

Leveraging Teachers' Assessment Practice to Advance India's Educational Vision and Mission

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Abstract

India published a transformative vision for the Indian education system in 2005 (National Curriculum Framework, 2005) that articulated a desire and directive for learner-centered (LC) education. A main goal of the framework was to diminish the heavy influence of an “overpowering examination system” (p. 49) on teaching and learning. Fifteen years since, although policy and capacity building efforts to achieve this goal have been swift and substantial (e.g., Continuous and Comprehensive Improvement, 2009), classroom practice remains largely teacher directed (Sriprakash, 2009). Consistent with literature in the Indian context, we posit that transforming the education system requires facilitating change from the ground up (Batra, 2006; Setty, 2014; Ratnam, 2013). To this end, we systematically examined key documents including the framework, assessment and evaluation policy, and evidence of capacity building efforts (Appendix A) with a specific question: *how can we leverage the role of classroom assessment and teachers' assessment practices to meet the vision for learner-centered education?* We conducted a deductive content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Taylor, 2004) based on a rigorously-derived model for teachers' assessment literacy in practice called TALiP (Xu & Brown, 2016). The framework allowed us to analyze the multidimensional nature of teachers' assessment practice. Preliminary findings indicate that policy and practice focus largely on developing teachers' knowledge about sound assessment practice; however critical elements including fostering critical reflection and teacher dispositions toward assessment in a way that aligns with learner-centered pedagogy is not articulated. The paper will discuss key findings from the study with implications for supporting teachers' assessment practice to meet the transformative intent of India's national curriculum framework.

Introduction

India's current National Curriculum Framework was introduced in 2005 (NCF, 2005) with an aim to overhaul India's education system. A main goal driving the educational reform efforts toward LC education is to alleviate the harmful effects of an “overpowering examination system” (p. 49) on teaching and learning (and student well being¹). In this paper, we posit that classroom assessment practices are vehicles to effectively advancing the implementation of a LC curricula. Through our analysis and findings, we argue that the policy conditions are optimal whereas the delivery system of curricular policy grossly inadequate. The paper aligns with studies that have called for the need to place the agency of teachers and teacher education at the center of the enactment of NCF. First, we describe the nature and role of assessment and

evaluation in the NCF. Then, we continue examining evidence of how the policy has been enacted in teacher training and education documents. We attribute implementation issues to the “delivery system” that transmits the vision of the NCF to school systems and teachers.

A constraint in enacting a transformative vision in the context of ingrained cultural beliefs and practices about teaching and learning contradictory to the vision. For example, in a study of student teachers’ beliefs and use of a LC approach to teaching in Malawi (Mtika & Gates, 2010), student teachers reported that they knew and understood the curricular expectations for a LC approach. However, they encountered clear contradictions in their teacher education program that was predominantly teacher directed; in their schools that adopted a teacher-centered approach; and, in dealing with students who were unfamiliar or resistant to LC instruction. Thus, a transmissive or teacher-directed approach dominated classroom discourse in the Nigerian context despite LC educational reform and teacher preparation. This apparent failure of LC approaches in nonwestern contexts is well documented. Schweisfurth (2011) studied 72 implementations of LC educational reform efforts worldwide and concluded thus: “the stories of unequivocal success in implementation (of LC education) are few and far between” (p. 429). In the Indian context, Sriprakash (2009, 2010) examined the pedagogical practices of early primary school teachers on how they enacted policy directives about child-centered teaching and learning. She found that teachers largely maintained power and agency over classroom discourse but interpreted their actions as aligned with student-centeredness. Sriprakash concluded thus from her observations:

Valued learning remained the written output of given sentences. This was perhaps not arrived at in the ‘direct’ way of a traditional pedagogy, but through a reinterpreted child-centered practice. With terminal objectives for the lesson (by the tightly framed syllabus structure which governed lesson outputs), there was a pulling back towards performance discourses and practices. We saw this in how the differentiation of students was interpreted through an ability discourse, the appeal of ‘joyful’ child-centeredness was understood as a compensatory discourse, and the non-involvement of the teacher was legitimized by the supposed independence and responsibility of students. – Sriprakash, 2010, p. 303

However, Thompson (2013) contested the notion that LC approaches are western concepts that do not apply to teaching and learning contexts in non-western developing countries. Thompson draws upon Schweisfurth (2011)’s work to make a case for cultural translation to bridge the universal idea of LC education and the educational practices of a context. Thompson illustrates this process by describing a qualitative practitioner research study in Nigeria. In this study, Thompson presented LC (termed social constructivism) approach as a western concept that was desired by a non-western educational system. Thompson presents cultural translation as a strategy to “sell” a worthy western idea but encourages systematic critical dialogue with individuals in a target setting to understand how ideas are likely to play out. Like Mtika & Gates (2010), Thompson found three ways that Nigerian teachers made sense of their pedagogical practice: learner-centered or constructivist, teacher-centered or transmissive,

and more commonly, pragmatic where teachers' support for learner-centeredness was constrained by external factors that supported a transmissive approach.

Parents, institutions of higher learning, and employers are other stakeholders who are not necessarily oriented to the LC vision. The expectations of these stakeholders also shape individual and systemic approaches to teaching and learning. Tests used by colleges, universities, and employers are high stakes for individuals that can make or break opportunities for social and economic mobility. In a society that relies on education as the primary way to attain upward social mobility, parents may be resistant to changes that appear to cater to constructivist notions of student autonomy and activity-based learning. They may also be wary of qualitative evaluation criteria that are harder to interpret compared to scores or marks. However, very little is known about parent perspectives on the curriculum framework. An article by Rajesh (2002) that presented such a perspective had an unfavorable view toward several focal points of the curriculum framework. Absent from the article was the mention of examinations or examination reform, a predominant feature of the curriculum framework. There is a need to consider parents as important stakeholders in educational reform.

Current conditions in the preparation of teachers and the enormous overhaul needed to bring about the changes envisioned in the curriculum need to be considered. Ratnam (2013) provides a historical and cultural account of the evolution of teachers and teaching in the Indian context. Her interest in the cultural history and its influence on cognition sheds light on the transmissive nature of teaching and learning prevalent today. This transmissive pedagogy is not only antithetical to NCF's vision, it is harmful because it reinforces hierarchical structures and control of the learning process at the hands of the teacher. Sociological inquires of pedagogical practices in early primary grades in the state of Karnataka have shown that teaching practices continue to perpetuate control in ways that undermine student-centeredness (Sriprakash, 2009, 2010). There was significant messaging through policy and teacher preparation that demanded child-centered teaching and learning; yet, in the excerpts analyzed by Sriprakash (2010), a transmissive nature of teacher-student interactions was evident even in student-led class activities.

While Ratnam's findings are relevant to understanding teaching and learning processes, her primary motivation for the analysis was to examine how teachers learn to teach i.e, positioning teachers as learners. How do teachers learn about teaching? What is taught, how is it taught, and how does it translate into practice? There is plenty of evidence from the study of teacher learning that shows a remarkable contradiction between preparing teachers to become LC educators. As seen in the study conducted by Mtika & Gates (2010) the learning experiences of these teachers were set in teacher-directed methods and devoid of LC opportunities for the trainees. We draw from this body of literature to center our study on discourse related to assessment and evaluation.

Method

We engaged in a systematic study of policy documents using content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We conducted the analysis using two separate strategies. First, we did a careful

keyword search using words and phrases of interest to the study: assessment, examination, evaluation, child centered, teacher preparation, teacher quality Next, we created a codebook comprised of the key ideas presented in Xu & Brown (2016)'s framework on teacher assessment literacy. In this step, we deductively applied the codes to text segments. These two steps enabled us to capture relevant passages in all the documents. An alternate method would have been to inductively code each text segment; however, this approach was not practical because it would be time consuming and would generate an overwhelming number of codes. Such a strategy is ideal for a comprehensive policy analysis. Since we had a clear research question and focus our approach was appropriate.

We gathered key documents based on the following criteria that the documents were: 1) publicly available 2) authored by an appropriate government authority 3) directly relevant to the study purpose 4) reflected the most current position or policy for educational reform. All documents were obtained in electronic format through multiple web searches. We selected eight documents for the content analysis.

We used Atlas.ti 8 qualitative data analysis software which allowed us to generate quotations and frequencies of coded data. This enabled a descriptive and comparative analysis. To enhance the trustworthiness of our process and findings (Shenton, 2004), our analysts engaged in deliberations in every step of the analytic process. The data analyst first coded each document, followed by a discussions of the coded segments. The analysts engaged in revisions based on the discussion. Our keyword analysis showed patterns that also helped us verify that our coding process was appropriate and valid; for example, the large presence of the code '*teacher preparation*' in the position paper statement on teacher education made sense in contrast to very few occurrences of that keyword in the continuous and comprehensive evaluation document.

We primarily relied on analytic reports generated by Atlas.ti to engage in a descriptive study of the policy documents. We make inferences by comparing the emphasis of each component of Xu & Brown's (2016) assessment literacy framework in the documents. We then present considerations to support teacher assessment literacy.

Findings

We present findings in three parts. First, the results of the keyword search are presented to provide an idea of the focus of the documents that we studied. Next, we present patterns observed in the content analysis using the TALiP framework. Finally, we present major themes that emerged from analyzing the content of the coded text segments.

Part 1: The keywords were identified using an automatic search feature in Atlas.ti. The analyst combed through each occurrence to ensure it was relevant before counting the keyword. We have three types of keywords that references evaluation and assessment; teacher education; and learner-centered education. Table 1 provides a report of absolute and relative frequencies of each keyword produced in each document.

Next, we present a descriptive analysis of occurrences of codes related to the TALiP framework (See Table 2). The frequencies of codes attributed to each document may represent the priority given by each document to each attribute in the framework. The framework's five categories include basic knowledge about assessment and its use, institutional context, compromises related to assessment in practice, teacher conceptions of assessment, teachers' assessor identity, and teacher learning and reflective practice about assessment. Overall, the major category that was the focus in the set of documents was teachers' knowledge about assessment practice (n = 280). Institutional and sociocultural context was the second most frequently coded category (n = 95); teacher conceptions of assessment and the compromises categories occurred only 14 times across all the documents respectively. Teacher learning and assessor identity based on contextual needs occurred 46 and 37 times respectively.

Examining the emphasis of each category by documents provides corroboration and contributes to our inferences on the need for policy to explicitly consider key ideas that promote assessment literacy presented in the TALiP framework. The descriptive analyses is provided for each element of the framework and we report cross comparisons across each type of document viz., curriculum, evaluation, and teacher education.

Knowledge about assessment. Consistent with the overall trends, references related to building teachers' knowledge of assessment essential to their instructional practice were dominant in all the documents with at least 25% of codes attributable to each document belonged to this category. For documents related to assessment and evaluation, the occurrences ranged from 48% to 81% of the coded passages which means that the majority of the codes related to developing teachers' knowledge about assessment practices. Other aspects of the framework appeared less frequently, but there was variability in the emphasis shown in each document for these codes. The documents on teacher education addressed all aspects of the framework. This is expected since the documents directly relate to the preparation of teachers for instruction and assessment.

Teacher conceptions of assessment. Teacher conceptions of assessment accounted for about 5% of the codes in the teacher education documents; in the evaluation documents, this category was especially lacking with only about 2% of the codes attributed in the NCERT examination reform position paper. In the curricular policy documents, about 5% of codes are associated with the NCF and is lacking in the state curriculum document. This demonstrates a lacking emphasis on addressing teacher beliefs toward assessment in all three aspects of policy.

Institutional and sociocultural context of assessment. This was the second most frequently occurring category of the framework that occurred across all documents except the state curricular policy and the teacher's manual on CCE. About 52% of the codes in the CCE Trainer's manual related to this category highlighting that training emphasized on transmitting policy directives to teachers.

TALiP Core. The need to balance the demands of contextual and individual assessment related expectations was present in the teacher education documents. The NCF and exam reform position papers made cursory references to this aspect (5% of codes in the document), and the

references to this aspect was absent in the CCE trainer's manual, teacher's manual, and the state curriculum document indicating that manifestation of the policy in these documents did not consider the core idea of the TALiP framework that defines teachers' assessment practice.

Teacher learning. Fostering reflective assessment practice and teacher learning was the third most frequent code category that mostly occurred in the teacher education documents, the curricular documents, and the CCE documents. The trainer's manual did not make any references related to teacher learning and reflection.

Assessor identity. In the pyramid of the framework, identifying and negotiating an assessor identity lies at the top. This aspect accounted for approximately a quarter of the codes in the teacher education documents. In the curriculum and evaluation documents, references to this aspect were minimal not exceeding 8% in any one document.

Finally, we present an analysis of the content covered in each of the framework components. Table 3 illustrates the nature of the content using example quotations for each of three types of documents. Two major themes emerged that indicated the vision for assessment in the education system. Content in the evaluation and teacher education documents present an under-representation and even a contrast view of the vision evidenced in the policy documents. We analyzed this pattern for each aspect of the TALiP framework.

Learner-centered education is a core aim of the policy reform that permeates the discourse in policy documents. This focus is absent from curriculum and evaluation training documents.

Attention was given to learner preferences and child-centered teaching in the curriculum documents to inform policy. In particular, there was an emphasis on supporting authentic learning experiences that brought the outside world and the realities of children's lives into the classroom to undergird teaching, learning, and assessment. The teacher education documents reflect these ideals well. They describe coursework that aim to educate student teachers about the sociocultural context and realities of the students, even in their assessment practice. The curriculum documents also outlined the logistics that would guide the move toward comprehensive evaluation. The evaluation documents including the CCE Trainer's Manual focus exclusively on these logistics and transmission of the examination policies to support continuous and comprehensive evaluation. Absent from the evaluation documents (particularly the CCE teacher's manual) is the learner-centeredness and sociocultural contextual issues emphasized in curriculum and teacher education.

Reducing the high stakes, hyper focus on examinations was a core aim of the policy reform, however, discourse aimed at changing teachers' mindset and supporting positive assessment practices was limited in the training manual.

Another underlying theme evident in the curriculum policy is to reduce the emphasis on examination-based education and make assessment an integral part of teaching and learning. Central to this idea is the focus on the child, a child's context, and holistic development. Our analysis indicate that according to curriculum documents, the vision of the policy requires teachers to adopt a learner-focused assessment practice as they learn about and implement

continuous and comprehensive evaluation through internal and formative assessment. These ideas are reflected in the teacher education curricular documents; however, the CCE training materials focus on conveying administrative and logistical implications of CCE to trainers and teachers. There was very limited discourse explicitly addressing teachers' conceptions of assessment, realizing their assessor identity, and engaging in reflective practice.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings show the use of the TALiP framework to examine how teachers' assessment literacy might be expressed in education policy. Our aim was to examine how the vision articulated in policy documents are reflected in teacher training and education. Our specific focus was on assessment literacy. Given that the main goal for educational reform was to curtail the role of high stakes examinations in Indian education, we approached the analysis with the assumption that any overhaul in the assessment and evaluation system requires drastic changes to teacher practice. Research on teacher perceptions and implementation of CCE is limited, but studies have found that teachers are not adequately prepared and the vision to make assessment a part of teaching and learning has not been realized in the last fifteen years. In the discourse related to assessment and evaluation, we found a solid transmission of policy initiatives to teacher training; we found an emphasis on tangible policy changes and teacher knowledge about the purpose and use of assessment; similarly, all documents consider important sociocultural and institutional contexts and policies related to assessment practice. Overall, there is an under emphasis on the change in mindset needed to help realize the policy vision at the classroom level. In particular, TALiP frames this in terms supporting teacher conceptions of assessment and assessor identity. Further, the discourse in training and education documents are particularly missing the crucial aim to foster assessment practices integrated with teaching and learning. As we continue to engage in further analysis, we conclude by noting that the transformative aim of policy initiatives should be purposely conveyed during implementation. Evaluations of policy reform success should consider whether the intended vision of the policy has been implemented. There is a need for extensive empirical research in this regard (Ratnam, 2013).

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Tables & Figures

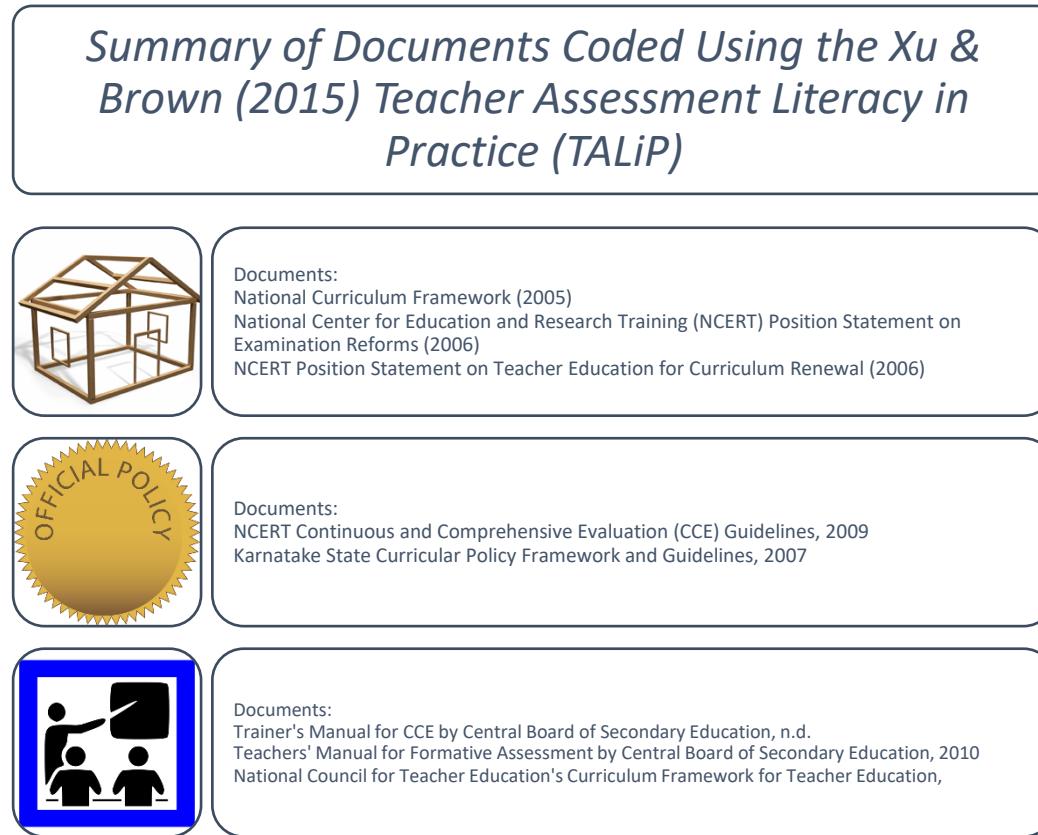


Figure 1. The list of documents used in the policy analysis. All documents were publically available and obtained from government websites.

Table 1. *Frequencies and percentages of keyword occurrences by document*

Keyword	Assessment-related terms			Learner-Centered Education Terms			Teaching and Teacher Education		
	Assessment	Examination	Evaluation	Child-centered	Teacher directed	Teacher as learner	Teacher responsibility	Teacher Quality	Teacher Preparation
Overall Count	371 (21.52%)	371 (21.52%)	296 (17.17%)	71 (4.12%)	9 (.52%)	16 (.93%)	93 (5.39%)	57 (3.31%)	230 (13.34%)
Document									
Curriculum									
NCF	11.45%	21.49%	11.04%	6.02%	0.60%	1.41%	9.24%	4.82%	18.27%
Karnataka State Curriculum Framework	9.59%	23.29%	9.59%	6.85%	2.05%	2.05%	4.79%	14.38%	19.18%
Evaluation									
NCERT Position Paper: Exam Reform	12.16%	54.14%	9.94%	0.00%	0.00%	1.10%	1.66%	2.21%	0.55%
CCE Trainer's Manual	35.67%	25.73%	23.98%	1.17%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
NCERT CCE Guidelines	48.67%	7.96%	30.09%	7.08%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.88%
Teacher Education									
NCERT Position Paper on Teacher	2.87%	2.87%	5.75%	6.32%	0.00%	0.58%	9.77%	4.60%	60.92%

Education									
NCTE BEd Curriculum	50.79%	7.94%	1.59%	6.35%	4.76%	3.18%	9.52%	0.00%	4.76%

Table 2. Proportion of codes attributed to each aspect of the TALiP framework in the documents

TALiP Categories	Assessment Knowledge	Conceptions of Assessment	Sociocultural and Institutional Boundaries	TALiP (art of compromise)	Teacher learning	Assessor Identity
Overall count	280 (58%)	13 (3%)	95 (20%)	14 (3%)	46 (9%)	37 (8%)
Curriculum						
NCF	56%	5%	21%	5%	8%	6%
Karnataka State Curriculum Framework	74%	0%	0%	0%	11%	5%
Evaluation						
NCERT Position Paper: Exam Reform	71% (row relative)	2%	19%	7%	4%	8%
CCE Trainer's Manual	48%	0%	52%	0	0	0
NCERT CCE Guidelines	71%	0%	8%	5%	13%	5%
CCE Teacher's Manual	81%	0%	0%	0%	14%	5%
Teacher Education						
NCERT Position Paper on Teacher Education	24%	5%	32%	24%	15%	24%
NCTE BEd	40%	5%	23%	16%	16%	24%

Curriculum

Table 3. *Example quotes illustrating each aspect of the framework in the documents*

Framework Category	Curriculum	Evaluation	Teacher Education
Knowledge of Assessments	A good evaluation and examination system can become an integral part of the learning process and benefit both the learners themselves and the educational system by giving credible feedback. NCF 2005	Exams and learning systems that require rote are unlikely to stimulate students, create interest in them to attend, or make them feel that they are learning skills useful to their later life. – NCERT Position Paper	Several kinds of appraisals take place in the form of self appraisal, peer appraisal, teachers’ positive feedback and formal evaluation at the end of the year. All appraisals aim at improvement and understanding one’s own strength and weaknesses, to understand what has to be strengthened and identify the next goals in the learning process. –NCERT Teacher Ed Position Paper
	It is important to allow making errors and mistakes to remain an integral part of the learning process and remove the fear of not achieving ‘full marks’	Involving children by giving more and more opportunities in planning, conducting and evaluating different tasks helps build skills of self and peer assessment among them which in turn, reduces teachers’ burden to a large extent. NCERT CCE Guidelines	
	The purpose of evaluation is not to motivate children to study under threat.		
Sociocultural and Institutional Policies/Issues	Currently, the board examinations negatively influence all testing and assessment throughout the school years, beginning with pre-school –NCF 2005	Child centered teaching learning and assessment under CCE depends, to a large extent, on the school and classroom environment, which needs to be child	These expectations suggest that teacher operates in a larger context and its dynamics as well as concerns impinge upon her functioning. That is to say, teacher has to

	<p>Any meaningful report on the quality and extent of a child's learning needs to be comprehensive. We need a curriculum whose creativity, innovativeness, and development of the whole being, the hallmark of a good education makes uniform tests that assess memorised facts and textbook -based learning obsolete. NCF 2005</p>	<p>friendly and free from any elements that promote fear, anxiety or trauma among children in any manner. NCERT CCE Guidelines</p> <p>To clarify to the participants the processes and procedures that will be adopted for summative and formative assessment in scholastic and co-scholastic areas. – CCE Trainer’s Manual</p>	<p>be responsive and sensitive to the social context of education, the various disparities in background of learners as well as in the macro national and global contexts, national concerns for achieving the goals of equity, parity, social justice as also excellence – Position Paper</p> <p>...the course will support student-teachers in understanding the psycho-social and political dimensions of assessment. NCTE Bed Curriculum</p>
TALiP	<p>Such evaluation places a lot of demand on teachers' time and ability to maintain meticulous records if it is to be meaningfully executed and if it is to have any reliability as an assessment. – NCF 2005</p> <p>Unless a system is adequately geared for such assessment, it is better for teachers to engage in more limited forms of evaluation, but incorporating into them more</p>	<p>This system of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation was recommended to identify the learning needs, difficulties and conceptual gaps to provide timely and appropriate interventions to reduce the stress and anxiety and enhance learning to help all children progress - NCERT CCE Guidelines</p>	<p>--</p>

	features that will make the assessment a meaningful record of learning. – NCF 2005		
Teacher Conceptions of Assessment	<p>This preoccupation with the examination, and its deleterious effect on learning, needs to be reviewed and challenged.</p> <p>Sometimes head teachers object, claiming that correction in the presence of the child reduces 'objectivity'. This is a misplaced concern for 'objectivity', stemming from a competitive system that believes in judging children. Such a concern for 'objectivity' is misplaced in evaluation, which is consistent with educational goals.</p>	--	<p>As an individual in society one has different identities – gender, relational, cultural – and it is important to address one's implicit beliefs, stereotypes and prejudices resulting from these identities. It is important for the student-teachers to be aware of their identities and the political, historical, and social forces that shape them. – NCTE B.Ed Curriculum</p>
Teacher Learning	<p>Exercises, both individual and collective, can be designed to enable them to reflect on and assess their learning experiences. – NCF 2005</p> <p>Teachers need to ... view learning as a search for meaning out of personal experience, and knowledge</p>	<p>While teachers daily reflect, plan and implement remedial strategies, the child's ability to retain and articulate what has been learned over a period of time also requires periodic assessment. CCE Teachers' Manual</p>	<p>This is one of the greatest challenges before the Indian system and this course will prepare prospective teachers to critically look at the prevalent practices of assessment and selection, and instead develop enabling processes which lead to better learning and more confident</p>

Assessor Identity	generation as a continuously evolving process of reflective learning. NCF 2005	This system would not just pay lip service to teacher empowerment but actually trust him/her to be the primary evaluator of her students	and creative learners. The concern for curriculum renewal emerges from the tenacious character of an education system that continues to view teachers as ‘dispensers of information’ and children as ‘passive recipients’ of an ‘education’ that is sought to be ‘delivered’ in four-walled classrooms. – NCERT Position Paper Critiques of current managerial discourses on ‘high stake testing’, competitive ranking of schools, and pressures for teacher accountability which lead to their disempowerment will be discussed in the context of growing commercialisation of assessment. – NCTE BEd curriculum
