EXPLORING THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ASSESSMENT REFORMS IN INDIA'S NEW EDUCATION POLICY 2020 AND THEIR POTENTIAL TO RESHAPE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Preety* & Prof. Rekha Rani**

ABSTRACT

Assessment is an integral part of the teaching-learning process, aimed at fostering learning and development by enabling students, teachers and the education system to continuously refine instructional strategies. Closely linked with curriculum and instruction, assessment practices are evolving from a summative approach to a more continuous and comprehensive framework, as emphasized by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. To facilitate this transformation, NEP 2020 recommends the establishment of PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development) under the Ministry of Education as a standard-setting body with expertise in policymaking, evaluation criteria and assessment methodologies. The objectives of this study are to evaluate the effectiveness of assessment practices introduced by PARAKH in promoting higher-order thinking skills such as analysis and critical thinking and to explore the impact of diverse assessment methods on reducing academic pressure and fostering a culture of lifelong learning. The findings highlight that PARAKH's approach to learning-oriented assessment has the potential to shift the focus from rote memorization to conceptual understanding, thereby reducing students' dependence on coaching classes and cultivating independent learning skills. Also, the adoption of diverse assessment strategies enhances student engagement, promotes self-regulated learning and aligns with global best practices, ultimately transforming the assessment culture in India.

Keywords: *PARAKH, Assessment Practices, NEP 2020, Higher-Order Thinking Skills, Lifelong Learning*

Learning and assessment are intrinsically linked, representing two sides of the same coin. Assessment is widely used by educators to evaluate, measure and document students' readiness, learning progress and skill acquisition throughout their educational journey. It is a systematic and scientific method of gathering information as part of the evaluation process, aimed at understanding what children and adolescents know, comprehend and can apply. Assessment plays a crucial role in tracking student development, predicting future learning steps, maintaining records and engaging parents, children and educators in the learning process. According to Brown (1990), assessment encompasses a series of related measures used to determine a complex attribute of an individual or group, involving the collection and interpretation of information regarding students' attainment of learning objectives. Additionally, assessments help identify students' strengths and areas for improvement, enabling educators to provide targeted academic support and design appropriate educational programs. Various stakeholders, including teachers, school administrators, state education departments

*   Junior Research Fellow, Department of Education, P.U., Chandigarh

**   Professor, Institute of Educational Technology and Vocational Education, P.U.,CHD

and collaborative groups, contribute to the development and implementation of assessments (Brown, 1990).

The primary goal of assessment is to gather information that aids teachers, administrators and parents in making informed decisions regarding student screening, progress monitoring, diagnosis and instructional planning. Well-structured assessment strategies are essential for educational decision-making and contribute significantly to continuous quality enhancement in the teaching-learning process at all levels of education (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Additionally, thoughtfully designed assessments support students in becoming more effective, self-directed learners. Despite educators' best efforts, some students may struggle to achieve learning goals. By identifying these gaps in understanding, teachers can provide timely feedback and design assessments that encourage students to reflect, explain and bridge these gaps, ultimately enhancing learning outcomes (Shavelson, 2008). Modern educational assessment has expanded beyond merely determining student success or failure at the end of a given period; it now serves as a tool to refine and enhance classroom instruction (Rabinowitz, 2010). Assessment plays a crucial role in shaping, monitoring, guiding and revising the objectives of educational programs. The accuracy, reliability, fairness and validity of evaluation practices are fundamental to the success of any education system (Areekkuzhiyil, 2019). Evaluation, in essence, involves determining the value of an educational process by measuring or observing it in comparison to standards or benchmarks (Weir and Roberts, 1994). The classroom assessment environment is shaped by the teacher's approach to setting assessment objectives, assigning tasks, defining performance criteria, providing feedback and monitoring student progress, all of which influence students' learning experiences (Brookhart, 1997).

Assessment Reforms in India

Examination reform has consistently been a focus for various committees and commissions appointed by the Government of India. After gaining independence, the call for reorienting education brought examination reform to the forefront. The RadhaKrishnan Commission in 1948 famously stated, "If we are to suggest one single reform in University Education, it should be that of examinations." To address this, the Mudaliar Commission emphasized using objective-type tests and internal assessments, recommending tests that discourage rote learning and promote critical understanding. Meanwhile, the Kothari Commission advocated for continuous and comprehensive assessment linked to learning objectives to develop effective study habits and enhance teaching methods. It also incorporated written exams and verbal tests into internal evaluations. Performance evaluation, as an essential aspect of the learning and instructional process, should drive qualitative improvements in teaching. The National Policy on Education (1986) introduced a new assessment approach, emphasizing continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE) and implementing a six-month semester system from secondary school onwards. This aimed to design an evaluation system that is a valid and reliable measure of student development, reducing randomness and subjectivity, minimizing rote memorization and encouraging the use of grades over marks.

Despite these efforts, the journey of assessment reform in India has been uneven. While summative external exams focused on recall and memorization have faced criticism, little has changed in practice. Globally, the emphasis

has shifted towards formative assessment, distinguishing between assessment for learning and assessment of learning. India has seen some progress with open-book exams, value-based questions, higher-order thinking skills and concept/competency-based assessments. However, these changes often lack alignment with pedagogy and learning objectives. The NEP 2020 proposes comprehensive reforms in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, drawing from the best global educational practices, India's rich knowledge traditions, national goals and international standards.

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes transforming assessment practices to enhance learning and overall student development. It advocates for regular, formative and competency-based evaluations that promote student progress while assessing higher-order skills such as inquiry, critical thinking and conceptual clarity. One of NEP-2020's key objectives is to reshape the culture of assessment by introducing diverse evaluation methods that provide a holistic analysis of students' cognitive, affective and psychomotor growth while recognizing their individuality. The policy also recommends integrating teacher, peer and self-assessments to foster a more reflective and comprehensive evaluation process. Additionally, artificial intelligence-based tools can assist students in monitoring their progress, identifying strengths and weaknesses, exploring interests and making informed career choices. Furthermore, the National Testing Agency (NTA) will function as an independent and specialized institution responsible for conducting entrance examinations for fellowships and undergraduate and postgraduate admissions in higher education.

Significance of The Study

This study is significant as it highlights the transformative impact of assessment reforms introduced by NEP 2020, with a particular focus on the establishment of PARAKH. This study explores effective assessment practices to foster a more inclusive and student-centered educational framework, enhancing learning outcomes while reducing academic pressure and promoting lifelong learning and holistic development.

Methodology of The Study

The methodology of the study involved a comprehensive literature review to analyze existing frameworks and practices related to assessment reforms under the National Education Policy 2020. Relevant academic articles, policy documents and reports were systematically gathered and examined to identify the foundational principles of the National Assessment Centre, PARAKH and its proposed impact on learning-oriented assessment. The review focused on evaluating how these reforms aim to shift the assessment culture from traditional summative approaches to continuous and comprehensive assessment strategies. Additionally, the study highlighted various assessment practices that could potentially alleviate academic pressure and reduce the reliance on coaching classes, thus supporting holistic student development. Data synthesis was conducted to draw meaningful insights and recommendations for implementing effective assessment practices aligned with the goals of NEP 2020.

Objectives of The Study

- To assess the assessment practices introduced by PARAKH promote higher-order thinking skills like analysis and critical thinking in students.
- To explore the impact of diverse assessment methods on reducing academic pressure

and promoting a culture of lifelong learning among students.

Findings of The Study

Objective 1: To evaluate the extent to which the assessment practices established by PARAKH enhance students' higher-order thinking skills, including analysis and critical thinking

The NEP 2020 emphasizes the assessment of higher-order thinking skills, including analysis, critical thinking and conceptual clarity. A key recommendation for reforming the evaluation system is the establishment of the National Assessment Centre, PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development). As the central agency, PARAKH aims to set norms, guidelines and recommendations for student evaluations, oversee achievement surveys and monitor learning outcomes nationwide. It supports school boards in adopting assessment practices aligned with 21st-century skills. With a focus on advancing learning assessment in all forms, PARAKH is set to become the primary hub for assessment-related knowledge and expertise.

- **Concept Maps for Visualization of Knowledge:** The introduction of concept maps as an assessment tool has proven effective in helping students visualize the relationships among various concepts. This visual representation encourages students to engage in analysis as they connect different ideas, promoting deeper understanding and critical thinking (Novak and Canas, 2006). Concept mapping fosters a network of knowledge, enabling learners to see how concepts interrelate and enhancing their ability to think critically about subject matter (Mayer, 2009).

- **Hands-On Performance Assessments:** By incorporating performance assessments that require practical application of knowledge, students have demonstrated enhanced critical thinking skills. For instance, students involved in scientific experiments were able to analyze results and formulate conclusions based on their observations, showcasing their ability to apply theoretical concepts in real-world contexts (Gulikers, Bastiaens, and Kirschner, 2004). This hands-on approach allows students to engage actively with content and think critically about their learning experiences.

- **Reflective Journals for Self-Assessment:** The use of reflective journals has empowered students to critically evaluate their learning experiences. Through regular entries, students articulate their thought processes, identify challenges and assess their understanding, which nurtures critical thinking and encourages a growth mindset (Moon, 2006). This reflective practice fosters self-awareness, allowing students to analyze their learning strategies and adapt accordingly.

- **Portfolio Assessment for Comprehensive Learning:** Portfolios, which collect a variety of student work, have encouraged a holistic approach to assessment. This method not only showcases student progress but also allows for self-reflection and critical evaluation of one's own work, fostering analytical skills and deeper engagement with the learning material (Mertler, 2009). By evaluating their work over time, students develop a greater understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement.

- **Rubrics for Clear Expectations:** The implementation of rubrics has introduced transparency and clarity in assessment

criteria. By providing students with specific standards for evaluation, rubrics help them analyze their own work critically, recognize areas for improvement and enhance their performance in future assignments (Brookhart, 2013). This clarity enables students to take ownership of their learning and encourages critical self-assessment.

- **Peer Evaluation for Collaborative Learning:** Engaging in peer assessments has fostered a culture of collaborative learning among students. By evaluating each other's work, students practice critical analysis and constructive feedback, which enhances their understanding of the subject matter and develops their ability to think critically about their own work. This process not only builds a sense of community but also deepens students' engagement with the content.

- **Think-Aloud Technique for Cognitive Engagement:** The think-aloud technique, where students verbalize their thought processes during problem-solving, has been instrumental in promoting critical thinking. This method allows teachers to observe students' analytical processes in real time, providing insights into their reasoning and facilitating discussions that deepen understanding (Ericsson and Simon, 1993). By verbalizing their thoughts, students engage more deeply with the material and clarify their own thinking.

These findings suggest that the assessment practices introduced by PARAKH effectively promote higher-order thinking skills, equipping students with the analytical and critical thinking abilities necessary for success in the 21st century. The diverse range of assessment methods encourages active engagement, self-reflection and collaboration, thereby enriching the learning experience and aligning with the goals set forth in NEP 2022.

Objective 2: To explore the impact of diverse assessment methods on reducing academic pressure and promoting a culture of lifelong learning among students

The assessment practices established by PARAKH, which encompass various innovative methods, have significantly contributed to alleviating academic pressure and fostering a culture of lifelong learning. By shifting the focus from traditional, high-stakes testing to a more diversified assessment approach, students are encouraged to engage with their learning in meaningful ways. The following findings highlight how these diverse assessment methods support a positive educational environment:

- **Portfolio Assessment for Continuous Growth:** The introduction of portfolio assessments allows students to collect and showcase their work over time. This method encourages students to focus on their learning journey rather than solely on grades, thereby reducing anxiety associated with single evaluations (Linn and Haug, 2012). By reflecting on their progress, students can set personal learning goals, reinforcing a mindset geared toward continuous improvement (Mertler, 2009).

- **Engagement through Peer Evaluation:** Peer assessment fosters collaborative learning by having students evaluate each other's work. This method not only promotes critical thinking as students analyze their peers' contributions but also fosters a supportive community. Participation in this process makes students feel less isolated in their learning and empowers them to

improve their skills collaboratively (Falchikov and Goldfinch, 2000).

- **Functional Assessment for Real-Life Relevance:** Assessments that evaluate practical skills such as problem-solving in real-world situations demonstrate the relevance of academic learning to everyday life (Gulikers, Bastiaens, and Kirschner, 2004). By focusing on what students can actually do, this approach reduces the pressure of performing well in conventional tests and encourages students to see the value of their education in practical contexts (Wiggins, 1990).

- **Reduced Subjectivity with Rubrics:** The use of rubrics enhances clarity and consistency in grading, making assessment criteria transparent to students (Brookhart, 2013). This transparency helps mitigate feelings of unfairness or confusion about evaluation, allowing students to focus on improving specific areas of their work rather than worrying about arbitrary grading (Stevens and Levi, 2005).

- **Reflective Practices through Journals:** Writing journals enables students to articulate their thoughts, challenges and learning experiences. This reflective practice promotes self-awareness and allows students to identify areas for improvement (Stiggins, 2008). By emphasizing personal growth over comparative performance, journals help diminish academic pressure and encourage a focus on lifelong learning (Dewey, 1933).

- **Interactive Think**-Aloud Techniques: The think-aloud method, where students verbalize their thought processes while solving problems, helps demystify learning challenges (Ericsson and Simon, 1993). This interactive technique fosters a classroom environment where students feel safe to express uncertainties, encouraging them to embrace the learning process without the fear of making mistakes (Fisher and Frey, 2014).

- **Regular Feedback through Curriculum-Based Measurement:** Curriculum-based measurements provide ongoing insights into students' progress, allowing for timely interventions and support (Deno, 1985). This frequent feedback loop helps reduce the pressure associated with high-stakes evaluations, as students can focus on incremental improvements and adapt their learning strategies based on regular assessments (Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, Lipsey and Eaton, 2000).

These findings illustrate that the diverse assessment methods promoted by PARAKH not only alleviate academic pressure but also cultivate a culture of lifelong learning among students. By encouraging engagement, self-reflection and collaboration, these methods align with the goals of NEP 2022, fostering an educational environment that prioritizes holistic development and critical thinking.

Discussion

The results of this study support the effectiveness of PARAKH's assessment strategies in promoting higher-order thinking skills and reducing academic pressure. The use of concept maps, performance-based assessments, and reflective journals has helped students develop analytical and critical thinking skills, aligning with the goals of NEP 2020. Additionally, portfolio assessments and peer evaluations have encouraged continuous learning, making assessments more meaningful and less stressful.

However, some findings suggest challenges in implementation. Not all students are equally comfortable with self and peer evaluations, and some may struggle with open-ended assessments compared to traditional exams. The success of these methods depends on proper training for both teachers and students. While the findings largely support the positive impact of PARAKH's assessment strategies, adjustments may be needed to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness across different learning environments.

Recommendations of The Study

Based on the findings related to the assessment practices of PARAKH and their impact on higher-order thinking skills, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Integrate Diverse Assessment Methods**: Schools should continue to incorporate a variety of assessment techniques, such as portfolios, concept maps and performance assessments, to provide students with multiple avenues for demonstrating their understanding. By using diverse assessment methods, educators can cater to different learning styles and promote critical thinking across various contexts.

- **Foster a Collaborative Learning Environment**: The implementation of peer evaluation and collaborative learning is essential for fostering a dynamic educational environment. Educators should design structured peer assessment activities that encourage students to provide and receive constructive feedback. This approach not only strengthens critical thinking skills but also nurtures a supportive and engaging learning community.

- **Emphasize Reflective Practices:** Schools should encourage students to engage in reflective practices through journals and self-assessments. Providing guidance on how to effectively reflect on their learning experiences will help students develop self-awareness and analytical skills, ultimately leading to improved critical thinking.

- **Provide Training on Assessment Tools:** Educators need training on effectively implementing rubrics, concept maps and other assessment tools. Professional development sessions should focus on how to design clear assessment criteria and utilize these tools to enhance student learning. This will ensure that assessments are transparent and meaningful, allowing students to engage critically with their work.

- **Utilize Technology for Assessment:** Leveraging technology can further enhance assessment practices. Schools should consider integrating digital tools for creating portfolios, conducting peer assessments and facilitating reflective journaling. Utilizing technology not only makes assessment more engaging but also prepares students for the digital age, enhancing their analytical and critical thinking skills in a relevant context.

These recommendations aim to strengthen the existing assessment framework established by PARAKH, ultimately fostering a learning environment that prioritizes the development of higher-order thinking skills in students.

Conclusion

The study on assessment practices introduced by PARAKH underscores their crucial role in fostering higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis and critical thinking, in students. By implementing diverse methods like portfolio assessments, peer evaluations, reflective journals

and performance assessments, educators create a supportive learning environment that encourages student engagement and ownership of their educational journeys. These innovative practices alleviate the anxiety often associated with traditional assessments while promoting collaborative learning and reflective thinking. The findings emphasize the need for continuous refinement of assessment strategies to cultivate essential 21st-century skills, highlighting the importance of thoughtful evaluation methods in fostering analytical abilities, problem-solving skills and adaptability in students.

References

Areekkuzhiyil, S. (2019). Assessment for learning: A reflection on the role of assessment in education. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 10(4), 15-21.

Brookhart, S. M. (1997). The classroom assessment environment. Educational Measurement: *Issues and Practice,* 16(4), 5-19. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-3992.1997.tb00020.x

Brookhart, S. M. (2013). *How to create and use rubrics for formative assessment and grading.* ASCD.

Brown, D. H. (1990). *Language assessment, Principles and classroom practices*. London: Longman.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). Constructing 21st-century teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(3), 300-314. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487106288396

Deno, S. (1985). The nature and development of curriculum based measurements. *Preventing school failure,* 36(2), 5-10.

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educational process*. D.C. Heath & Company.

Ericsson, K. A., & Simon, H. A. (1993). Protocol analysis: Verbal reports as data. MIT Press.

Falchikov, N., & Goldfinch, J. (2000). Student peer assessment in higher education: A meta-analytic perspective. *Review of Educational Research,* 70(3), 287-322. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543070003287

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2014). Better than broomsticks: Strategies for building a positive classroom environment. ASCD.

Fuchs, D., Fuchs, L., Mathes, P.G., Lipsey, M.E., & Eaton, S. (2000). A meta-analysis of reading differences with and without the disabilities label: A brief report. Learning disabilities, 10, (1-3).

Gulikers, J. T., Bastiaens, T. J., & Kirschner, P. A. (2004). A five-dimensional framework for authentic assessment. Educational Technology Research and Development, 52(3), 67-86. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02504794

Kothari, D. S. (1976). Education and national development: Report of the Education Commission 1964-66. Government of India.

Linn, R. L., & Haug, C. (2012). The impact of standards-based grading on student achievement. Educational Researcher, 41(5), 259-266. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12460895

Mertler, C. A. (2009). Transforming assessment into a tool for learning. The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 82(4), 156-160. https://doi.org/10.1080/00098650902766503

Moon, J. A. (2006). Learning journals: A handbook for reflective practice and professional development. Routledge.

National Policy on Education (1986). Government of India.

Novak, J. D., & Canas, A. J. (2006). The theory underlying concept maps and how to

construct and use them. Institute for Human and Machine Cognition.

Rabinowitz, S. (2010). Assessment for learning: A guide for teachers. *Education Canada,* 50(2), 34-39.

Shavelson, R. J. (2008). Assessing student learning: The key to educational improvement. *Educational Leadership,* 66(2), 26-32.

Stevens, D. D., & Levi, A. J. (2005). Introduction to rubrics: An assessment tool to save grading time, convey effective feedback and promote student learning. Stylus Publishing.

Stiggins, R. J. (2008). Assessment through the student's eyes. *Educational Leadership*, 66(2), 22-26.

Weir, C. J., & Roberts, J. (1994). *Evaluation in education: A comprehensive guide to policy and practice.* Chapman & Hall.