

Assessment for Better Learning: Student Assessment in Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

In my research paper I cover the Kyrgyzstani experience in introducing new student assessment initiatives. Nowadays, our educators have a good understanding of the need for changing goals of education, as well as the political will required to make these changes happen.

The current system of education is not yet capable enough for training students to prepare them for real life, as required by realities of the modern world. The majority of Kyrgyz school students are not ready to apply knowledge and skills acquired at school in practice, particularly so at a level required by international research. One of the key ways to change the situation is to reform student assessment in the country.

Therefore we are focusing on changing classroom assessment (introducing formative assessment in country schools), school leaving summative assessment, and also conduct international and national surveys of student achievements.

We face many difficulties on the way but the situation is changing dramatically. In the research paper I am planning to focus on improving educational quality by building analytical and creative thinking skills of students with different abilities and measuring the changes in their learning.

Key words: education quality, formative and summative assessment, large-scale assessment.

NEW TRENDS AND CHANGING PARADIGMS IN KYRGYSTANI EDUCATION

The Kyrgyz Republic, or Kyrgyzstan is a small country in Central Asia with more than 60% of the rural population. Like other post-Soviet countries with the planned economy and the collectivist ideology, education in the Kyrgyz Republic has inherited a traditional Soviet education system. Therefore, the formation of a pragmatic consciousness and relationships required by market economy creates many external and internal contradictions. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in education many dramatic changes have occurred and still are occurring. In fact, Kyrgyzstan's education system still is rigid and teacher-centered not student-centered. Mainly for this reason, education quality had deteriorated dramatically over the past decades (according to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA 2006 and 2009) and National Sample-Based Assessment (NSBA 2007 and 2009) results).

For the last two decades, there was a dramatic shift of paradigms. First, during the Soviet era in Kyrgyzstan the subject- professional paradigm was dominated. This paradigm is focused on knowledge approach: all academic subjects in the curricular were directly related to the acquisition of a student's future profession. In education the overwhelming state control and rigid centralization covered all administrative, teaching and learning practice and research. Today, one of the arguments to follow this traditional education system is the fact that the Soviet Union was one of the most educated countries and was the leader primarily in the field of natural sciences. Of course this is right and that education system met all the demands of the past Soviet society. But at the same time, we

need to recognize the fact that we have never shown leadership position in the social sciences and the shift to the market economy clearly has shown that we are not ready to adapt to the current situation. As well in education sector today we are going through a difficult transition period: we are moving away from the old education system and the new developments in the system are being introduced. The main result of this shift is the fact that in our country a new phenomenon is appearing: many young people are not ready for life in uncertainty, they do not want to work, they prefer to get all on the shelf.

Step by step in our country, a universally professional, technology and research paradigm is forming. This paradigm meets the demands of the current period; it is focused on the student's and teacher's personality. It is more democratic, flexible, and open to all changes, at the same time, it is more structured and organized, as focuses on the results that can be achieved in different ways. In this result-oriented paradigm, the most important things are practically oriented research, programming, forecasting, planning based on technologies and information. People more and more aware that their main goal is not to receive a diploma or certificate, which give a possibility to get a job at the end of a certain educational cycle, but to obtain skills, abilities, and certain new competences as life-long learners in order to meet specific demands of the time in the new communication and high technological environment. A globalized world also requires changes, and education perhaps is the most effective instrument for surviving in such a competitive world as ours. This is maybe more necessary for developing countries.

Now Kyrgyzstan is at a point where its economy could begin a period of rapid development. But in order to do this, a number of innovations need to be in place. One is the formation of a skilled pool of employees and managers who are capable of creating and maintaining businesses of international scope. International connections with Russia, Turkey, Korea and several other countries are growing quickly, but the question is, will Kyrgyzstan have the people with the skills needed to make use of these connections?

In this, the education system plays an important role. For after all, it is the schools and universities that will train those with the needed capabilities, and who will ultimately carry the nation forward into a developed status. The next question, therefore, are the education institutions doing their job by creating programs that will give our young citizens the right skills?

A small country like ours can only succeed through absorbing and using the international experience, by reforming the education system, and our schools with new curricula as well as reconceptualized instruction and student assessment can push rapidly toward this goal. It should also be very sensitive to the challenges of new information and technology-oriented society.

Thus, education is one of the main tools for changing the society and moving the country out of a prolonged crisis. The introduction of new student- centered approaches to teaching and assessment will help make the learning process more flexible, constructive, motivating, supportive and results-oriented.

The government officials and educators, parents and students in our country understand the need for changes. We have a number of documents including concepts, strategies, road maps etc. We have also a picture of aims and objectives of education development, but we still need more SYSTEMIC

and STRATEGIC understanding of the nature of pending education changes, and most importantly, we lack the understanding of HOW it should be changed. I assume it happens due to the fact that there is no clear and balanced general understanding of the priorities in the development of society, economy, politics and therefore in education. For this reason, changes are spontaneous and fragmented (e.g. we try to print textbooks without considering issues of new curricula, nor introduction of electronic textbooks and other related initiatives; or we believe that financial security is fundamental for education institutions, while it is necessary to use existing funds more efficiently). Learning environment also is not comfortable for the students: not sustained, designed for 'one size fits all', do not executed as a natural process; assessment is not transparent for the students and not confidential. Here we face many problems.

Corruption and **academic dishonesty** are the main obstacles for education of high quality. The reasons for academic dishonesty are rooted in the authoritarian society, in which evaluation was the main tool for the suppression of the individual, a means of punishment or award, the sign of subordination to the general rules. This led to the denigration of self-esteem, which encourage to desire for external success. You had to have very strong personality in order to resist an external force. Today socio-economic conditions are changing: it is more important to have an understanding of the real causes of your successes and failures, as it is directly related to his personal and career development. And very often obvious contradictions between the formal evaluation of the student learning outcomes, which is provided by a school, and an actual self-esteem can be clearly seen.

Decentralization in education is also one of the crucial issues. School management must be executed by the schools and local communities themselves depending on their needs. In this case, the implementation of the academic freedom principle allows more flexible and more mobile methods to respond to the needs of a particular community. In general, international experience shows the great efficiency of education institutions (schools, universities) that have autonomy. The independence of education institutions, ensuring the independence of all subjects of the educational process is the basis for their creative development. But autonomy needs appropriate trainings on strategic planning, management, leadership, financing, new instruction and assessment forms). The point is that all these must be done in a system based way. All these also require a continuous and regular measurement.

Thus, education **goals, principles, and content** are also changing: analysis and synthesis should predominate over simple memorization, students should possess analytical, critical thinking skills, be proactive, flexible, initiative, dynamic, self-confident, responsive and responsible, have excellent communication, cognitive, team work, and adaptability skills; education should be practice oriented, curricula must be in alignment with teaching goals, textbooks, instructional practices and assessments.

It is well known that standards, curriculum development and an assessment system operate together and form a country's education system. New standards, curriculum and assessment are needed to match each other, than the changes will be really systemic. In Kyrgyzstan, the existing curriculum is overloaded and inefficient. Therefore, a new Curriculum based on the National Curriculum Framework is under development. In the curricula, the content changes step by step, by moving from memorization of facts to problem-solving and shaping competence-based skills. The main focus is

made on the process of learning and development of practical skills. New principles of student assessment are an integral part of the Curriculum.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT IN KYRGYZSTAN

For decades, the system of education evaluation was not beneficial to students, tough, very limited, in many cases oppressive to the students and teachers. The situation remains the same to the certain extent. But changes in the education goals, principles and content in the contemporary world and in the country determined the new approaches to assessment. The most important questions are: how to build the evaluation process in order to stimulate the formation of the democratic changes in society, how the new priorities in education reforms are reflected in the assessment of students' knowledge, skills, and competencies, which assessment model better contributes to the development of a student as a creative personality?

If other countries have a long history of relevant assessment approaches, tools that connected with curriculum and teaching practice, our country is at the very beginning of this way. But nowadays the country educators have become aware of the fact that assessment is a very complex process and that this process has its own sequence, strategy and tactics, that evaluation is one of the main instruments to improve the quality of education, that assessment system directly links with educational quality and the role of student assessment in becoming more and more important. They try to understand how this process works, how to measure the current status quo in all fields and how to make changes if it is not satisfactory. The most of school administrators understand the necessity of introducing more challenging methods and types of assessment, but do not understand more or less clearly how it could be implemented.

But experience shows that sometimes for administrators and teachers it is very hard to understand that assessment is an extremely dramatic process, which should be transparent for an individual student and confidential; the student assessment process is going spontaneously, a student's grade does not substantiated properly; in the schools **quantitative** methods of evaluation, not **qualitative** are dominated (teachers have limited resources to assess their students' progress); there is no clear and accurate algorithm for evaluation, which can provide students' information for identifying his/her achievements and progress; mostly assessment criteria do not reflect concrete learning goals; in most cases students' **reproductive** (not **productive**) knowledge is assessed; comprehensive framework for data-collection, analysis, and reporting on students on the country level has not been established yet. In general, the current assessment system does not meet the new social and economical demands.

Thus, in order to assure a high education quality the government formulated agenda based on the certain principles. I called it as a set of five 'I's. According to this set of principle assessment should be: **Introducing** (introduce new items, assessment methodologies and approaches, **new assessment culture** as a whole); **Inquiring** (provide analysis at all levels – classroom, school, region, country); **Integrative** (be in line with standards, curriculum and instruction); **Informative** (meaningful and open for all stakeholders); **Improving** (changing education quality for a better).

Since the main objective of any quality assessment is to develop a new assessment culture for the country through introducing new assessment dimensions and methods (**formative** and **summative**)

we identify five areas which we need to improve. They are: classroom assessment (formative and summative), school leaving evaluation, participation in international large-scale assessment PISA, administering national sample-based large-scale assessment – NSBA, capacity building in assessment field. I would like to present the Kyrgyzstani experience in four main areas: **classroom assessment, school leaving evaluation, participation in PISA, and administering national sample-based large-scale assessment NSBA**. All these initiatives were made possible thanks to donors' support.

Classroom Assessment

Education creates new opportunities. But the paradox in this complex process every time is individualized; it is the result of a particular individual's efforts. The basic contradiction - between the personal nature of education and a certain education system which should create an enabling environment for a student must be taken into account by educators and governments. Therefore, it was so important for us to introduce student-centered approach into teaching and evaluation.

In order to measure student and school academic progress in the framework of the student-centered approach, new classroom-based formative and summative assessment methods as an organic part of the new curriculum, has been started to be introduced in the country since 2006. These new types of assessments are used to provide effective feedback to students, teachers and schools, to involve students more actively in their own learning, and to improve teaching on the basis of the assessment results. Since formative assessment techniques are mostly informal, it helps to organize more active involvement of students in their own education, provide teachers and students with more immediate and pro-active feedback in a classroom.

The introduction of formative assessment into the classroom helps to improve classroom evaluation practices. Many teachers have already been exposed to innovative teaching methods through various donors' projects, and Rural Education Project financed by the World Bank also contributed a lot to helping teachers evaluate the progress of their students. Country teachers were provided with useful support materials including practical guidelines on student assessment.

Alignment of instruction with assessment is essential to teaching effectiveness. Therefore, we presented to teachers such assessment methods as **direct observation, portfolio, dictation, quick writing, essay, multiple choice tests, peer assessment, and self-assessment**. Teachers started from investigating their students' learning styles and abilities, and then moved to developing and signing the learning contracts with their students. We provided our teachers also with formal formative assessment (forms, samples, e.g. Student Achievement Tracker (SAT), Class Achievement Tracker (CAT). It is used when assessment data is collected and kept by the teacher as a record of student learning.

After introducing new forms of assessment into the teaching practice in two Kyrgyzstan's pilot regions, many teachers have noticed a big positive shift in their work. They noted that they have become more creative in their work paying more attention to each student. Teachers also noted that although they were familiar with some new assessment forms before, they have started to use these forms more effectively. Students, who consider these methods as well as self-evaluation tools as a

key factor for their progress, have become more active in a classroom, more responsible for their learning, which resulted in their better performance. Classroom environment is also changing: the relationship between students and teachers are improving, which is in general raises the education quality in rural schools.

Based on an experiment conducted in the pilot regions, we are planning to continue introducing and/or supporting new developments and initiatives: using READ Program funds we will train more than 5000 primary school teachers countrywide on new methods of student assessment. We will try to make formative assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning, as well as an effective instrument for increasing education quality, and we hope that it will help the high school students to learn and grow.

School Leaving Evaluation

Currently, **high stake state exams** in Kyrgyzstan include: (1) final exams for the comprehensive school students (grade 9) and secondary school (grade 11), which are held in a traditional oral form based on question cards, as well as in writing (essays/essays/dictations and math assignments) given by schools themselves; (2) Voluntary testing for 9 and 11 grade students given by National Testing Center under the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic (NTC); (3) National testing for admission to the country's universities given by the independent Center for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods (CEATM). Final exams are regulated by the Regulations on final examination of graduates and annual orders of the MOES. Teachers themselves conduct these exams at school. School graduates (grades 9 and 11) receive their marks based on the results of final examinations, which take place in a traditional form.

The World Bank Rural Education Project offered to reform the existing student assessment system. Under the Project a completely new testing model was developed and partially tested in a number of Kyrgyzstan's rural schools.

To achieve long-term goal of modifying the existing student assessment system, now by using the READ funds we propose to address the following short-term objectives: (a) implement a full-scale pilot of final exams for graduates from eleventh grades in one of the country region using the Rural Education Project results; (b) as a result of this pilot, provide a concept of introducing a new model of final student assessment in the country to the Ministry of Education and Science.

International and National Large-Scale Assessments

Being a main tool for identifying problems in learning, teaching and feedback, one of the components of quality education is **large-scale assessment of student achievements**. It plays a very important role in development of the educational system, because it is clearly embodies the principles that underlie the educational process in general. In 2000 and 2005, the student performance monitoring (SPM) survey was carried out by the Center for Public Opinion Research and Forecast (El-Pikir) with financial support of UNICEF and UNESCO. The International Student Assessment Program (PISA) and the National Sample Based Assessment (NSBA) attracted great public attention. Both surveys were conducted by the independent Center for Educational

Assessment and Teaching Methods (CEATM) with support of the World Bank Rural Education Project. Two rounds of PISA were implemented in 2006 and 2009, and two rounds of NSBA were implemented in 2007 and 2009.

The first reaction on the PISA and NSBA results in 2006 was shocking and striking. It was noted, in particular, that students from Kyrgyzstan ranked the last among 57 countries participated in PISA in 2006 and among 65 countries in PISA in 2009. In turn, the NSBA 2007 findings showed that “more than 60% of fourth grade students in each subject area are at a level below baseline, which means that this group of students does not have sufficient knowledge, abilities and skills for further successful learning of curriculum.” (3, P.110). Findings of the international comparative research of functional literacy of 15-year-old teenagers (PISA-2006 and 2009) and the National Student Assessment of fourth and eighth grade students (NSBA-2007 and 2009) emphasized that rural school does not provide quality education.

According to the findings of low levels of student achievements analysis, in addition to teaching and learning gaps, lots of other factors, such as political, economic and social, also have impact on this process, and therefore require certain policies to improve quality of education based on assessment of student achievements (2, P.220).

Then the results were discussed at the highest level: by President Office, Prime Minister Office, Parliament, and Security Council. Some activities on education policy for improving the education system based on these results were included by MOE into the 2020 Education Strategy and other strategic documents. Also after the PISA results’ presentation MOE applied to the Ministry of Finance for resources for computerization of country schools (about USD2 million) and textbooks publication (about USD2 million annually). New curriculum development (ADB Project) also was forced by MOE.

PISA and NSBA surveys revealed that assessment system means not only the scale that is used for marking, but also a mechanism of maintaining supervision and diagnostic communication between a teacher and a student, a student and his/her parents about success of the educational process as a whole, as well as a mechanism of self-assessing by students of their academic achievements.

We plan to continue organizing large-scale national surveys by using READ Program funds.

So educators in the country try to use information on student achievements to make some important political and practical decisions, such as design and implementation of new curriculum, and assistance and professional development opportunities for lagging teachers and schools to ensure that all students are provided with adequate quality of education.

SUMMARY

In general, Kyrgyzstan’s achievements in introducing new student assessment initiatives are not so impressive as we wished, and currently we do first steps in this way. Nowadays, our educators have proper understanding of the need for changing goals of education, as well as the political will required to make these changes happen. New initiatives in education field should become an important component of the political and social development of the Kyrgyz Republic. The efforts to establish a new political structure, to cope with a changing economic environment, to build a new

civic and social order is still underway, demanding much of the financial and human resources of the country and the attention of our policy makers. But at the same time almost all developments are being implemented with the donors' support, because there is no specific financing in the budget for assessment.

We still need more **effective quality assurance mechanisms** for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of new initiatives and results. These mechanisms and instruments should be based on the principles of transparency and accountability as well as on education strategic goals. The other important prerequisite is the public awareness of the changes. Now everybody in the country – from the President to teachers and parents – expresses his/her concern about the current situation in the schools. We hope that all these will help us to reach our goals, and introduction of a new assessment across the country will inevitably lead to the formation of a citizen capable of an informed choice, including the political one.

Kyrgyzstan is one of the beneficiary countries of the READ Trust Fund in cooperation with the Russian Government and the World Bank. Participation in the READ Program is very relevant and timely for Kyrgyzstan. Main objective of the Program is to assist with building capacity of institutions responsible for student assessment and using information collected during such assessments. The Program helps to improve quality of education through forming and transforming the more efficient national assessment system with other stakeholders. In addition, the Program supports improving technical quality of the existing assessment instruments, as well as strengthening or creating mechanisms (policies) of using assessment results with a view to improve learning and teaching performance (4). We hope that the READ program will help solving a number of issues related to the reform of the education system in our country.

In spite of some achievements in the area, we are at the initial stage of the assessment “journey”. Therefore, we need to see other countries' experience to avoid mistakes.

This paper is just a brief description of the situation in Kyrgyzstan's education. Comprehensive analysis of the system including secondary analysis of the findings of the international and national large-scale surveys is under way.

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