

EXAMINATION REFORMS

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Introduction

Come the month of March and the temperature soars, so does the anxiety of students as examinations approach. This is followed by a mad rush to score more and more marks. This cycle is repeated every year. We have been brought up being told to study well, so that we score high in the examinations. The comparison among peers and their parents based on the examination marks is not only rampant in Indian society but throughout the world. The kids have been made to believe that the higher they score; higher are their prospects of getting employed.

Education is often linked to employment and earning livelihood. The problem today is that the examination system has also become a victim of consumerism. The personality of the student is often valued less or more on the basis of the marks scored by him/her in the examination. The grim side of the examinations is that instead of being used as a pedagogic tool they are being used for elimination of people opting for higher jobs or higher education. This accelerates a mad race and unhealthy competition in order to get highest marks/grades from primary classes onwards.

Instead of using education for a holistic balanced development of an individual enshrined with strong moral values, it is often being used to

obtain certificates for procuring good jobs. This defeats the very purpose of education.

Jiddu Krishnamurti points out that, 'There is no end to education. It is not that you read a book, pass an examination and finish with education. The whole of the life from the moment you are born to the moment you die is process of learning'. Assessment and evaluation are two words which are used synonymously. Evaluation in our education process remains the termination point ritual in our schools. The basic purpose of the examination is to identify the level the student has reached at a certain point of time. While evaluation may help to find out the improvement over a time period, it may also suggest the points on which attention is needed in order to further increase the level of attainment.

Various policy documents have highlighted the ways in which examination in school system be conducted/held. In fact, when we look back as to how examination evolved in our country we need to remember the ancient times when '*Gurukul*' education was followed. In this system, evaluation was based on day-to-day progress, behaviour and activities of the students as observed by the teacher. The pupil was considered as an individual, a human being in flesh and blood rather than merely a roll number as treated in present examination

system. This observation although subjective was highly reliable and valid because it observed the student keenly rather than observing at a specific point of time or time intervals.

In colonial era, the Britishers imposed what is termed as external examination. The wisdom of existing system to trust the teacher was questioned and this system was labelled as subjective.

With the Woods Dispatch of 1854, the '*Pathshalas*', the '*Madarsas*' and existing system of internal examination were undermined and gradually switched over to an external collective examination. The prerequisite to have an artificial qualification for pursuing higher education also added to the importance of external examination system. This system was systematic and step-wise and hence had an easier acceptability with the masses.

Post 1947, the university commission raised the concern that external examination is not the only one to assess students and the overall assessment throughout the year should be taken into the account. It recommended 1/3rd of total marks to be internally assessed.

In 1952, the Mudaliar Commission recommended that the certificates awarded to the students should also include the evaluation of personality attributes and the score/results of the school tests. All India Council for Secondary Education was created on the recommendation of the Mudaliar Commission. It focused on three issues namely science education, examination reform and In-service teacher education.

In a seminar convened at Bhopal in 1956, termed as National Seminar on Examination Reforms, it was recommended that 20 per cent marks should be for internal assessment. But, with its implementation in the states it was wrongly

used to boost marks rather than focusing on assessing throughout the year; this led to withdrawal of the scheme by the implementing states one by one.

Conclusions of almost every major committee constituted to review the education system from time to time, always pointed out that if we wish to move towards the goal of comprehensive educational reform then, reform in the examination system is a critical issue. It is widely accepted that the present examination system is the reflection of the way teaching- learning takes place. Efforts of policy-makers and teachers for improving classroom teaching- learning transaction remain futile for want of one time terminal examination system without accompanying examination reforms.

Before the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, the Narsimha Rao Committee was formulated. The most important aspect of Narsimha Rao Committee report on examination reform is that for each measure of examination reforms suggested by it gives the benefits that will yield to education.

The Kothari Commission was the basis for the development of the NPE 1966 and also that of the NPE 1986.

National Policy on Education 1986/1992

In the light of objectives of examination as stated in section 8.23 and 8.24 of NPE, examination reforms are the need of the hour.

8.23. Assessment and performance is an integral part of any process of learning and teaching. As part of Secondary Educational strategy – Examinations should be employed to bring about qualitative improvement in education.

8.24. The objective will be to recast examination system so as to ensure a method of assessment that is valid and reliable measure of student's development and a powerful instrument for improving teaching and learning. In functional terms, this would mean:

- i. The elimination of excessive element of chance and subjectivity.
- ii. The de-emphasis of memorisation.
- iii. Continuous and comprehensive evaluation that incorporates both scholastic and non-scholastic aspects of education.
- iv. Effective use of evaluation process by teachers, students and parents.
- v. Improvement in the conduct of examination.
- vi. The introduction of concomitant changes in instructional material and methodology.
- vii. Insertion of the Semester System from the secondary stage in a phased manner, and
- viii. The use of grades in place of marks.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF-2005) traces the source of a wide range of systemic ills in the public examination system. The NCF attributes the social Darwinist ideology (which says that only the fittest should survive) of our system to the manner in which examinations are conducted. The ideology of social Darwinism is totally incompatible with the Constitution's vision which asks us to regard every child as a valued participant in the democratic order. If we were guided by the Constitution, we would nurture whatever potential a child has, rather than stigmatise millions by labelling them 'failed'. The NCF also criticises the examination system as an obstacle to curricular reform.

The NCERT's textbooks require a whole new approach to evaluation. These new textbooks

based on constructivist approach, encourage children to reflect on problems, to recognise multiple perspectives and promote critical thinking. The kind of learning such textbooks encourage cannot be evaluated through the ritual of our traditional examination system. Evaluation is an indispensable part of the educational process as some form of assessment is necessary to determine the effectiveness of teaching-learning processes and their assimilation by learners. Term-end examinations are largely inappropriate for the 'knowledge society' of the 21st century and its 'need for innovative problem solvers'. Questions if not framed well, "call for rote memorisation and fail to test higher-order skills like reasoning and analysis, lateral thinking, creativity and judgement. External exams make no allowance for different types of learners and learning environments and induce an inordinate level of anxiety and stress". (NCF – Position Paper on Examination Reforms)

This calls for a functional and reliable system of school-based evaluation.

Examination reforms depend for their success on teachers, especially on how much freedom they will be permitted to exercise and how their responsibility will be defined. This is where a huge systemic challenge lies buried. It consists of giving teachers the autonomy to teach and to equip them, through sensible training, with the capacity to cultivate in children the freedom and the desire to learn. The prevailing system obstructs both these freedoms by assigning a fixed number of periods and marks to each topic in the syllabus.

The NCERT's syllabus did not assign marks to topics, nor did it specify the number of periods within which a topic should be completed. To

do so would have been a violation of the NCF perspective according to which a teacher should have the freedom and the skills of time management so that knowledge can be experientially assimilated by children. The NCF also talks about letting individual children learn at their own different paces, instead of rushing them as a herd from topic to topic, breaking it up into topics and sub-topics, each carrying a specified label of marks and periods thereby, imposing a tight and arbitrary time-frame on teachers.

Whatever little scope there might be in this structure for creative teaching is further constrained by the poor quality of the questions asked. Typically, they are based on the textbook and can be answered correctly by memorisation. The practice of developing model answers further discourages originality and diversity.

Exam Reform: Why is it needed?

- Through examination assessment of learning has restricted itself to the test of cognitive abilities, which is largely inappropriate for the 'knowledge society' of the 21st century and its need for innovative problem-solvers.
- Exams do not serve the needs of Social Justice. Exam systems need to be more flexible. Just as we must ensure that education and assessment systems are fair to all social groups, we should ensure that they do not discriminate against particular kinds of learners. There is a lot of psychological data to suggest that different learners learn differently, and, hence, to test all learners through a written test of the same type in subject after subject is unfair to those whose verbal proficiency is superior to their writing skills, or those who work slowly but with deeper insight, or those who work better in groups than individually.

- Quality of question papers is such that they usually call for rote memorisation and fail to test higher-order skills like reasoning and analysis, let alone lateral thinking, creativity and judgment.
- There is no scope of assessment of non-cognitive abilities and traits.
- There is no flexibility of time, space, content, environment and individual personality traits. Based on a 'one-size-fits-all' principle, they make no allowance for different types of learners and learning environments. We are thus not looking at a micro-level picture of assessment at individual learner's performance per se, rather we look at assessment at a macro-level during assessment of learners as a group.
- Examinations are artificial situations created for the convenience of the system and not the individual learner. Given the time-bound and 'one short' nature, it is not surprising that exams in their current form induce anxiety.
- Lack of full disclosure and transparency in grading and mark/grade reporting.
- Absence of functional and reliable system of school-based assessment and evaluation system.

Examination reforms can address the above challenges for holistic development of child for 21st century catering to the needs of knowledge economy —

1. There should be more varied modes of assessment, including oral testing, group work evaluation, PowerPoint presentation, project work, performance in homework and assignments, participation in co-curricular activities and life skills imbibed by the learners.

2. Do not expect everything of everybody in every subject; just as we allow students and schools some element of choice in choosing their subjects, they should have the choice of picking one of two levels within that subject.
3. Flexibility in when exams are taken. If it is accepted that learners learn at different paces we recommend that students be allowed to clear some subjects at the end of Class XI. This would not only reduce stress a year later but also make for better long-term learning—and cause very little inconvenience to exam boards.
4. Enhanced reporting of performance which takes into account the gradual progress made by the students.
6. Elimination of the term 'fail' on marksheets must be done. It can be replaced by phrases such as unsatisfactory or better needs, more work to attain desired standards.
7. There will always be some individual who cannot demonstrate such satisfactory completion of the examination. So number of chances must be provided to retake one or more examinations. There should be elimination of the pass/fail concept by permitting repeated retake.
8. School-based Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) should be promoted. Teachers should be comprehensively trained through pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes to understand the concept of CCE and affectively practise it in their classrooms.

Reducing Exam Anxiety

1. Periodicity of evaluation and assessment may be increased but duration of exams should be decreased. A lot of stress is related to the excessive length of the question papers and shorter exams leave time for deliberation.
2. Questions that required to draw on two or more areas of the syllabus would also allow more comprehensive testing within lesser time, education after all is about making lateral linkages or creating 'ecology of knowledge in the brain'.
3. A shift in emphasis from 'short answer' to MCQs designed to test real understanding of core concepts.
4. Students should be able to take the exam in their home school in order to reduce stress caused by unfamiliar environments.
5. A long-term move towards open book exams can be promoted with due weightage in overall grading as implemented by CBSE at secondary level.

Following the principle that examinations are an evil, if a necessary one, there should be no exams other than that are strictly and absolutely necessary.

Conclusion

It is an established fact that the performance of students is to a great extent determined by the way in which the curriculum is transacted in the school and in the classroom. If the students are facilitated, motivated and guided to learn in a healthy environment, examinations will not be perceived with the 'Day of Judgment' fear. But, the bitter fact is that the issue of classroom transaction is seldom discussed or highlighted. The point that is being made here is that we have reached a point of time when we should focus our attention on improving the reach of the curriculum, at the heart of which lies a teacher and institution development.

It should be clear from the above that examinations and curriculum transactions in India need serious re-examination, at the same time, it should be recognised that exam reform has the potential to lead educational reform.

Reforming exams alone will attain very little unless it is accompanied by other basic reforms: improvement of pre-service and in-service teacher training, teacher quality and teacher-student ratio.

In the present education system, teachers, instead of assisting learning, spend most of their time in assessing learning. Instead of enabling and equipping students to learn, schools have taken on the function of examining and screening out on the basis of those examinations. So, the need of the hour is to make possible changes in whole education system. Our education system needs examination reforms. Format of exams must be changed. Marks should be given for performance of overall academic year. It should be given on the observable attributes of student, on his/her performance in co-curricular activities, on performance in class test, on

attendance. We need to look at the holistic assessment of a learner which also include Life Skills, Attitudes and Values, Sports and Games as well as Co-curricular activities. The CCE scheme aims at addressing these in a holistic manner.

It is time that parents should stop living their dreams through their children. Helplines have established that more than the fear of examinations, it is the fear of failing parental expectations that is enhancing the stress profile for children. We should also understand that stress is a part of daily existence. In fact, the ability to perform under pressure will make students stand in good stead as they get ready to enter the world of work. To completely isolate them from challenging situations would only result in the insulation of students from the realities of the world, rendering them unfit to face competition later in life. The solution lies in bringing about a more responsive and responsible work culture in schools. An empowered teaching community is vital to all attempts at transforming education through curriculum transactions and examination reforms.

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