people have been expressing concern with the level of competencies demonstrated by school leavers. Since the 1980‟s, efforts have been underway to develop a coherent system for monitoring and evaluating pupil learning outcomes. This system is referred to as National Assessment System (NAS) (UNESCO, 2007).

The NAS obtains a representative sample of measures of student achievement, in key curriculum areas, at regular intervals, at selected grade levels. The purpose of the exercise is to assess the achievement of the education system through national aggregation of individual student performance. Data on the performance of students on various sub-domains of curriculum can point to strengths and weaknesses within the curriculum areas.

Simultaneously with data on student achievement, information is also collected on correlates of learning outcomes. Any desired combination of correlates may be chosen from amongst student-related, school-related or teacher-related factors. Information on how student outcome is related to these factors can help policy-makers to identify and focus upon those which were likely to contribute to improvements in student achievement levels via examination assessment.

Analyses of data on sub-domains of curriculum and correlates of learning outcomes provide insight into how intended curricula are implemented in schools and into factors affecting student learning. Learning assessment data provides an indication of the state, efficiency, or performance of an education system. Learning assessment serves the following purposes: Provides pertinent data to guide policy-makers in selection of priorities in curriculum, in allocation of resources, and in designing teacher-training strategies; Provides accurate data on changes in level of student achievement over years to substantiate or refute assertions pertaining to lowering of educational standards; Information on manipulatable variables affecting student outcome can help in assessing the impact of in-service training, supervision procedure, emphasis on different curriculum content and language instruction, etc; Introduce accountability in the system.; and

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Help bring about cost efficiencies by identifying failing features of the existing system or by providing evidence to support more effective alternatives.

The effectiveness of the NAS depends on the relevance of indicators selected, quality of data collected, and validity of analyses. Examination and learning assessment both collect data on student achievement levels and use it for improvement of examination assessment in education. The examination data is used by teachers both for the grading of students as well as improvement of the quality of their instruction. Learning assessment data, on the other hand, is used by policy makers and planners for improvement of the school system.

**Assessment Studies (AS)**

To assist in the formulation of appropriate policies, AS were first conducted in 1983 under the Primary Education Project. This was followed by studies under the “BRIDGES” project of the Haward Institute of International Development during 1988-89. However, these were one-time, project-driven activities and did not become part of the system. The World Declaration on Education for All drew attention to the need for improving learning outcomes. The Technical Guidelines prepared for the Year 2000 Assessment, stressed the need adequately to assess the level of student achievement within the examination system. Consequently, a number of assessment studies were conducted during the 1990-2005 period with the support of the UN and other international agencies to improve the education system by an affective examination and assessment system. Lack of administrative infrastructures prevented pooling together of national capacity for planning and execution of learning assessment studies and held back progress in this field. Attention is now being focused on development of required infrastructures, both at national and provincial levels, under the Social Action Programme. (For detailed information on the assessment studies conducted in Pakistan See Report of Ministry of Education Government of Pakistan, MoEGP, 2009)

**National Education Assessment System (NEAS)**

NEAS was established to undertake systematic evaluations of student learning achievement across Pakistan and to share the analytical results with both policy makers and practitioners to inform the education quality reform process. With data that is comparable across regions and over time, NEAS can identify gaps and bring about improvements in the curriculum, teaching and classroom support practices, as well as in the development of examination and assessment systems. For NEAS to be established as a student assessment system on par with international standards, several key steps towards institutional strengthening, capacity building and improvement in technical quality and processes should be undertaken. The following are required: Further investment in the technical proficiency of key staff is required, in both specialized skills (item writing, sampling, test procedures) and core expertise (report writing, comparative analysis); This will facilitate improvements in test and instrument design, and will support robust research and analysis. Extending the dissemination of results and findings to primary stakeholders, particularly teacher trainers, textbook developers and policy makers is important; and Deeper understanding is needed of the assessment process and stronger linkages between assessment systems and other education sub-departments (such as teacher professional development centres, examination units, curriculum wing, and textbook development) will facilitate better-informed and strategic use of assessment information for improvement in student learning.

The longer term sustainability of NEAS will depend not only on its establishment as an autonomous body and but also on the degree of integration between the federal and regional assessment centres so that cross-learning and implementation of best practice is facilitated. With continuous improvements in test instruments and key technical skills, NEAS will be able to track overall system efficiency as well as individual student performance, and identify key areas for intervention that will lead to improvement in the quality and effectiveness of the education system.