



The impact of an assessment policy upon teachers' self-reported assessment beliefs and practices: A quasi-experimental study of Indian teachers in private schools



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ABSTRACT

India has engaged in a policy reform seeking to increase the formative use of assessment in the hope of reducing negative effects of public examinations on students. The 2005 Curriculum Framework has been implemented within the context of significant privatization of schooling around the country. This study examined the beliefs of teachers about the purpose of assessment because they are the main agents of the policy reform. A large-scale survey of secondary school teachers predominantly in private schools asked them to indicate how much they agreed with multiple purposes concerning either internally determined school-based assessments ($n = 812$) or externally mandated public examinations ($n = 883$) and how they practiced assessment. Structural equation modeling identified a well-fitting model in which there were eight statistically significant paths from Beliefs to Practices and which was strictly equivalent between conditions. While teachers in both conditions endorsed most strongly the improvement purpose, there were statistically significant differences in mean score between conditions for three of the purposes and for one practice. While differences accounted for just 3% of variance in factor means, they were in the hypothesized direction in which internal school-based assessment generated more endorsement of the improvement purpose and diagnostic practice. Greater use of diagnostic practices (an ambition of the Indian Curriculum Framework) depends, in part, on teachers believing in the positive role of internal, school-based assessment and emphasis on educational improvement as the legitimate purpose of assessment is to be encouraged.

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There are various assessment policy reforms globally that seek to address a variety of challenges. The imposition of compulsory student testing to evaluate schools and teachers has been a key characteristic of American educational policy for the last two decades (Ravitch, 2013). In contrast, resistance to the mandated Key Stage testing at ages 7, 9, 11, and 14 in England, led to a strong formative assessment reform advocacy (known as assessment for learning) which has been widely

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endorsed in many developed Commonwealth countries (Stobart, 2006). Dissatisfaction with examination systems that failed to identify the actual competencies of adolescents and adults (hidden behind rank order scores or examination percentages) had led to the successful implementation of outcomes or competence based qualifications (Crooks, 2002). In some societies, there has been a widespread reaction against the reduction of teaching to the development of examination-taking skills, because they are deemed useful for passing examinations that focus on accurate memorization of academic content. For example, Hong Kong has implemented a new secondary school curriculum and moved the 13th year of schooling into the 1st year of university education in the hope of increasing students' critical thinking and learning ability (Chan, 2010).

As in other countries highly dependent on formal high-stakes public examinations, the 2005 Indian National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (NCERT, 2005) has tried to move the focus of educational assessment from being purely summative public examinations to a more constructivist and formative footing. Specifically, the NCF sought to renew the curriculum by reforming the examination system and reduce psychological pressures upon children and parents, especially in Classes 10 and 12 when high-stakes public examinations were implemented. Rather than classify children as 'pass' or 'fail', the reform sought to use evaluation practices so as to provide greater feedback to learners, extend the range of evaluated capacities to include non-academic curricular outcomes (e.g., thinking skills, leadership, cooperation, sports, arts, etc.), and incorporate teacher judgments throughout the learning process as part of the feedback to parents and children.

This curricular reform of assessment and evaluation practices requires active engagement and understanding by classroom teachers. Hence, it is important to discover if the new policy has had an identifiable impact on teacher beliefs about, attitudes toward, and self-reported practices of assessment.

1. Teacher beliefs about assessment

It is generally agreed that teachers' belief systems about the nature and purposes of a phenomenon (e.g., teaching, learning, or assessment) influence strongly how they teach and what students learn or achieve (Fives & Buehl, 2012). Due to socialization processes, human beliefs seem to be context-dependent (Gao & Watkins, 2002) and appear to be ecologically rational (Rieskamp & Reimer, 2007). This suggests that as government policies shape educational activities, teacher beliefs will reflect the priorities and even tensions present in a society (Brown & Harris, 2009). For example, New Zealand has an assessment policy that focuses predominantly on the formative, diagnostic, and interactive classroom features of assessment (Ministry of Education, 1994) and teachers there are strongly committed to an improvement-oriented purpose for assessment (Brown, 2004, 2011). In contrast, teachers in examination driven societies, such as Egypt (Gebril & Brown, 2014) and China (Brown, Hui, Yu, & Kennedy, 2011), are strongly focused on the evaluation of students as the purpose of assessment. Additionally, as policies change, teacher attitudes and beliefs appear to modify in response to a new policy. For instance, Brown and Harris (2009) indicated that as the practice of leader-driven, school-wide data analysis of assessment results was implemented, teacher beliefs moved from being predominantly improvement-oriented to being dominated by the idea that assessment demonstrated school quality.

Two studies have examined explicitly the relationship of teacher beliefs about assessment and teachers' self-reported assessment practices. New Zealand primary school teachers responses (Brown, 2009) indicated that the more assessment was seen as a way to hold students accountable the more formal, test-like assessment practices were used which were considered to be measures of surface (i.e., recall of facts, details, and information) learning. In contrast, the more assessment was seen as an indicator of school quality, the more teachers reported using measures of deep (i.e., transformational construction of new meanings from material) learning. Additionally, increased use of informal assessment practices (e.g., teacher-student interaction, student self- and peer assessment) was predicted by the belief that assessment was for improvement and that assessment was irrelevant. Together these patterns suggested that teachers believed externally created measures of student accountability only delivered surface learning, while school-based assessment practices led to improvement, especially of deep learning competences.

Similarly, among Hong Kong primary and secondary teachers (Brown, Kennedy, Fok, Chan, & Yu, 2009), in the context of an assessment for learning project, indicated that they used diagnostic and improvement assessment practices (e.g., analysing student strengths and weaknesses, giving formative feedback, and modifying teaching plans) the more they believed that assessment was for improvement. Consistent with the high-stakes consequences for school reputation based on student examination results, teachers reported increased use of practices intended to show the school was doing a good job (e.g., school self-evaluation based on examinations and using exam results as a quality indicator) when they agreed that assessments ought to be for school accountability. Emphasis on student accountability as the purpose of assessment led teachers to specifically prepare students for external examinations (e.g., help students pass exams, teach exam skills, and teach to exam requirements). Finally, the teachers reported sticking to their teaching plans and ignoring exam items in their classes, when they indicated belief that assessment should be ignored.

Together these two studies, in quite contrasting policy jurisdictions (i.e., highly formative vs. highly summative), show that teacher self-reported practices have meaningful alignment with their beliefs as to the purposes of assessment. On the whole, it would seem teachers are very sensitive to the important role that assessment plays in communicating the quality of a school (and by inference themselves) and report using practices that maximize student performance on external measures. At the same time, teachers indicated strong endorsement of the improvement goal of assessment and the use of diagnostic practices and indicated a willingness to modify teaching in response to assessment information. While these studies reflect teacher perceptions and beliefs and lack independent verification of the espoused practices, they also lack explicit

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