

**IMPACT OF PUBLIC EXAMINATION SYSTEM
ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IN PAKISTAN**

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Abstract:

The paper discusses the role of Public Examination at the secondary level in the context of Pakistan. Based on an empirical study, it is argued that examination plays a vital role in determining approaches to teaching and learning and that teachers face great pressures from various stakeholders to gear their teaching to prepare students for passing examinations with good grades. Students are also expected by teachers and parents to sharpen their latent potentials in rote memorizing factual knowledge and reproducing it in the examination. There is little emphasis on testing children's understanding of what they learn and on higher order skills. It suggests that it is through clearly defined objectives of why examinations are conducted and by introducing internal school formative assessment as part of public examination it would help improve the system that would lead to improved teaching and learning and enhanced quality of education.

Introduction

Public examinations are conducted in many countries of the world and have been considered to play a significant role in determining what goes on in the classroom in terms of 'what' and 'how' teachers teach and students learn, and can have an impact on both teaching and learning (Gipps, 1994 & 1996 in Little and Wolf; Black, 1998; Greaney and Hasan 1998; Mirza, 1999; Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Kellaghan and Greaney 2001). Gipps (1994) suggests that the major purpose of assessment is to support the teaching and learning process, but some forms of assessment can clearly impede deep learning (Rehmani, 2000 a).

If the examination stresses understanding and critical approaches to learning, it is likely that students would adopt deep approaches to learning (Entwistle, 1993; Marton, Dalla'Alba, & Beaty, 1993; Marton & Saljo, 1984 in Marton et al (ed. 1997).

Due to the socio-cultural norms and authoritarian attitudes of parents, teachers and elders in Pakistan, children in general are emotionally and psychologically suppressed. They are expected to be passive and blindly obedient which leads to a lack of confidence in them. School culture loads them with lots of homework and poor quality of teaching forces them to take private tuition in addition to formal schooling. Learning, especially in public schools, is mostly curriculum-based and teacher-centered. Children tend to do better in subjects requiring rote memory but do poorly on basic comprehension and understanding. Moreover, the concepts in textbooks are often at a much higher level than the cognitive level of the children for which the books have been written, leaving pupils no choice but to rote-learn them (Hayes, 1987; National Education Policy, 1992; Report on National Textbook Conference, 1994; Warwick and Reimers, 1995; Farooq, 1996)

Public examinations in Pakistan have more demerits than merits. A number of issues related to the examination system have been discussed here which need to be addressed to improve the quality of teaching and learning and education as a whole.

Public Examination System in Pakistan

A number of educationists and researchers have criticized the Public Examination system in Pakistan (e.g. Bhatti, 1987; Warwick and Reimers, 1995; Greaney and Hasan 1998; Mirza, 1999. Greaney and Hasan 1998 have cited a number of unpublished papers, reports and research studies mostly done for the Government of the Punjab).

In Pakistan the first public examinations are held at class IX and X levels which are called Secondary School Certificate Exams (SSCE) and then at grade XI and XII called Higher Secondary School Certificate Exams (HSCE). Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education conduct these examinations. Students of public, most private, NGOs and community based schools sit for these exams. There also exist a different system of public examination at parallel grade levels run by Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) and Edexcel International London Examinations for O' Level (Ordinary level) and A' Level (Advanced level). Some private elite schools follow this system only. Yet other private schools go for both the systems and select 'bright' students whose parents can afford to pay for Cambridge system, whereas, others are asked to go for Matric system. Both systems are poles apart in terms of syllabi, choices of subjects from any discipline, conduct of exams, style and type of papers, reliability and credibility (Naqvi, 2002).

The purpose of public examinations conducted by these Boards is clearly that of promotion, selection and certification and indicates the extent to which learners have covered a prescribed syllabus. For stakeholders at schools it is to pass them with good grades and to bring good name to school. For some schools, teachers and students, passing examination with highest positions become a question of prestige and yet some other may want to get through them by any means. Implicit are accountability purposes on part of school administration especially in non public schools and teachers are rewarded or otherwise depending on the level of achievements. One can not agree more with Gipps (1996) who points out, 'Assessment carried out for these purposes is likely to be more superficial and needs to be more 'objective' or reliable ...' (p.251). These exams are sole determinants of students' future career in pursuing further or higher education or getting into the job market.

The present system of examination is based on summative examination system that drives the curriculum rather than assesses achievement. It is mostly based on assessing factual knowledge rather than students' critical thinking and analytical skills as well as their understanding and comprehension. Thus teachers teach for testing, rather than for learning. The examination system reinforces approaches to teaching that reward memorization. The better the reproduction, the better and higher scores or marks awarded by the examiners. The literature on the subject reveals that there are grave issues in the examination system from paper setting, invigilation, paper marking, tabulation to dissemination of results. Reliability and validity of exam papers in terms of coverage of curriculum, selection of paper setters, lack of training for the paper setters and examiners, marking system and preparation of results are considered dubious (Bhatti, 1987; Warwick and Reimers, 1995; Greaney and Hasan 1998; Mirza, 1999).

Those who set papers may be academically highly qualified persons (school teachers, head teachers and subject specialists) with more than 5 to 10 years of teaching experience but few

have had proper training in paper setting and modern approaches to assessment (Mirza 1999). In his study Mirza found out that quite a good number of paper setters set their papers in one to two hours only. Examiners hardly receive any instructions for scoring the papers, they prefer to check the papers at home and that most markers mark one paper in only 5 to 10 minutes. (p. 21-23).

The exam papers are hardly representative of the entire curriculum. Teachers and students mostly rely on one prescribed textbook.¹ Exam questions are repeated at least every three to five years and hence questions can be predicted. There are ‘model papers’, or ‘guess paper guides’ available in the market with ready made answers based on past five years papers. Teachers and students tend to rely on such guides and put their content to memory. Regurgitation seems to be the only key for students to pass the examination rather than creative thinking and independent analyses. The irony is that those students score higher marks who could reproduce better. This leads to lecture method and curriculum based teaching approaches.

A culture of mal practices and cheating in exams has got currency (Daily Dawn Karachi, April 1 2000). It has also been reported in newspapers that exam papers get leaked out hours before the exam and sold to students (Dawn, June 2, 2001). This is not only at Secondary levels but also at degree levels including M.B.B.S. (Dawn 16 August 2001). Worst scenario is when some unruly students boycott papers on the pretext that they are out of the syllabus and do not let even serious students do their exams. At times invigilators lives become at risk and law enforcement agencies are called upon for security, maintaining discipline and to check mal practices.

Examination thus has become a dreadful thing and an end in itself rather than means to achieve educational objectives of improving teaching and learning and raising standards and quality of education. Students are fearful of exams and at times failing students commit suicide (Daily Dawn Karachi 21 August 2001).

The Government has formulated various policies since 1951 to bring reforms in examination system. Bhatti (1987) lists 18 documents of Commissions, Committees and Education Policies from 1951 to 1984 in which issues related to examination reforms are considered and debated. The emphasis is on internal evaluation, cumulative achievement records, students’ portfolios, open book exams etc. Though many policies have been implemented much is desired yet to put these recommendations in application.

More recently the government has taken stringent measures to curb mal practices, some attempt is being made to bring uniformity among the different Boards. Provincial Assessment Centres (PACs) are to be established (Mirza 1999; Greaney and Hasan 1998). Private publishing companies have been, for the first time, invited to produce text books to increase competition and to give schools choice of selection. Training is to be provided to the Boards and conductors of examination. Bureau of Educational Standards and Training (BEST) would be set to provide academic leadership in assessment.

Despite of all these measures they still fail to address the core issues related to reliability, credibility and using examination to improve quality of education. It can hardly be denied that

¹ The textbooks do not seem to be keeping pace with the time, considering children’s experiences and age level. They are regarded as dreary, insipid, dull and boring, difficult in terms of language and contain factual errors (Saiyid, 2000; Rehmani 2000 b;).

the present examination system needs drastic reforms specially in improving the quality of exam papers that would assess higher order skills and reward answers that are based on various books articulated with understanding and comprehension.

Public Examination and its impact on teaching and learning – A case study

This qualitative study conducted recently in 4 schools of Karachi belonging to four different educational systems i.e. private, public, NGOs and AKESP (Aga Khan Education Services Pakistan) confirm that examination system dictates teaching and learning approaches and hardly play any positive role in improving quality of education. Four head teachers, 8 teachers, and 16 students (four of each school) were interviewed. One of the main questions asked was regarding assessment practices in their schools and whether public examination held at SSC level had any impact on their approaches to teaching and learning.

Keeping in view the scope of this paper findings have been briefly summarised. 95% viewed examination as exerting great pressure on them and on students. All the teachers of the 3 non public schools said that up to class VIII they have some kind of freedom in assessing students. Although there is a pressure of following the curriculum and syllabi, they do use variety of teaching methods encouraging interactive, activity and group-based learning. They rewarded students for their understanding, imagination and creativity and expected them to demonstrate comprehension and applicability of their learning. Students also confirm that although they memorize certain parts such as grammar, their test and exams challenge them. Sharp differences were noted in approaches to assessment in the government school where the head teacher and teachers mostly followed pattern of public examination due to pressures from the administration and parents to complete the syllabus and strictly follow the text books; high teacher student ratio (1: 50); lack of resources and number of examination copies they have to mark. They resort to examination practices that foster rote learning and reproduction of bookish and factual knowledge.

In grade IX and X where students appear for annual board exams the situation in the three non-public systems also gets reversed. It is due to the examination system mentioned above and the fact that schools want to out perform and get good results and parents also wish that their children pass with good ranking. Teachers and students work under considerable pressure. All the research participants of the four schools confirmed that their teaching and learning is totally concentrated to prepare for the Board exams. Teachers said that they are bound to switch their teaching methods to mainly the lecture method and adopt teacher and curriculum centred approaches to teaching and learning. Some even rely on model or guess paper guides available in the markets. Mostly, students adopt surface approach to learning as they are expected to memorize the contents of prescribed textbooks. They look for shortcuts to learning and also use such guides. In the government school, teachers even identify paragraphs from textbooks that answer particular questions.

This study confirms that up to class VIII the internal school assessment system supports teaching and learning approaches and promotes to some extent higher order skills but as soon as they enter into grade IX and X the whole teaching and learning gets driven by the external public examination system.

The findings substantiate what other studies mentioned above have pointed out. It clearly demonstrates that such an examination system drives teachers what and how to teach and forces students to learn without much consideration paid to understanding and comprehension. Their teaching and learning was based on what is called 'Traditional instructional theory' and 'building block' models of learning, which assumed that knowledge and skills could be compartmentalized. Such approaches to teaching and learning could not help in developing problem solving or thinking skills to develop understanding in a holistic way rather it atomizes knowledge. (Gipps, 1994; 1996 in Little and Wolf; Black in Murphy, 1999).

Internal assessment

So far what we have seen is that assessment has been *of* learning, that is, to test students for what ever they have learned without any feedback coming back to them to improve upon their learning because the nature of assessment or examination is external and summative. If we seriously consider bringing reforms to our examination system and address the issues discussed above there is a great need to shift the system from being totally external examination driven to an on-going internal formative assessment (Bhatti, 1987) to enhance learning. Internal assessment could compliment the public examination. It is in this sense that the word assessment has been used here.

Assessment for learning

What is needed here is to introduce assessment which promotes learning. In assessment *for* learning, students' achievement is measured in terms of how much they have learnt, what their weaknesses and strengths are and how they can be helped to improve their learning. It is considered to be 'one of the most powerful educational tools for promoting effective learning' (Assessment Reform Group, 1999 p. 2). It is also called formative assessment. Formative assessment is an instrument used by teachers in giving feedback to their students as to how they are progressing and how they can improve their learning and understanding during a course of action. It helps modify teaching and learning activities in which both teachers and learners are engaged (Black & William, 1998). It may also indicate to teachers of their teaching quality. It is not merely categorizing and grading students for accountability purposes.

Assessment is said to be closely linked with models of learning and impacts on both teaching and learning. (Gipps, 1994; 1996; Black, 1998; Assessment Reform Group, 1999). The major purpose of assessment is and should be to support the teaching and learning process (Gipps 1994). Learning takes place when students are able to make sense of what they learn and construct meaning and interpret it on the basis of their previous knowledge and experience through an active participation in the learning process (Watkins et al 1996 and 1998; Black in Murphy, 1999) and take responsibility of their own individual learning (Hargreaves 2001). This is called the cognitive or constructionist model of learning, in which learning is seen in an integrated and interconnected way allowing students to continuously reorganize and restructure their learning. Learning is thus seen as a process of 'knowledge construction' and 'meaning making' (Gipps, op. cit.).

Ramsden (1992) emphasizes learning that promotes understanding. Assessment, he suggests is measuring students' learning and diagnosing specific misunderstanding in order to help them learn more effectively. Real or deep learning only takes place when it enhances students understanding, enabling them to interpret and apply it in a totally different context than in which it was learnt (Harlen & James, 1997).

The purposes of teaching, learning and assessment are thus interrelated and may be depicted in the following figures:

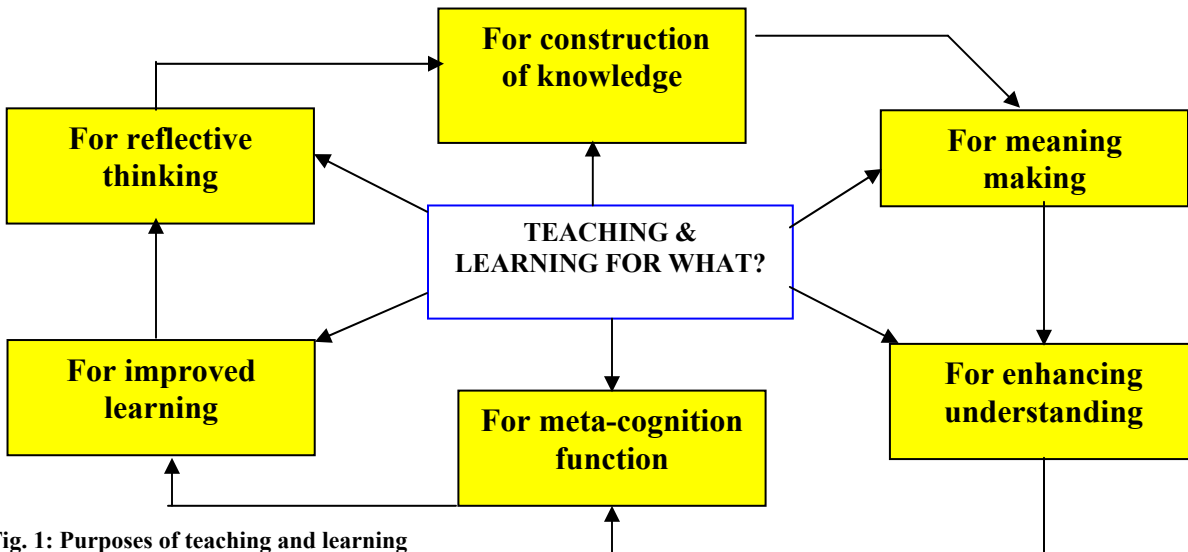


Fig. 1: Purposes of teaching and learning

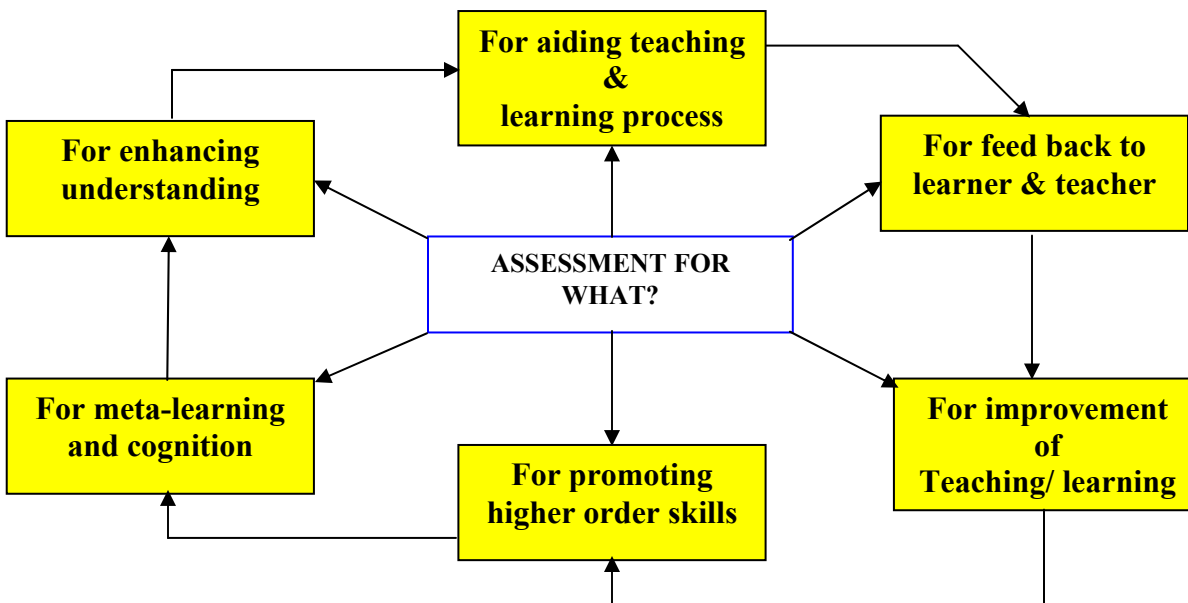


Fig. 2: Purposes of Assessment

It is through the formative assessment that learning can be enhanced and deepened. It thus helps students to self assess their work. Students can be helped in narrowing the gap between their current performance and what needs to be done to achieve the required

standards. In summative assessment students do not get feedback because it happens at the end of a course. Their grade or rank does not properly convey the extent of their learning (Assessment Reform Group, 1999). In formative assessment students still maintain a link with their teacher and continue to learn and improve from the comments and feedback they get which according to Rowentry (1987) is ‘the life blood of teaching’ (p. 24).

A combination of formative and summative assessment

Some regard the formative and summative as two distinct instruments, whereas, others see them as linked in so far as an aggregate record of formative assessment may be used to form the summative assessment (Harlen & James, 1997). This is what I also suggest here:

- ◆ 40% of the public exams to be conducted as internal formative assessment by the respective school on cumulative test result basis and 60% by external summative examination and results may be prepared on aggregate basis.
- ◆ Some policies and modalities of conducting both the examinations would need to be framed.
- ◆ There may be a gap of at least one month in both types of assessment and examination so that students get proper feedback to improve upon their learning.
- ◆ Internal formative assessment will help students to prepare well for the external examination as well as encourage them to demonstrate their latent potentials. They would get confidence and teaching and learning would improve.
- ◆ Both types of evaluation must assess students’ understanding and comprehension and questions must challenge their creativity and imagination. Students must be allowed to prepare their answers from more than one text book and markers must get comprehensive guidelines in this regard.
- ◆ The joint internal and external assessment may also help in curbing mal practices to great extent because students would be better prepared for the external public examination. It would however need some kind of harmony between the two types of papers.
- ◆ For internal assessment a joint invigilation by school and appointed representative of the Boards of Secondary Education would ensure fairness and address issues of validity and reliability in setting papers and marking them.
- ◆ Subject contents may need to be divided and same areas or questions may not be repeated in the external examination. In this way entire or most of the syllabus can be covered.
- ◆ There is much to be learned from the Cambridge system as far as choice of subjects from various disciplines, reliability and credibility of examination are concerned. The

compartmentalization of knowledge into science, arts and commerce may be done away with at least at secondary level.

Conclusion

Public examination system can play a significant role in improving the quality of education when its purposes are not only accreditation for the purpose of accountability, selection and promotion but also for enhancement of teaching and learning. It has been argued that this can be achieved through the combination of both formative and summative assessment. It is hoped that examination in this way would not become a burden and fearsome activity but a means to promote learning which is one of the major objectives of schooling and would lead to improved quality of education. If the pattern of conducting examination were changed, surely it would have greater impact on quality of teaching and learning.

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