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Student Assessment in Social Sciences at Elementary School Stage: Alternative Strategies

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Abstract : *The basic purpose of assessment is to improve teaching learning process and ultimately to gauge the extent to which the capabilities of learners have been developed. A good assessment can become an integral part of the learning process and benefit both the learners themselves and the teachers by giving feedback. There is a widespread belief that social sciences merely transmit information. It is book centered and is required to be memorized for examinations. This is mostly due to the facts that our current practices of assessment of pupils learning, particularly in social science, usually employ teacher made and standardized tests using multiple choice or other objective type items. These assessment practices are too used in measuring complex problem solving skills, divergent thinking, collaborative efforts among students and communication skills. Though these practices were challenged almost two decades ago, we still continue to follow the same in our educational institutions. It is high time to think of introducing alternative methods of assessment in our educational institutions. This paper discusses the assessment practices such as creative writing, acting and dancing, portfolio assessment, field visit, picture reading tasks, children's drawing projects and experiments rubrics for performance based assessment. These practices not only take into account the social realities, but also make the assessment exercises activity based, participatory and joyful.*

Keywords: *Performance based Assessment, Alternative Assessment*

Student Assessment at Elementary School Stage:Basics

When we meet someone for the first time, we engage in some form of evaluation. Some of the descriptions we might apply to people we meet include: funny, intelligent, arrogant, witty, rude etc. As teachers we meet new student each year and form impression about them from our interactions and/ or observations. These impressions are forms of evaluations or assessment of characteristics we observe or determine from our interactions. In order to find out how children are doing in schools, teachers spend a lot of time in assessing children. But many of them do not give importance to what they do (interact or observe) on a daily basis informally. Examinations, particularly the board examinations,

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negatively influence all the activities of school, including assessment and teaching learning process. In the Indian education system, the term assessment is associated with examination, stress and anxiety.

Why should Children be Assessed?

The purpose of assessment is to improve teaching learning process and ultimately to gauge the extent to which the capabilities of learners have been developed. This does not mean that tests and examinations will have to be conducted frequently. Well-designed assessment and regular reporting provide learners with feedback and encourage them to learn further. They also serve to inform parents about the quality of learning and progress of their wards. This is not a means of encouraging competition among learners. The popular notion that evaluation should identify the needs of remediation is misleading. The term remediation needs to be restricted to learners having problem with literacy / reading or numeracy (NCERT, 2005, p.72).

Here are some of the important purposes of assessment to:

- find out what learning and changes takes place in the child over a period of time.
- identify the individual needs and requirements.
- plan teaching-learning process in a more suitable way.
- help the child understand about what s/he knows or can do.
- find out the extent to which the objectives of the syllabi have been achieved.
- improve teaching learning process.
- communicate the children's progress in the subject to parents.
- do away with the fear of assessment among children.
- encourage and support children to learn together.

The purpose of assessment is not to:

- encourage children to compete with each other for marks.
- identify what the child does not know or cannot do.
- label children as slow learners, or bright students or 'problem children'.
- identify children who need remediation.
- diagnose learning difficulties and problem areas.
- help children to score more marks in exams.
- encourage children to get position (first/second) in exams.

What should be assessed?

Education is concerned with preparing children for a meaningful and productive life, and therefore, concerned with the all-round development of the child- physical, social, emotional, cognitive and moral. The school should support and encourage this. We need to ask ourselves what aspects of children's learning should be assessed? What is that we are looking for when we assess children? Seen from this perspective, all aspects need to be assessed rather than only academic achievement. Unfortunately, the current processes of evaluation, which assess a very limited range of faculties, do not provide a complete picture of an individual's abilities or progress. It is, therefore, important that assessment be undertaken

for all the activities that the child participates in both inside and outside the school/ classroom. Think of the subject social science and suggest as to which activities of the learners should come under the purview of assessment in the subject. The following activity would be of help to refine your thinking and process of evaluation in social science.

Suggested below are some activities of children that need to be taken into consideration in the context of assessment:

- A child's learning in subject areas.
- Children's skills, interests, attitudes and motivation.
- Children's participation in social activities.
- Children's responses to different situations and or opportunities both in and out of school.
- Children's participation in co-curricular activities.

When should assessment be done?

One of the critical questions rose by most of us as to when or how often should we assess a child's learning. While many teachers are of opinion that assessment of learning outcomes should go along with the teaching-learning process in a continuous manner, some resist it saying that continuous assessment reduce learning time and, therefore, is waste of time. Think about these two views. The following activity would refine your thinking.

There are many reasons to prefer the former view on assessment of learning outcomes most. A good evaluation can become an integral part of the learning process and benefit both the learners themselves and the teachers by giving feedback. It is obvious that teachers use to observe the progress of their children regularly on informal basis. These informal observations no doubt, have immense implications for improving teaching-learning process and thereby children are learning. There is, however, need for some periodicity in evaluation to help teachers reflect upon the information collected about learners. Thus, assessment should be on daily basis as well as periodic.

Assessment may be on:

- i. Daily basis: Interacting with the children and continuously assessing them both in situations inside and outside the classroom.
- ii. Periodic: Once in every 3 to 4 months, teachers may check and reflect.

Source: NCERT, 2008, p.7

Continuous assessment implies maintaining a profile for each child. This is required to reflect upon, derive feedback, plan and implement measures so as to enhance children's learning. Thus, continuous assessment implies a cycle of learning and assessment.

How should Assessment be done?

You are already aware that the process of assessment is cyclic and continuous. It implies that assessment is an integral part of teaching learning process - begins and ends with teaching learning process. You are also aware that assessment follows certain steps and process. Let us discuss those steps:

Collecting Information about Children

Assessment is any systematic procedure for collecting information that can be used to make inferences about the characteristics of people or objects (AERA et al., 1999; Reported in Reynolds et al. 2009,

p.3). In the context of collection of information about children's learning and progress, two things are important – first, to collect information from a variety of sources, and secondly, to use different methods or tools and techniques. Before we discuss on these two issues respond to the following activity based on your experiences:

It has been observed in most schools that the teacher is the primary source of information. The other important sources include: Children themselves, Parents, Child's friends / Peers/ Classmates, Community Members, Principal/ Headmaster, School records (attendance register etc.).

The next question that arises is how information to be collected from different sources is. What is observed across all schools is that the most commonly used methods are: class tests, assignments, paper-pencil tests, written and oral tests, questions on pictures, discussion with students. It should be remembered that no single tool/ technique or method can provide all the required information about a child's learning and / or progress. They can be used in different times depending on what is being assessed.

Recording of Information

The most common form of recording of information is through the use of report cards. Most report cards in schools across the country carry information in the form of marks or grades obtained by children in tests / exams. Such report cards fail to provide a complete picture of the child's learning and progress. The scope needs to be widened. Recording needs to include records of observations and comments on children's performance on assignments, ratings of what children do and how they behave and anecdotes or incidents of children's behavior towards others.

Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE)

Conventional schooling has been heavily criticized on grounds that it favours rote learning and reaps limited cognitive growth of children sidelining the socio-personal qualities. Examinations take children further from life than from books. Learners' assessment largely focuses on achievement in core subject areas only ignoring other aspects of children's life, e.g. social, emotional, physical, personal. Report cards display more the weaknesses of children than their strengths. Children's poor performance is attributed to their cognitive capacities but not to the schooling process and / or assessment approaches. Thus, the conventional examination practices were less supportive to all round development of a child's personality.

Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation refers to a process of evaluation which is school based and aims at all round development of the student. The term consists of three key words. The word "Continuous" refers to watching children's learning and progress regularly at short intervals as frequently as possible, throughout the academic session to identify their current standing, strengths and requirement of additional inputs and /or interventions to further expand their boundaries of learning, development and progress. The word "Comprehensive" means evaluation has to cover curricular subjects, curricular activities, socio-personal qualities, and work and art education etc. It involves both quantitative and qualitative information gathered from various sources such as school records, peers, parents, teachers and self through then use of varieties of tools and techniques, e.g. observation, interviews, documentary analysis. The word "Evaluation" is the process that deals with the collection of information regarding the changes that occur in the child's behavior; interpretation of these information; judgment regarding the progress of the child; and decision with regard to his promotion to the next class.

Methods of Assessment in Social Sciences

There is a widespread belief that social sciences merely transmit information. It is book centred and is required to be memorized for examinations. The contents of these textbooks are considered to be unconnected to daily realities. Further, social science is viewed as providing unnecessary details about the past. There is a perception that job options are less to students specializing in social sciences. All these beliefs produce the impression that the subject is redundant.

This situation raises many questions relating to the objectives, teaching-learning process and assessment in social sciences: What does it mean to learn social science? What kind of classroom interactions can enhance learning in a social science classroom? What are the objectives of teaching social sciences? What kinds of indicators help us to see if these objectives are being achieved and to assess the learning of every child?

Objectives of Teaching Social Studies / Science

The position paper of National Focus Group on Teaching of Social Sciences states the following objectives of teaching Social Studies / Sciences at Primary and upper Primary stages:

Primary Stage

- To develop in the child skills of observation, identification, and classification.
- To develop in the child a holistic understanding of the environment with emphasis on the interrelationship of the natural and the social environments
- To sensitize the child to social issues and develop in him/her a respect for difference and diversity.

Upper Primary Stage

- To develop an understanding about the earth as the habitat of humankind and other forms of life.
- To initiate the learner into a study of her/his own region, state, and country in the global context.
- To initiate the learner into a study of India's past with reference to other parts of the world.

To introduce the learner to the functioning and dynamics of social and political institutions and processes of the country (NCERT, 2006, p.5.)

Indicators of Assessment

We want children to learn social sciences by developing different kinds of skills, conceptual knowledge, feelings and sensitiveness. We can draw a broad list of indicators for assessment which can help to plan our learning tasks. Each indicator consists of abilities that need to be developed in children. At elementary stage we should help their abilities to develop along the following indicators:

Table 1: Indicators vis-à-vis Abilities for Assessing Learning Indicators

Sl.No	Indicators	Abilities
1	Observation and Recording	Reporting, narrating and drawing; picture-reading, making pictures, tables and maps
2	Discussion	Listening, talking, expressing opinions, finding out from others
3	Expression	Drawing, body movements, creative writing, sculpting etc.
4	Explanation	Reasoning, making logical connections

5	Classification	Categorizing, grouping, contrasting and comparing
6	Questioning	Expressing curiosity, critical thinking, developing questions
7	Analysis	Predicting, making hypotheses and inferences
8	Experimentation	Improvising, making things and doing experiments
9	Concerns for Justice and Equality	Sensitivity towards the disadvantaged or differently abled, showing concern for environment
10	Cooperation	Taking responsibility and initiative, sharing and working together

Alternative Assessment Strategies

Our current practices of evaluation of pupils learning usually employ teacher made and standardized tests using multiple choice or other objective type items. These evaluation practices are too used in measuring complex problem solving skills, divergent thinking, collaborative efforts among students and communication skills. Though these practices were challenged almost two decades ago, we still continue to follow the same in our educational institutions. It is high time to think of introducing alternative assessment in our educational institutions.

Alternative assessment procedures are based upon constructivist principles of knowledge construction. Fundamental focus of such procedures lies on learner's ability for creative expression and proficiency in real life task and activities.

Assessment in social science does not have to be limited to only paper and pencil test. Assessment can be done through drama, picture reading tasks, projects, experiments, children's drawing and even dialogues with children.

Assessing through Creative Writing, Acting and Dancing

When children are given a chance for creative expression-either through acting, drawing or creative writing, do they learn more effectively. It also makes it positive for us to assess their original ideas. Let us take the theme environmental pollution and see how assessment can be done in three ways:

A: Conventional Questions

- Name three human activities that cause water pollution.

B: Drawing

- Draw picture showing how water gets polluted.

C: Creative Writing Exercise

- Describe how water of your village pond gets polluted and suggest how to prevent it.

Picture Reading Tasks for Assessment

Many kinds of questions can be framed using pictures and photographs to give children to express their ability to observe, make connections and interpret. For example, present the paintings of different temple of our country, ask the students to observe and to answer the following questions:

1. Describe the people's love for art and music.
2. Can you guess the number of days/months/years devoted to construct temple in painting C?
3. Describe the life style (for example food habit, dress pattern) of people from painting A.

Children's Drawing

Children can express themselves much more freely and deeply through drawings. It gives an opportunity to the children for personal interpretation and imagination. Children enjoy drawing. It is also a pleasurable way of asking them about their understanding about a concept or idea. Each child's drawing is different and distinct. Drawing is not only an enjoyable activity for children but a very effective learning opportunity for teachers. As we all see here, drawings help teachers in assessing children's concepts, ideas, thinking and personal feelings, which they may not to express in words. Look at the example follows:

Example: Draw a picture of a village pond.

This drawing exercise may give us many insights into children's thinking about how water in villages gets polluted and different pollutants etc. As an assessment exercise this becomes an important guide for further learning.

Field Visit

Visits are meant not only for an enjoyable outing but can offer several opportunities for teachers to assess what children are learning all along- before going out, during the visit, and also after returning. Young children learn much more through observing and finding out for themselves. For instance, a visit to a nearby cottage industry to see and record the raw materials used, number of people engaged, marketing potentials, daily/monthly income of workers etc. help the children learn better than listening to teacher in the class.

Portfolio Assessment

Portfolio refers to a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of a student's efforts, progress, or achievements in a given area over a period of time. It is more than a folder stuffed with student papers, video tapes, progress reports, or related materials. Portfolio should contain not only the best work but all kinds of work to show the growth and progress of the child over the entire school year. Such a collection shows to teachers and parents what the child has accomplished and is a record of the actual work done. The actual work done by a child over the year can be collected in a portfolio. For example, you can maintain a portfolio for each of your students by pasting pockets on the classroom walls and asking children to put their following types of works, from time to time, in their respective pockets:

- Written materials-worksheets, creative writings, tests, reports of out-of classroom activities etc.
- Various drawings-plants, flowers, animals etc.
- Craft work like paper folding and paper cutting.
- Greeting cards prepared by children.
- Letters to the child from others.
- List of story books read by the child.
- Collection of leaves, textiles etc.
- Diary paragraphs written by children in a fearless way.
- Samples of child's self assessment sheets.

Thus, portfolio is a collection rather than a single piece of work. As the school year progresses the collection in the portfolio increases. At the end of every term the teacher looks at each child's portfolio to assess her progress and gives specific and useful feedback to parents. The portfolio often helps

parents to know more about their own child, about abilities and interests they may not have observed at home, and helps them discuss with the teacher the child’s performance, progress and growth.

Rubrics for Performance-Based Assessment

A rubric is a scoring tool created by experts, teacher, or both teacher and students for assessment of student’s performance in any area, including curricular subjects, curricular activities, and socio-personal qualities. It is a set of criteria and standards related to learning objectives that is used to assess students’ performance/assignments. Rubrics allow for standardized evaluation according to specified criteria, making grading simpler and more transparent. It is a scoring guide that seeks to evaluate a student’s performance based on the sum of a full range of criteria rather than a single numerical score. A rubric is a working guide for students and teachers, usually handed out before the assignment begins in order to get students to think about the criteria on which their work will be judged. Rubrics can be analytic or holistic, and they can be created for any content area including math, science, history, writing, drama, art, music, etc. It is a formative type of assessment because it becomes an ongoing part of the whole teaching and learning process. Students themselves are involved in the assessment process through both peer and self-assessment. As students become familiar with rubrics, they can assist their teachers in the rubric design process.

Table 2: Rubric to Assess a Project Report Prepared by Students

Category	4=Excellent	3=Very Good	2=Satisfactory	1=Need Improvement
Organization	Information is properly organized with well-connected paragraphs and sub-headings	Information is organized with well-connected paragraphs	Information is organized, but paragraphs are not well-connected	The Information appears to be disorganized
Amount of Information	All topics are addressed and all questions answered with at least 2 sentences about each.	All topics are addressed and most questions answered with at least 2 sentences about each.	All topics are addressed and most questions answered with 1 sentence about each.	One or more topics were not addressed.
Quality of Information	Information clearly relates to the main topic. It includes several supporting details and/or examples.	Information clearly relates to the main topic. It provides 1-2 supporting details and/or examples	Information clearly relates to the main topic. No details and/or examples are given	Information has little or nothing to do with the main topic.
Grammatical Standard	No grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.	Almost no grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.	A few grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.	Many grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.

Graphic Organizer	Graphic organizer or outline has been completed and shows clear, logical relationships between all topics and sub-topics.	Graphic organizer or outline has been completed and shows clear, logical relationships between most topics and sub-topics.	Graphic organizer or outline has been started and includes some topics and sub-topics.	Graphic organizer or outline has not been started.
Diagrams and Illustrations	Diagrams and illustrations are neat, accurate and add to the reader's understanding of the topic.	Diagrams and illustrations are accurate and add to the reader's understanding of the topic	Diagrams and illustrations are neat and accurate and sometimes add to the reader's understanding of the topic	Diagrams and illustrations not accurate or do not add to the reader's understanding of the topic

Source: Senapaty, 2010, pp.46-47.

Rubrics improve student's end products and, therefore, increase learning. When teachers evaluate papers or projects, they know what makes a good final product and why. When students receive rubrics beforehand, they understand how they will be evaluated and can prepare accordingly. Rubrics offer several advantages:

Use of Grades

One of the drawbacks in the present marking system of 101-point scale that runs from 0-100 is the absence of both absolute zero and 100. The zero that is artificially created for the convenience of the users does not represent the nothingness of an attribute, nor does the score of 100 signify the perfection in achievement. This results in variations in spread of scores in different subject areas. This limitation neither allows the comparison of scores from test to test nor from subject to subject.

This shortcoming can be overcome if the students are placed in ability bands that represent ranges of scores. These ability bands may vary according to the number of categories one wishes to employ for the classification of students. Each ability range may be designated with a letter which is called a grade. Several committees and commissions in the past, even prior to NPE-POA, 1992, have recommended the use of grades in place of marks.

In the context of assessment, grading is essentially a method of using a set of symbols, e.g. A, B, C, D, E that ought to be clearly defined and uniformly understood by the students, teachers, parents and all the concerned. Marks are also a type of grades on a very big 101-point scale. A properly introduced grading system may not only provide for the comparison of students' performance, but also indicate the quality of performance. Grading may be carried out in a variety of ways: (i) direct grading and indirect grading; (ii) absolute grading and relative grading.

Direct Grading

In direct grading, the performance of learner is assessed in qualitative terms and expressed in terms of letter grades (such as A, B, C, D ...). This method can profitably be used for the assessment of curricular subjects, curricular activities and social and personal qualities.

Indirect Grading

In indirect grading, the performance of the learner is first assessed in terms of marks and subsequently transformed into letter grades using absolute or relative grading procedure.

Absolute Grading

Absolute grading involves direct conversion of marks into grades irrespective of the distribution of marks in a subject. It is just like categorizing the students into five categories as follows:

Table 3: Categories of Grades

Range of marks	Grade
75% and above	A
60% to 74%	B
45% to 59%	C
33% to 44%	D
Below 33%	E

In absolute grading system, the distribution of grades is not predetermined. If all pupils demonstrate a high level of performance all will receive high grades. If some pupils demonstrate low level of performances they will receive low grades.

Relative Grading

Relative grading is known as grade on the curve. The curve refers to normal probability curve. It is also known as 'norm referenced grading'. The assignment of relative grades is essentially a matter of ranking the pupils in order of overall achievement and assigning letter grade (e.g. A, B, C, D, E). The proportion of As, Bs, Cs, Ds and Es to be used must be determined prior to letter grades are assigned. Grading on the normal curve that has been widely used in the past results in an equal percentage of As and Es; and Bs and Ds. For example, if the students will be divided into five categories, the distribution of grade wise cases would be as follows:

Table 4: Distribution of grades

Letter Grade	Interval (sigma distances)	No. of cases
A	1.5 to 00	7%
B	0.5 to 1.5	24%
C	-0.5 to 0.5	38%
D	-1.5 to -0.5	24%
E	-00 to -1.50	7%

Conclusion

The basic purpose of assessment is to improve teaching learning process. A good evaluation can become an integral part of the learning process and benefit both the learners themselves and the teachers by giving feedback. There is a widespread belief that social sciences merely transmit information. It is book centered and is required to be memorized for examinations. The contents of these textbooks are considered to be unconnected to daily realities. This is mostly due to the facts that

our current practices of evaluation of pupils learning, particularly in social science, usually employ teacher made and standardized tests using multiple choice or other objective type items. These evaluation practices are too used in measuring complex problem solving skills, divergent thinking, collaborative efforts among students and communication skills. It is high time to think of introducing alternative methods of assessment in our educational institutions. Alternative assessment procedures are based upon constructivist principles of knowledge construction. Fundamental focus of such procedures lies on learner's ability for creative expression and proficiency in real life task and activities. Assessment in social science, therefore, does not have to be limited to only paper and pencil test. Assessment can be done through a variety of methods such as drama, picture reading tasks, projects and experiments, portfolio, rubrics, children's drawing and even dialogues with children so as to make the evaluation exercises activity based, participatory and joyful.

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