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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### CRITICAL REVIEW OF ASSESSMENT APPROACHES OPERATIVE AT SCHOOL LEVEL- A JOURNEY FROM MINIMUM LEVELS OF LEARNING TO LEARNING OUTCOMES

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#### Abstract

Assessment being an inextricable part of any learning process has gone through many ups and downs since independence in India. Transformations have seen from the introduction of Minimum Levels of Learning: to measure a list of competencies as an end product, to the introduction of theoretically sound 'Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE)' to guide the overall learning process of student. With time, many pitfalls and implementation failures have been observed in these approaches of assessment. Thus, the inception of learning outcomes approach after CCE's unexpected implementation failure opens a scope for critical discourse in the field of school education in India. The term 'learning outcomes' reflects a conceptual tension and far less scope of flexibility as propounded by many educationists globally. Thus, the paper attempts to show the post-independence journey of assessment procedures at primary and elementary level in India and critically reflects upon the current learning outcomes approach from national and international perspective to predict its future feasibility and upshots.

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#### Introduction:-

Traditionally, knowledge is commonly viewed as static and absolute in nature and learning as a passive exercise. Accordingly the curriculum tends to be designed and implemented as a collection of facts and truths and assessment as a means to quantify how much and how well these facts have been memorized and reproduced by the students. But with the changing perspective of knowledge in terms of social, cultural and political dimensions as a constructive process of meaning making, contest these absolute and rigid notions of "knowledge", "learning" and "assessment". The assessment process stays within the socio-cultural context, emphasizing upon the diversified needs and ways of knowing and learning and a 'fair' opportunity being provided to all to express their learning throughout this process (Rampal, 2020).

#### What role does assessment plays in education?

Assessment is inextricably embedded in the teaching-learning process. A careful and effective design of assessment could facilitate learning by providing valuable feedback to the learners as well as teachers on their learning process and help external stakeholders to pass a judgement on learner's course of study (AzimPremzi Foundation, 2015).

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At the time of designing assessments, it becomes difficult what purpose does it serve, i.e. formative or summative. Summative assessments are designed to judge a learner's performance at the end of an academic year or a particular course against pre-defined standards. While formative assessments are designed as a part of the on-going learning process and provides a detailed, individualistic and continuous feedback on the learning process of learners. This kind of 'assessment for learning' also helps the learners, teachers and their parents in understanding the process of learning and reframing the teaching strategies and assessment practices as per the individual learner's profile. The kind of assessment also depends upon for whom it is being designed, i.e. for students, governance purposes, institutions, a program and so on (AzimPremzi Foundation, 2015).

### **Transformations in Assessment Approaches at School Level in India**

#### **Important Policies, Commissions and Frameworks: Perspective on Examination Reforms**

The education system of any nation has its foundation based upon the recommendations made by educational policies, national frameworks, various commissions and committees as well as the decisions and conclusions made by the higher bodies and institutions set up for the planning, research and governance of the education system at the school level. The Education Commission (Ministry of Education, Govt. of India, 1964) and Secondary Education Commission (1952) stated the educational system as examination-ridden and reflected upon the crippling effect of external examination on quality of learning and suggested that teaching for successful learning cannot occur without high quality assessment (Ministry of Education, Govt. of India., 1964 & Mudaliar, 1953). Therefore, assessment needs to be integrated in the process of teaching and learning and designed in such a manner that it becomes a powerful means of influencing the quality of what teachers teach and what students learn. Similarly, the National Policy on Education (1968) had mentioned that the major goal of examination reform should be to improve the quality of evaluation system and make it a continuous process for the students to improve their level of performance rather than focusing upon certification. In the queue, the second National Policy on Education (1986) revised in 1992 and Programme of Action (1992) addressed that the reforms in examination have been a subject of serious discussion for quite a time and suggested decentralisation of the operations in examination system; increasing the credibility of the examination system; shift from pass/fail criteria to grade system; open book examination, diagnostic evaluation to be experimented with (Programme of Action, 1992). The Minimum levels of Learning (MLLs) in language, Mathematics and Environmental Studies for classes 1 to V have been developed by Ministry of Education at the national level and the POA (1992) suggested developing the same in the remaining subject areas. It also suggested a flexible scheme of Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation at the elementary stage so as to make the evaluation process an integral part of teaching and learning process (Programme of Action, 1992).

Another remarkable documents, National Curriculum Framework (2005) and Position paper on Examination Reforms (2006) associated the term evaluation with stress, anxiety and examination and accepts that the efforts at redefining curriculum would be of no use if the evaluation and assessment system would not change for good. It deeply identified that CCE would require a great deal of planning at various levels if it is to be meaningfully executed and if it is to have any reliability as an assessment. It explicitly addressed the issues in the examination system as categorisation of students as 'fast' or 'slow' learners; stress-ridden examination system; one size does not fit all and suggested to not expect of everything of every subject from every student; flexibility in when exams should be taken and elimination of pass/fail concept; make use of variety of assessment methods; qualitative feedback; self-evaluation; criterion based assessment, term-wise exams; progress card indicating general observations on health and nutrition, specific observations on the overall progress of the learner, and information and advice for the parents etc.

CCE was then introduced into the school examination system as one of the measures of Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009) and many alterations have been done since then, following which, the latest document on CCE published by NCERT in 2019 was designed to keep it abreast with the learning outcomes designed in various curricular areas in 2017. It provides information to help different practitioners to understand and overcome the misconceptions related to CCE supported with detailed insights on 'What', 'Why', 'How' aspect of CCE as well as provides exemplary 'Rubrics' for evaluation in consonance with the learning outcomes with a focus on bringing inclusivity and quality into the system. Parallel to this, the National Education Policy (2020) envisages transforming the culture of coaching, rote memorisation and checking content knowledge of students to the flexible and competency based assessment system where learning outcome and indicators would guide the course of learning and suggested to establish a National Assessment Center (PARAKH) and report cards of students with 360-degree coverage.

A brief timeline of important policies, frameworks and commissions on the examination reforms at the school level provides a backdrop to how different assessment approaches came into existence which is reflected upon in a detailed manner ahead.

### **From Minimum Levels of Learning (MLLs) to the Inception of Learning Outcomes Approach**

Special focus on educational achievement and quality of education began in India when National Council of Educational Research & Training (NCERT) in collaboration with the UNICEF, worked upon the projects on 'Primary Education Curriculum Renewal' and 'Developmental Activities in Community Education and Participation' in 1978 and laid down Minimum Learning Continuum (NCERT, 1991). This continuum included learning outcomes to be achieved by the students studying in class 2, 3, 4 and 5. Considering the evidences collected from these projects and the recommendations of the National Policy on Education (1986), NCERT developed another document named 'Minimum Levels of Learning at Primary Stage' (NCERT, 1991). The vision behind formation of MLLs was to reduce the disparities in terms of caste, class, creed, and promote equity by providing a standard access to education to all children of primary stage. The government laid down the MLLs which specified the standards to be achieved by all learners in various grades of the primary stage in three curricular areas of language, mathematics and environmental sciences (NCERT, 1991). But critics have argued that the philosophical and conceptual basis of the MLL concept was flawed in many ways as stated in a report titled 'Status of Learning Achievement in India' published by Azim Premji Foundation in 2004.

A radical shift has been observed in the process of learning and teaching as a construction of knowledge rather than focusing upon the competencies and product oriented evaluation. Soon, the MLL concept was found to have a limited scope for the overall development and assessment of the learners as well as equally focusing upon the affective and psychomotor domains of learning. In order to address these changes and bring them into the system, NCERT undertook an exercise to frame 'Learning Outcomes' for classes 1- 8 in all the subjects (NCERT, 2017) based upon the long term grade and subject-wise curricular expectations and suggested pedagogical processes.

It is pertinent to reflect upon the major assessments related initiatives taken in between the era of MLLs and the concept of learning outcomes before jumping upon the conclusion.

### **Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), Non-Detention Policy (NDP) & Admission in Age Appropriate Class (AAAC): Major Initiatives under RTE Act, 2009**

More than a decade ago, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, highlighted a shift in the paradigm of learning (NCF, 2005). Children as active learners than passive consumers of knowledge; construction of knowledge as a natural process within the environment; learning- a meaning making process by exploring, inventing, enquiring, reflecting and deciding wisely, were the few highlights of this shift (Sharma, 2015).

Keeping that in mind, the Ministry of Education (MoE) earlier known as Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) advised the academic authority in one of its advisory notice that apart from following ABL (Activity Based Learning) methodology, Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) system involves creating profile for each child by focusing upon five major tools, namely, the engagement of child with others and oneself; overall observation; observation pertaining to group activities as well as individual activities; understanding of child's written responses on teacher assigned activities and recording anecdotes (MHRD, 2012). CCE in itself was proved to be a well thought shift in the assessment system.

Highlighted in an e-article on 'Assessment in School Education: The Current Debate' by Azim Premji Foundation (2015), the poor implementation of a well thought concept of CCE made it a huge hurdle to realise its real intent into the process. It was misunderstood as a process of weekly testing of learners in the name of formative assessment and passively filling the formats. If teachers would have given intensive trainings, first, for understanding the conceptual dimensions of CCE and, then, its pedagogic implications into the classroom, the implementation of CCE would have been processed in a desired manner (Azim Premji Foundation, 2015).

The policy in itself was fault free and theoretically sound but the authoritarian structure of education system could not make it possible in practice (Mishra, 2015). Thus, there seems to be a need to challenge and reconstruct the overall evaluation system of the country from being authoritarian to child centred for the policy ideas, like CCE, Age Appropriate Admission to the Class (AAAC) and NDP, could realise their true potential in practice (Mishra, 2015).

The actual worth of CCE could be understood well if other important measures of Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009), such as AAAC and NDP, would be read and understood in concomitance (MHRD, 2012). All these measures are based upon the rock solid constructivist philosophy of child-centred education. This paradigm believes in child's own construction of knowledge in an active and enriched environment as per their own individual potential with the positive support and guidance of the teachers. The goals of learning, the process and assessment activities, are all discussed and decided among teachers and learners together as a part of overall learning process.

This approach disapproves the authoritarian role of teachers and requires learners to ask questions and think critically and rationally to arrive at a solution for the well-being of the humankind. The underlying assumption that similar age group would help learners to collaborate well brought in the concept of AAAC. Likewise, individual differences among learners make them learn in their own way and pace. A 'one-size fits all' type examination system cannot justify with each child's potential and leaves many important areas of child development untouched. Consequently, CCE was recommended through RTE, 2009. From here, the need for NDP was recognised because each child progresses as per their own potential level and mere tagging them with 'pass-fail' would not account for conceptual clarity rather make them feel demotivated (Mishra, 2015).

Before the new National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) became public; there had been a lot of murmuring in the reports and news about the future of assessment and evaluation system of the nation. This whole buzz was about whether the traditional pass-fail exam based system will be reinstated or 'No Detention Policy' (NDP) will be followed which was assumed to promote learners automatically to the next class by the majority.

#### **How are they all connected?**

After the decline of MLLs approach and poor implementation failure of CCE and related measure like NDP, the next transformation in assessment procedures came into the form of 'Learning Outcomes' till elementary level. NCF (2005) emphasized upon the fact that though MLLs were designed to measure the level of competencies of children in different curricular areas but the fragmented manner of sub-skills to be achieved in a timely manner was never a condition for flexible learning process. With regard to the concept of learning outcomes, NCF (2005) takes a stand that, "designing learning and test items for these detailed lists (competencies), and teaching to these learning outcomes, is impractical and pedagogically unsound". Apart from having its own merits and demerits, there is still a lack of clarity between what NCF (2005) emphasised about learning outcomes approach and the vision behind designing 'Learning Outcomes' till elementary stage. Therefore, the recently developed 'Learning Outcomes' (LO) for assessment purposes make it even more crucial to look at it from multiple perspectives with a critical stance.

#### **Critical Reflection on the Learning Outcomes Approach in School Education of India**

In India, the journey of assessment system at school level has gone through various stages and forms since independence. A number of studies have shown the concern behind India's declining rate of educational achievement with no signs of improvement. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), 2018 released by Pratham, indicated that though the levels of basic arithmetic and reading has improved a bit in rural India since 2014, but significant efforts to improve foundational skills are the need of the hour as noted in the report. Similarly, the National Achievement Survey (NAS) of the academic year of 2017-18 conducted by NCERT shows levels of learning in different subject areas, wherein lowest performance of students was seen in the area of mathematics as compared to other subjects.

Since independence, many commissions and committees laid emphasis upon revamping the assessment system based on standardised examinations and tests to bring about qualitative reforms in the education system because assessment takes a significant part of any teaching-learning process (Assessment Reforms; NEP, 2020). Student assessment in India has passed through oral testing, written tests, centralised examinations at secondary and senior secondary levels, continuous and comprehensive evaluation and, now, towards competency based assessment through predefined learning outcomes. The recently launched 'National Education Policy' (NEP) 2020 amidst COVID-19 pandemic, in its fundamental principles, stated, "focus on regular formative assessment for learning rather than the summative assessment that encourages today's 'coaching culture' (NEP, 2020), which has been a word of mouth in several previously published policies and commissions.

The new NEP insinuates upon replacing the rote memorization and summative form of assessment to a more flexible, formative, competency based assessment system which includes assessment 'as', 'of' and 'for' tools designed to measure the predefined learning outcomes and capabilities in a specific subject area (NEP, 2020). At

once, these changes sound vibrant and give a lot of hope, though a few have been repeated throughout education policies, but to announce board like school examinations at the end of classes 3, 5 and 8 to be conducted by an external authority reflects worrisome story as highlighted by many activists and educationists. Anita Rampal, an eminent educationist from Delhi University, stated explicitly in this context that,

“It’s centralised focus on state examinations even in grades 3, 5 and 8 in addition to the board examinations in grades 10 and 12 runs contrary to the RTE which had banned children from being subjected to any board examination till grade 8, and even its modified section 16 allows a regular school examination” (Rampal, A. 2020).

This centralised focus on examination system even at the foundational stages of education clearly indicates the focus on measuring the previously made learning outcomes for each subject of a given class for the purpose of governance and accountability matters. However, an e-news article on ‘NEP 2020: Why altering school education in India has divided experts’ puts it in favour of the policy guidelines on assessment that it could benefit students to take enough time to grasp concepts even in board exams and the school examination at class 3, 5 and 8 by an authority would fill the gaps in learning then and there, instead of failing students at higher classes (Kaveri, M. 2020).

Another perspective in this discourse supports the formulation of learning outcomes in lieu of broad curriculum expectations suggested by NCF-2005 as it would benefit the teachers to measure students’ learning progress and also throw a light on the health of the education system (Sharma, 2015).

The document on learning outcomes at the elementary stage claims not to be prescriptive in nature and may be modified as per the local requirement on the one hand and constructivist in nature on the other hand (NCERT, 2017), but failed to recognise that in constructivist paradigm, learning outcomes are not prescribed in advance for all the students as repeatedly mentioned by majority of educationists earlier in this paper.

#### **The document also reads,**

“Keeping in view the decline in outcomes of reading ability as well as numerical and mathematical ability which is a major concern at present, quality, as measured by learning outcomes to be achieved by all, especially for literacy, numeracy and essential life skills is crucial. The focus of the Twelfth Five Year Plan for basic learning as an explicit objective of primary education and the need for regular learning assessments to make sure that quality goal are met”(NCERT, 2017).

The focus of above statement is reflecting the ultimate objective of developing learning outcomes is to shift the focus from ‘teaching to test’ culture in order to judge and maintain the quality of learning in a standardized manner. A special focus was given to suggest some curricular strategies for the categories of students who fall under inclusive education but it was made sure that they, too, reach the same levels of learning or obtain same outcomes at the end of the year. The individual learning needs and styles of learning are given due importance in terms of developing class-specific or student-specific suggested learning outcomes. The document emphasised upon process-oriented learning to be measured in both qualitative as well as quantitative forms (NCERT, 2017) for students to develop holistically which provides a ray of hope that at least it did not completely loosened a touch with constructivist approach.

Also, the document points, “Most often, teachers are not clear about what kind of learning is desired and the criteria against which it could be assessed” (NCERT, 2017). The fact could be valid but the bigger concern remains, “Would the suggested learning outcomes make teachers competent enough to teach and assess what they are expected to do in the constructivist paradigm?” or “will it rather make them mechanistic in their approach by withdrawing their academic freedom and autonomy”?

The reasons presented for the development of learning outcomes in order to maintain quality in school education driven towards constructivist paradigm but more clear guidelines are required to make the learning outcomes inclusive for all (special needs as well as social inclusion categories) students in the near future.

#### **Critical Reflections on Learning Outcomes (LO) Approach: International Perspective**

The term ‘Learning Outcome’ has been used extensively in educational literature and the concept has found widespread application in educational institutions. Along with the developments made in this prospect, it has become an area of constant dialogue. While the idea has been embraced by some, some have criticized it on many

accounts or argued that it has been misused. At present, the diverse meanings attached to this term and multiple ways of implementation has made it pertinent to reflect upon the concept of learning outcomes supporting with different perspectives upheld by various educationists globally.

The term 'learning outcomes' was first defined and used in the Educational Policy Document of European countries as part of Bologna Declaration 1999 to provide some common standards of performance in higher education (European Ministers in charge of Higher Education, 1999). The concept of learning outcomes presumes that predefined and precise standards of learning would ensure the level of student's performance at the end of the academic term or course of study (Murtonen et al., 2017). The overriding discussion in this area has been about whether predefined, unchanging, precise and measurable statements should judge the level of learning or less precise, open-ended and less focus on measuring learning in standard outcomes would analyse the process of learning (Prøitz, 2010; Zhang, 2016). Another view posited by Hussey and Smith highlighted that learning outcomes have been used in behaviouristic terms since a long time but the introduction of a "more fashionable term" as 'Learning Outcomes' would not change the level of magnitude they deem to check in a standardised manner (Hussey & Smith, 2008). The purpose of any teaching-learning is to scaffold, elaborate, extend, apply and critically form an understanding of a particular concept with the help of previous occasions of learning or a skill to be refined further. During these sessions, it is neither preferable nor possible to design specific or stable learning outcomes because the emphasis of any teaching learning session would vary with the level of individual student's ability (Hussey & Smith, 2008).

Eisner quoted the movement of learning outcomes as, "uniformed army of young adolescents all marching to the same drummer" (Eisner, 2000, p. 344). The paradigm shift discussed earlier in this paper involves teaching and learning as an interaction between a teacher, learners, learning environment and learning aids where individual needs and potential of the learners could take unexpected moves leading the process of learning towards a completely new path and used as "learning moments" (Hussey & Smith, 2008) by the progressive teachers and thus, the role of the teacher is of prime importance in framing learning outcomes according to the relevance and worth. Bennett and Brady seems to be in agreement with what Hussey and Smith said about 'Outcomes' being a tool for judging and auditing the teacher's ability of teaching in place of measuring the teaching and learning process (Bennett & Brady, 2014). The movement of LO based assessment contributes to the existing structural inequalities, further homogenize the classrooms, curtailing the academic freedom of teachers and placing them under the unfair surveillance (Bennett & Brady, 2014). It was also noted by some that learning outcomes are not showing results as they were deemed to (Holmes, 2019) but could benefit if the teachers and curriculum designers would allow learners to become a part of designing learning outcomes and observe learning from learner's perspective (Allan, 1996).

Conversely, Manuel Souto-Otero noted the critical and defensive viewpoints regarding LO movement and presented a neutral stance that learning outcomes may work for different purposes in different geographies. They could be precise as well as open-ended; some could be used for assessment purposes (Souto-Otero, 2012) and others might not; some might follow the process of learning by using different modalities and others might use them as an end; if implemented in a desired manner (Lassnigg, 2012).

From the above considerations, it is seen that the globally the learning outcomes approach is being widely used in the higher education system and the pros and cons presented by various educationists indicates that LO may be useful in the successful completion of a specific teaching session with teachers and students equally participating into the process of learning but cannot be used as performance indicators.

### **Conclusion:-**

The purpose of education is to imbibe the three essential processes of learning (how to learn, relearn and unlearn) into the learners. The assessment of such learning is a part of the broader learning process which does not focus solely upon pass or fail criteria or achieving an end outcome but to improve learning throughout by systematically maintaining the holistic learning reports of students. Traditionally, teaching to test the knowledge of pre-decided competencies and specific performances in rigid contexts does not hold much scope of growth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There should be a constant discourse among educational departments, teachers and policy makers regarding the current wisdom that assessing the pre-assumed learning outcomes should take priority over teaching our students how to think critically and become a critical part of their own learning and assessment processes. One can ask, "What really is the purpose of this focus on learning outcomes?" Although a number of critical remarks on

the learning outcomes approach have been observed by the international researchers in the previous section of the paper but a constructive approach towards achieving these learning outcomes and timely reflections with a critical lens would prove their worth in the Indian school education system. Only if the learning indicators mentioned in the document 'Learning Outcomes at Elementary Stage' (NCERT, 2017) in order to achieve the learning outcomes, would be effectively conceptualised and practiced by the teachers at the ground level with continuous and appropriate training programmes, the vision behind the inception of learning outcomes approach could be internalised and realised by the system accurately.

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