

## A cultural-historical analysis of assessment and education reform in Iran

Dr. Ebrahim Talaee, Assistant Professor of Educational Research, Department of Education, Tarbiat Modares University, Iran

### Abstract

Decisions about education reform have influenced and have been influenced by the assessment and evaluation practices in the past 100 years of education history in Iran. In this cultural-historical study, we did a content analysis of policy documents ratified in the supreme council of education in the past 100 years in the country and deduced the themes which shape the trends and policy ideas of contemporary education in Iran. The research question focused on discovering the rationale, explicit and implicit, behind decisions which were made about assessment-related policies and the way these policies influenced or were influenced by the real assessment practices by teachers and students in schools. Furthermore, the more general socio-cultural context of the country at different time periods (such as revolution, war, change of monarchies etc) was drawn upon to analyse the deduced themes from policy documents. This is an ongoing study and the emerging results will be presented in the conference.

**Key words:** cultural-historical, Iranian system of assessment, policy analysis

### Introduction

The history of educational assessment<sup>1</sup> coincides with the history of education in its formal or informal form in Iran. By informal education, I mean the education which children received at home or later at the home of educator at the time of Old Persia (from 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC to early centuries after the birth of Jesus Christ). In this form of education, assessment of children's learning and development were done informally too, i.e. neither the place nor the organization of assessment, time and structure of it was formally designed and thought for. In other words, assessment was done authentically and as part of teaching and learning process. People's lives were mainly based on agriculture at this time so the educational objectives were around life skills related to agriculture for boys and doing home chores for girls. They also included religious and ethical objectives which were met by reading classical texts of Quran and Persian literature. Assessment of learning which led to certification was not an issue, however formative

---

<sup>1</sup> In this paper "assessment" and "evaluation" are used interchangeably.

assessments were everywhere. This was feasible as the number of children in class was not too large and educational monitoring was done personally and at the start and during the course. Certification was in fact referred to as “completion of the specified book” such as completion of ethics book. Graduation meant completion of, for instance, Sa’adi’s classic book of Butsan which is mainly a book on ethics and good behavior.

In this paper, educational assessment was conceptually studied in contemporary Iran i.e. last 100 years of history of education in Iran.

### **Methodology**

In the present study, a sociological perspective is taken to look historically at the way educational assessment was understood and how this understanding affected and was affected by people’s practices in dealing with children. A cultural-historical approach to assessment is adopted here which means that concepts of “assessment”, evaluation and measurement were studied in the context of formation of education in contemporary Iran.

### **Emergent findings**

This is an ongoing study and for this paper the emergent findings are presented.

### **Late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century period**

#### *Formative assessment*

Formative assessments were carried out regularly and orally. Children were individually chosen to sit in front of the educator and were asked to read the texts which were either from Quran or Persian classical prose or poetry. Reading was the main subject of assessment. In fact, children were required to decode the texts rather than comprehend and analyse it. That is why most of class activities and homework were repetition and copying. Parrot learning was admired and there was no need to deeply understand the texts. It was believed that understanding the core of the texts comes naturally after repetitive practice, even though not absorbed deeply at the beginning.

#### *Personalized assessment*

Most assessments were done individually or in small groups who were in the same level. Therefore, criterion based assessment was exercised rather than norm-referenced. Of course one can argue that norm-referenced was exercised informally too. It was exercised through both oral examinations where children had to read at presence of the whole class in turn. Therefore, teachers intuitively compared individual children's reading fluency with the mean level of the group. However, ample time and no pre-specified curriculum left enough leg room for teachers to assess children's reading ability based on the criterion of mastery. Time was used instrumentally to achieve the educational objectives, therefore extended time, whether at home or in school, was spent to reach the mastery level. It is interesting to note that as assessment was done at presence of all classmates, a kind of peer assessment was exercised to. However, it was a different version of peer assessment in which all children "indirectly" take part in a classmate's assessment. They expressed their opinion about their classmate's ability to read through their facial language, quietly correcting the reader's mistakes and, when allowed by the teacher, by reading aloud the correct form of it.

#### *Summative assessment*

Summative assessment was equivalent to completion and mastery of a book or a section of the specified book. If the textbook was Quran or a long book, sections or parts of them were considered for a school year to complete. The interesting and noteworthy thing for today's education is the coverage was not equivalent to mastery. The syllabus (or curriculum) was only considered complete or "covered" when all learners learned it to the mastery level. This is an issue that some scholars today such as Mike Schomek call it "guaranteed and viable curriculum". Summative assessment gradually turned into an important occasion. It constituted final exam period at the end of an academic year in late May and early June. Final exam sessions were so important that sometimes VIPs such as politicians were invited to school for these sessions. This started with Roshdiyyeh schools and followed by other private and national schools in the next decades.

#### *Pen and Paper assessment*

Most of the assessments were done orally because the instructional objectives revolve around oral literacy such as reading, assertive presentation of arguments and reasoning. Written examinations were only used for spelling exams (or dictations) and calligraphy. Former was

assessed in group and teachers dictated some texts from the books which have been covered during the course. In this exam, trivial points of spelling were considered very important and the teacher assessed children's ability to write on the basis of following these spelling rules. Calligraphy was an important subject in schools in the form of both "beautiful" writing with pencil and with reed pen. Handwriting was so important that a graduate of primary school with bad handwriting was informally called "illiterate"! Therefore, assessment of handwriting both through formative assessments and final summative one were important part of the syllabus. Children's homework was mainly copying many times a modeled sentence written by the teacher on each of children's notebook. Therefore, formative assessment of handwriting was done, in fact, every day by the teacher through checking their homework.

### *Qualification and Certification*

"To certify" did not mean that a child has finished or covered a course and its curriculum but it meant that they have actually learned the intended curriculum at mastery level. Therefore, it was the teacher who approved a child to go to a higher grade. By higher grade, I mean a new book or a new section of the same book. Completion of a book by an individual child was celebrated and parents of the child bought gifts for the teacher. The gift was usually a local product such as butter, oil, milk, wheat or a big cube sugar decorated with colorful cloth. If the teacher of the higher grade was a new teacher, he did not usually ask for a so-called certificate but asked for the title of the book (s) that the child has read and the name of the teacher who taught them. Then the teacher made a diagnostic assessment of the child himself.

The response to children's results from these formative assessments was in fact too harsh, either by telling off the child or by physical punishment. Punishment and hardworking were typical characteristics of pre-modern schools in Iran. Child-centred education was not part of the education discourse and classroom practice, not even until late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Assessment for learning was understood as assigning more practice and drills for the failed child during the school year or by assigning a smart peer to help him/her.

It was not until early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the first "supreme council of knowledge" was formally formed by the government in 1911, that concepts of educational assessment and evaluation entered Iranian educational discourse. These concepts were referred to by the word

“examinations” and “examiner”. The first formal guideline on educational evaluation was called “Regulations of Examinations” and it was written by experts at the supreme council of knowledge in 1923.

## **Current period**

### *1) From 1969 to now*

The first national entrance examination for universities took place in 1969 and it was a cornerstone state policy which is still a hot debate in Iranian educational discourse. It was carried by a centre which was then called “the centre for testing”, established a year before in 1968. The centre or testing was responsible for developing a guideline for selection of university students. Seven years later, due to increasing demand to enter higher education in the country, the centre promoted to “National Organization for Educational Assessment” (NOEA) which is still working under the same name and is affiliated to Ministry of Higher Education. The organization has expanded its activities to include all entrance exams for all 3 levels of undergraduate, Masters and Doctorate which are carried out at the national level. Other national assessments such as call for employment in the government or non-government sectors, GRE, TOEFL, IELTS, Persian (for foreign students), and other language tests are part of the NOEA’s activities.

The entrance exam to enter university, konkur as it is called in Iran (from the French Concours), has had severe backwash effect on school education and its quality. Gradually konkurization affected not only secondary education but it has now afflicted even primary education in the country. Multiple choice questions and filling in a circle from a choice of four circles have led teachers to teach testing techniques rather than engaging with big ideas and deep conceptual analysis in disciplines. Children, too, stick to superficial learning only to pass the school tests with the required minimum. Education scholars have warned against konkur for several years and some policy makers have initiated some actions to de-kokurize at least lower school grades but it has not led to much success so far.

The testing regime which is advocated by konkur has had washback effects on formative assessments too. Nearly all formative assessments done by schools themselves or by external private testing organizations follow the same regime of multiple choice assessment. The

historical effects of the above mentioned testing culture have led to sever educational deficiencies:

- Ranking of children based on their performance in large scale preparatory assessments during school education. These large scale assessments are carried out by private testing institutes and it is administered in all year groups from primary to the end of secondary education. Most private schools and many public schools sign up for these assessments, usually every 2 to 4 weeks, and families pay for that. The statistical population which it provides for families and schools creates a context against which individual children and school's performance are ranked at national and local levels. Ranking comes from the norm-referenced approach adopted by konkur to admit participants for universities. Apparently, it brings a motivation among children and schools but research shows that this is generally a motivation for filling in the right circle in a multiple choice question with any tricks or memory boosting techniques rather than deep understanding of the concepts. Their learning does not stick any longer than required for the tests.
- Assessment for assessment: konkur culture in Iran has derailed assessment from its authentic purpose of assessment for learning and teaching improvement. Teachers rarely analyse children's performance in each question to inform their lesson plans and children rarely adopt a deep approach after assessments. They, again, look for short cuts, more rote repetitions and memorizations without understanding and application of knowledge.

## 2) *From 2009 to now*

Scholars have criticized the quantification culture of assessment since it formally started in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first guideline for school examinations declared a 0-20 system of scoring system. Usually 10 has been the passing score in the past 100 years in the country. This scoring system has become culturally so deep among Iranians which is used and understood easily outside education contexts such as asking, during TV interviews, the president about his self-scoring of his presidency or when children are asked to score their parents and compare them in their quality of parenting. This quantification culture has been so strong in schools that parents and children may argue with teachers about the difference between 18 and 18.25 in a spelling test or a Math test. It has gradually become a folk pedagogy, as Bruner (1996) puts it, in Iran and any mark deduction, from 0.25 to 0.5, 0.75 and 1, in spelling and Math test particularly and in

other school subjects general, implies a generally agreed mis-performance in the give test. For instance, misspelling of a letter in a word (“g” instead of “j”) implies 0.5 reduction of score.

Critics wrote that this has ruined education particularly at primary level. Moreover, it has made school a stressful place for young learners as every other day they are compared with their classmates, by their teachers and/or parents, based on these quantities of learning. From 2009, Ministry of Education, after seven years of pilot study and research, passed a law at the Sureme Council of Education which assessment in primary education is no longer based on 0-20 but it is based on something called “descriptive-qualitative assessment”. For the summative assessment reports which are given to families twice a year, the report cards include some statements for each subject, which are the expected outcomes in that subjects, and teachers should tick or cross it and it is better if they write a short paragraph about each school subject. However, finally the teacher should decide on a 4-point scale (very good, good, acceptable, requires more effort) about individual’s performance.

Iranian quantification culture has not been able to embrace this fully. Therefore, one can see objections which are raised by both teachers and parents about this system. Some are listed below:

- 1) Teachers have transformed the new 4-point scale to the old 20 point scale. This gives them both meaning and more leg room to judge on children’s performance. The argument is that, two children might be categorized as “acceptable” but there is huge differences between them and the current 4-point system can not capture these differences.
- 2) Parents ask for a score based on the old system for them to realize and accommodate their child’s performance in say Math. They want it to be “exact”, as they say. “Exact” is really meant here because the following questions by parents are about which section of Math, which page of the book, etc.
- 3) There is no concrete study but the intuition is that, Iran’s decrease in the latest international assessment of PIRLS and TIMSS in grade 4 is not irrelevant to this policy. It is argued that the so-called descriptive-qualitative assessment has loosen learning criteria in a way that it brings all children to the gray area rather than being clear about where each child is. This gray system of assessment has led to many compromises when children are to be allowed to go a grade up or even during the academic year. There has

been a hot discussion on media in last 6 months whether Iranian children have become less literate in the past 10-15 years and why. One argument is related with the above mentioned policy.

## References