Language and Literacy

The education system in Iran is a social and cultural institution that serves as the most important organization for the edification, dissemination, and transfer of culture in Iranian society, helping students to lay appropriate foundations and develop appropriate values.\(^1\) Article 15 of the Iranian Constitution states that the official language of Iran is Persian (Farsi) and that “the use of regional and tribal languages in the press and mass media, as well as for teaching of their literature in schools, is allowed in addition to Persian.”\(^2\) The population of Iran is approximately 79 million with a literacy rate of 87 percent among those age 15 and older.\(^3\) Persian is the mother tongue of at least 65 percent of the population and is spoken by most of the remaining 35 percent.

Iran is a diverse country with a population comprising many ethnic backgrounds, including Persians (53 percent), Azerbaijanis (16 percent), Kurds (10 percent), Lurs (7 percent), Arabs (2 percent), Baluchis (2 percent), Turkmens (1 percent), and Turkic tribal groups such as the Mazandarani and Gilaki (7 percent).\(^4\) A one month program is offered to students entering first grade who do not speak Farsi at home. According to article 3 of the Constitution, the government is responsible for providing free education and strengthening the spirit of inquiry and investigation in science, technology, culture, and Islamic studies through secondary school. Religious minority groups including Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians are free to teach and practice their own religion.

Overview of the Education System

Islamic principles and precepts form the basis of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Constitution, which attributes great importance to education. The ultimate goals of education in Iran are grouped into cultural and ethical; scientific and instructional; social, environmental, and life; and economic goals. The structure of the education system in Iran through the upper secondary level is highly centralized.

Iran’s Ministry of Education is composed of several deputy ministries, organizations, and centers with specific administrative responsibilities, including developing goals and strategies, conducting and supervising educational activities, developing curricula and textbooks, publishing and distributing educational materials, planning and conducting professional development and education for teachers, carrying out student assessments and examinations, and defining human resources policies within the Ministry (see Exhibit 1).\(^5\)
Exhibit 1: Divisions in the Ministry of Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deputy Ministries</th>
<th>Organizations</th>
<th>Centers</th>
<th>Offices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary Education</td>
<td>Educational Research and Planning</td>
<td>Human Resources and Information Technology Planning</td>
<td>Secretariat of the Central Recruitment Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Renovating and Equipping Schools</td>
<td>Talented and Gifted Students and Young Researchers</td>
<td>Performance Evaluation and Responding to Complaints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational and Cultural Affairs</td>
<td>Private Schools and Public Participation</td>
<td>Department of International Affairs and Schools Abroad</td>
<td>Veterans Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Physical Education</td>
<td>Students with Special Needs</td>
<td>Assessment and Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Affairs and Parliament</td>
<td>Literacy Movement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development and Management Support</td>
<td>Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Literacy Movement Organization, established in 1979 in affiliation with the Ministry of Education, has the mission of teaching reading, writing, and simple calculation skills to illiterate Iranian citizens and of promoting Islamic culture among participants. To attain these goals, the Literacy Movement Organization coordinates activities that strengthen literacy skills, promote cultural standards, increase new reader knowledge, expand the writing culture among different groups of society, produce textbooks for those learning to read, and train adult education teachers. Some of these activities include:

- Preparing continuous instruction in class and virtually via multimedia
- Providing books to rural and public libraries, mobile libraries, and prisons
- Organizing and supplying book exhibitions
- Conducting reading games for people ages 10 to 49
- Publishing monthly magazines for new readers
- Providing community learning centers with posters, bulletins, and magazines
- Developing and preparing multimedia packages to empower rural mothers to foster creativity in children
- Creating a continuing education literacy program

The Supreme Educational Council, an autonomous legislative body, is responsible for adopting and communicating executive policies; designing mechanisms for achieving policy objectives; improving educational structures and processes; updating, amending, and coordinating policies; and monitoring the
implementation of programs pertaining to the strategic reform of education. The council is required to provide the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution with an annual progress report on the implementation of the fundamental reform plan and the performance of the Ministry of Education. At the tertiary level, the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology oversees universities offering nonmedical degrees; the Ministry of Health and Medical Education oversees medical schools and paramedical degrees; and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs oversees informal vocational education.

The formal education system in Iran includes six years of primary education. At age 12, children begin three years of lower secondary education followed by three years of upper secondary education (see Exhibit 2). Each school year begins on September 21 and ends on June 21 of the following year. A high school diploma is required to enter university.

Exhibit 2: Overview of the Education System in Iran

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Schooling</th>
<th>Ages</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Number of Years</th>
<th>Number of Sessions per Week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preprimary</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>1–3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Varies by institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary (two three-year periods)</td>
<td>6–8</td>
<td>4–6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25 (45 minutes each)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Secondary</td>
<td>12–14</td>
<td>7–9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30 (50 minutes each)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Secondary</td>
<td>15–17</td>
<td>10–12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>35 (50 minutes each)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>15–17</td>
<td>10–12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>40 (50 minutes each)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The optional level of preprimary education prepares children for the mandatory stage of primary education. A one month course in Farsi is required in addition to regular preprimary activities in parts of the country where Farsi is not the primary language. The Organization for Educational Research and Planning and the Welfare Organization are responsible for the supervision and educational preparation of preschool centers. Preschools may be public or private and may cater to only boys or girls, although many admit both. The main objectives of preprimary education are to:

- Contribute to the physical, mental, emotional, and social growth of children
- Promote children’s socioemotional development, self-confidence, sense of environmental conditions, and sense of aesthetics
- Provide children with opportunities to enjoy and be interested in group activities
- Strengthen religious and ethical values and national identity
- Promote desired social and individual behavior in children
- Promote oral language development and communication skills

Primary education, the first stage of formal education, comprises two three-year periods from Grades 1 to 6 for students ages 6 to 11. The main objectives of primary education are to:
• Create an atmosphere for moral development
• Develop literacy and numeracy skills
• Develop social skills
• Teach students about personal hygiene
• Develop students’ talents, abilities, and physical strength

The subjects taught in primary school include the Holy Quran, Farsi (reading, writing, and dictation), mathematics, science, religious education, social studies (social studies, history, and geography), art, and physical education. In addition to the above subjects, thinking and inquiry, technology, and occupations also are taught in sixth grade. Typically, one teacher is responsible for teaching all subjects except religion, art, and physical education in Grades 1 to 3. In Grades 4 to 6, mathematics and science are taught by specialist teachers in most schools.

The lower secondary stage of education lasts three years (Grades 7 to 9) for students ages 12 to 14. At this stage, students become familiar with various subjects in the physical and social sciences and in the humanities and art. The main objectives of lower secondary education are to:
• Develop moral and intellectual abilities
• Increase general knowledge
• Strengthen academic discipline and scientific imagination
• Identify individual preferences and talents in order to direct students toward suitable programs of study

In addition to the subjects taught at the primary level, students in lower secondary school receive second language instruction in a language of their choice (English, French, or German), vocational education, and defense education (boys only).

Upper secondary education lasts three years (Grades 10 to 12) for students ages 15 to 17. At this stage, students choose among three tracks of study: academic, technical and vocational, and Kar-Danesh (or knowledge skill, a flexible vocational branch). These programs have different objectives and are intended for students with different abilities and interests. Academic programs prepare students to enter university; students who select these programs focus on mathematics, natural science, or social science based on their educational backgrounds and career interests. Both technical and vocational and Kar-Danesh programs prepare students for participation in the labor market after finishing high school, leading to a post-diploma (associate diploma) degree or a skill certificate diploma, respectively. Students who complete these programs have the opportunity to continue their education at a vocational college, where they may choose a program based on their capabilities and interests, or to take a university entrance examination after completing vocational college.

Schools in Iran may be public or private at all levels from elementary school through university. Approximately 12.4 percent of primary schools, 12 percent of lower secondary schools, and 18 percent of upper secondary schools and technical and vocational institutions are private, for a total of 13 percent
of all schools. These schools must conform to the regulations of the Ministry of Education, though they are financed primarily through students’ tuition. Public schools in Iran are free for all citizens.

Language/Reading Curriculum in the Fourth Grade

Reading Policy

Reading literacy, including reading skills acquisition and comprehension of written texts, is one of the most important abilities students acquire during the first years of schooling. Playing a major role in the mental, social, and emotional development of each student, reading literacy provides a foundation for the learning of other subjects. In addition to understanding the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences, comprehension involves deciphering authors’ main objectives through verbal codes and symbolism. Reading with persistency goes further than achieving knowledge, and therefore learning will become enjoyable. Students acquire reasoning abilities and knowledge.

The current national curriculum for Farsi language in primary school is fully centralized and integrated; thus, reading instruction and its goals are incorporated with other components of language instruction. The main objective of reading education is the development of accuracy, reflection, reasoning, and judgment skills with an emphasis on the ability to:

- Write with focus and accuracy
- Read aloud or to oneself
- Read rhythmically and harmoniously
- Identify the main idea of a text
- Recognize the connection among different parts of a text
- Use appropriate instruments that are suitable for reading
- Expand point of view through reading
- Acquire desirable reading habits

The Organization for Educational Research and Planning developed the national curriculum with the cooperation of school districts and teachers. The curriculum guide prescribes goals, objectives, processes, methods, and materials for all students. Parents are informed about the reading curriculum through meetings with teachers and school administrators, public awareness campaigns, the Ministry of Education’s website, and parents’ associations and organizations. Visiting inspectors, research programs, and national and regional assessments evaluate the implementation of the curriculum.

The aim of reading instruction in the primary grades is not merely to gain the ability to read textbooks through traditional methods. In the revised curriculum, reading is considered to be a conscious activity in which students collect knowledge about their favorite topics, satisfy their sense of curiosity, and gain personal enjoyment.
At the primary levels, reading is accompanied by activities such as movement, games, and singing. During the process of learning language, students should not only focus on identifying letters, words, and correct pronunciations, but also consider reading as a tool for transferring thoughts and ideas; fostering thinking skills such as imagining, justifying, and judging; and problem solving. Because the curriculum basically guides students as they read textbooks and other sources, it is not necessary for all students to read at the same pace. In fact, each student may read a different text during class.11

Teachers, Teacher Education, and Professional Development

Teacher Education Specific to Reading

Teacher training universities offer courses at the associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s degree levels to high school graduates who passed the national higher education entrance examination. Students may specialize in mathematics, science, physical education, social studies, primary education, Persian language and literature, internal affairs, Islamic and Arabic languages, art, or special education. Graduates of these programs are qualified to teach. Other universities and higher education institutions offer four year education programs leading to a bachelor’s degree. High school graduates who have passed the national higher education entrance examination are eligible to apply. Once admitted, students are required to take courses in pedagogy and educational psychology along with specialized courses in their subject area.

Technical and vocational colleges fall under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Higher Technical and Vocational Education. These colleges select their students from the graduates of technical and vocational and Kar-Danesh schools.

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

The Ministry of Education’s Bureau for the Scientific Promotion of Human Resources has developed short term courses and workshops that provide general and specific educational content to help teachers and other staff members develop their knowledge and skills. Pre-employment training, training for promotion, teacher education regarding newly implemented policies, and computer literacy courses are mandatory for teachers. The Curriculum Development Center and other offices also assist language and literature departments and teachers.

All textbooks are accompanied by a teacher’s edition and a teacher’s guide, which includes recommendations for teaching, assessment methods, and student activities. Almost all teachers use additional workbooks prepared by private sector organizations, but this is not mandatory. A series of instructional videos for teachers is included with most new textbooks, introducing them to the goals and objectives of the program of study. Educational magazines produced under the supervision of the Organization for Educational Research and Planning are available to teachers for additional support.
Reading Instruction in the Primary Grades

Instructional Materials

The Organization for Educational Research and Planning prepares all textbooks and curriculum materials in Iran. Teachers are encouraged to use cards, maps, labels, magazines, and storybooks as other tools for instruction. Class libraries are recommended at some schools. These tools diversify reading and increase students’ interest.

Use of Technology

The use of videos, overhead projectors, calculators, and computers in all subject areas and at all grade levels is recommended. Individual schools and teachers decide whether to use this equipment when it is available. Currently, several schools in large cities integrate educational software or the Internet into their curriculum. The Ministry of Education prepares instructional videos and compact discs for schools to use.

Second Language Instruction

Students in lower secondary school receive second language instruction in a language of their choice (English, French, or German). Learning Arabic is mandatory.

Students with Reading Difficulties

Diagnostic Testing

Prior to the start of primary school, a school readiness assessment is administered to identify students with special needs, and determine whether students are ready to start first grade or need to be directed to a program for students with special needs.

Instruction for Children with Reading Difficulties

Students with learning disabilities are included in regular classrooms when possible, though they may participate in special learning or rehabilitation programs.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Schools issue descriptive report cards for individual students in October and June. Students who do not qualify for promotion to the next grade in at least three subjects must participate in compensatory sessions and complete further enrichment activities by the following September. Until Grade 6, students are continually assessed through observation of their in-class activities, oral or written examinations, and homework.

At the end of Grade 6, students take a regional examination developed by the Office for Assessment in the Ministry of Education in each province. Students who pass the examination receive an elementary school leaving certificate, while students who fail can retake the examination in September. Students who fail a second time may retake the examination the following year. The primary education
grading system uses points earned through continual written and oral examinations incorporating national criteria. A total of 10 points out of 20 are required for promotion to the following grade.

The system of promotion in secondary school is similar to the system in primary school, but grading is not descriptive. Students in secondary school receive report cards on which they are graded on a 20 point system in each subject. At the end of upper secondary education, students who pass a national final examination receive a high school diploma. Graduates who want to go on to further education take a university entrance examination administered by the National Organization for Educational Testing.

Special Reading Initiatives

The Fundamental Reform Document of Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran has identified 10 domains as key components of education and has defined educational goals, basic competencies, and special objectives for each subject area. Accordingly, Farsi textbooks are compiled with consideration of how the five components of knowledge, thinking, belief, ethics and morals, and practice relate to oneself, others, creation, and creator (God). The approach schools in Iran take to language instruction goes beyond teaching listening, speaking, reading, and writing; it aims to foster and improve thinking skills such as critical reasoning.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Previous PIRLS results have impacted the schools and research areas and led to evaluation of language teaching objectives and analysis of the factors that contributed to the results. Revisions to specific curriculum components are being considered due to updates to teaching objectives. Informational texts have been added to primary school language textbooks, and the PIRLS framework and its objectives have been included in teacher’s editions of textbooks.

PIRLS released items have been distributed to teachers for incorporation into their classroom instruction. Professional development sessions have been conducted to introduce the PIRLS framework and its objectives to teachers.

Finally, potential research opportunities using PIRLS results have been presented to master’s and doctoral students studying reading education and curriculum planning.

References


