



# An Investigation into the Type and Amount of Representation of Intended Values of Iran's National Curriculum Document in Vision Series



Alireza Rasti\*

(corresponding author)

Assistant professor in Applied Linguistics and TESOL, Department of English Language Teaching, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Salman Farsi University of Kazerun, Kazerun, Iran

Email: a.rasti@kazerunsfu.ac.ir

## ABSTRACT

In today's world, we are witnessing a resurgence of interest of formal schooling systems in what has come to be termed as Values Education. Part of this interest emanates from the emphasis laid by contemporary discourses, especially those around sustainable development, on the inclusion of commitment-oriented values in the educational arena and abiding by them. In keeping with this, by extracting policy-makers' intended values as reflected in such macro policy texts as Iran's National Curriculum Document, the present qualitative study set out to unpack the type and amount of such a reflection of values in secondary schools' English textbooks Vision Series. To this end, and subsequent to the identification of the said document's intended values, having employed the content analytical method, it sought to scrutinize all the clauses of the total set of six textbooks (three student books and three workbooks) in an attempt to lay bare to what extent and how, if any, the values had been represented and foregrounded/backgrounded. It was found, among other things, that personal growth, community-based, health/hygiene-related, and environmental/ecological values, respectively, had the highest frequencies through the provision of pictorial as well as linguistic contexts. Along similar lines, in terms of representational patterns, values such as work/labor-related, religious, nationalist, and aesthetic ones had been poorly reflected in the textbooks. The study is liable to have implications for the major educational stakeholders, including teachers, the series compilers, and educational policy-makers.

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\* Alireza Rasti is a faculty member at Salman Farsi University of Kazerun. He has published several articles in refereed journals in Foreign Language Education Policy, Materials Evaluation, and CDA.



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**Alireza Rasti\***

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## 1. Introduction

In today's fast-paced world in which progressive discourses are dominant, it comes as no surprise that we are witnessing a reemergence and redefinition of values and their inclusion in the formal schooling systems in a wide variety of countries. The discourse of sustainable development, which is informed by the necessity for the preservation of natural resources, the access of all individuals to equal opportunities, multiculturalism, and the citizens' commitment to the above or pertinent issues (Steger, Battersby, & Siracusa, 2014), and globalization which has made humans face fresh and at times unpredictable relationships (Steger, 2004), have caused the establishment of some kind of new order. It goes without saying that the establishment of every new world order leads to a (re)defining/reading as well as an establishment of a series of specific values at any given period. These two powerful forces, vis-à-vis sustainable development and globalization, have resulted in the formation of a discourse centered around the necessity of provision of what is in general education described as values education. The issue is of such significance that some experts (i.e., Lovat, 2009) consider values education as a requirement for quality teaching.

Values are a value-laden notion which, for their seemingly stable and universal essence, are highly dynamic and context-sensitive (Zajda, 2009, xviii). It is

because different societies and dominant discourses in every age lay emphasis on a different set of values than what other societies stress and they have their own unique definition of them. This tends to go in so far as a phenomenon called value shift occurs in some societies. Zajda (2009, p. xviii) gives the example of the former Soviet Union which in light of its values disintegration underwent a transformation from ideological Communist values, being mainly collectivistic, into mostly individualistic liberal Western ones. The common yet slippery term 'values' has been variously defined and conceptualized by experts and educators. Thio (2005), for instance, considers them as "socially shared ideas about what is good, desirable or important" (p. 46). According to Zajda (2009),

Values may refer to a particular belief system (believing that pluralist democracy is the best political system), a mode of conduct (being honest, tolerant and courageous), a state of existence (peace, tolerance and equality), or a moral judgment (truth, beauty and justice). (p. xiv)

In general, values can be seen as a set of ideas and ideals which propel ahead individual members of human society in regard to the decisions they make (un)consciously in their personal and social life domains, and which determine their

behavior patterns. [Lovat](#) (2019) believes, in order for the teaching of a teacher (in a broad sense) to be effective and bring change in the learner, it should be based on teaching explicit and implicit values. By the latter, he means that "the learning environment must be values-filled, characterized by care, respect, trust, encouragement, etc." (p. 11). Along similar lines, values must also be taken into consideration explicitly. It means that "building the learning discourse around values" ([Lovat](#), 2019, p. 13) at both curricular and extra-curricular levels be done.

Regarding the importance of values in educational systems, [Lovat](#) (2019) conceives of them as pedagogy and not as part of it. [Halstead](#) (1996) views them as an indispensable part of education theory and the practical activities of educational centers, especially schools, in that

First, schools and individual teachers within schools are a major influence, alongside the family, the media and the peer group, on the developing values of children and young people, and thus of society at large. Secondly, schools reflect and embody the values of society... (p. 3)

The existence of such perspectives clearly points up the significance of the role and place of values in the world's formal schooling systems for the purpose of educating citizens who will be able to more appropriately adapt themselves to the various challenges in the contemporary world and do well in tackling them. With this in mind and also the controversial nature of values owing to cultural, political, and ideological reasons, it is imperative that teachers and educational researchers – in both the position of producer and consumer of research findings – do their part seriously in analyzing the essence and consequences of such a pedagogy and raise their own as well as others' critical knowledge of values in education and sensitize their nation's educational systems to attend to the kind and way of dealing with them.

### **1.1. Iran's National Curriculum Document and the Intended Values in it**

Iran's National Curriculum is an educational policy macro-document which was issued to be enacted in the country's formal education system and its subsystems by the then Minister of Education in 1391/2011. It was designed as a roadmap to steer education in all schools in all curricular elements of pedagogy, content, goals, and evaluation. Since prior to this date the formal education system was not based on any systematically compiled curriculum text, the Establishment

went into great lengths to promote and consequently help implement the new curriculum document in accordance with the policymaker's intentions. In the words of one of the experts involved in its design, 'the National Curriculum Document was intended to be made into a strategic comprehensive plan for the creation of change in all domains and facets' (Mehrmohammadi, 2014, p. 219).

In an index attached to the fifth edition of the National Curriculum Document and located under the entry The Foundations of the National Curriculum and the subheading Values Foundations, the policymaker has offered a list of examples of four major categories of values stressed by the policy text. These include values pertinent to "God, self, people and creation" ([The National Curriculum Document, 5<sup>th</sup> edition](#), p. 58).

In this investigation, the researcher has sought to extract the realizations of these four general categories of values in English school textbooks entitled the *Vision*, to compare them with the values available in the fifth edition of the National Curriculum Document, and to report the results in relation to the most common global trends and noticeable research findings at the international level.

## 2. Literature Review

A glance at the literature focused on values education shows that the research is bulking up on a regular basis. Such growth,

however, does not enjoy sufficient quality and pace and it seems, except for some sporadic small-scale works (e.g., [Sharifian, 2020](#); [Soleimani & Lovat, 2019](#); [Yazdani, AkbariLakeh, Ahmady, Afshar, & Foroutan, 2015](#)), no noteworthy studies have been conducted, and it behooves investigators well to treat the issue both theoretically (due to values being context-embedded and owing to the ideological structure of the country) and practically in Iran's educational subsystems.

At the global level, [Berkowitz \(2011\)](#) in a review literature has enumerated fifteen research-based educational activities, proved to lead to the effectiveness and efficiency of the inclusion of values in education. Among them, one can cite discussion around moral dilemmas, parental involvement in education, empowerment, role modeling, and mentoring.

As far as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts is concerned, [Qooyimah \(2016\)](#) gave an account of the implementation of a values-based curriculum in the Indonesian educational system, especially in schools and saw the religious context as responsible for the rather smooth enactment of the said curriculum. In another study, [Feng \(2019\)](#), adopting a multi-modal perspective, analyzed the reflection of values in the texts and images of English textbooks in Hong Kong schools. The findings clearly pointed to a transformation of the values from a

personal to an interpersonal and ultimately to a collective level.

In keeping with the Critical Paradigm dominant in contemporary research in the humanities, several studies have set out to view values as discursive constructs and to look into the nature of values in curricula in educational systems using this theoretical lens ([Mirfakhraie, 2018](#); [Tekin, 2010](#); [Xiong & Peng, 2020](#)).

In the Iranian EFL context, as mention was made of it previously, to date very few notable investigations centered around values education and the inclusion of its instances in school curricula have been conducted. This issue could, in turn, be considered the innovative aspect of the present research, which has attempted to examine the way and extent of reflection of value-related categories and components derived from the National Curriculum Document. Accordingly, it has sought to advance the answer to the following two research questions:

- **To what extent, if any, have the policymaker and top educational decision-maker's intended values been represented in the English textbooks in senior high schools?**
- **What patterns, if any, can be spotted in the kind or nature of reflection of values?**

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. A Look at the Data

The data of the present study consists of all the clauses and phrases used in the English textbook series the *Vision*, which are taught in the Iranian senior high schools. The series include three student books and three workbooks. The reason for the choice of the books is that in the preface to all of them there are references to the fact they are based on explicit or implicit principles in the macro-policy text, the National Curriculum Document. The present researcher, who has examined the coursebooks in terms of form, content, and methodology, especially with regard to the philosophy of writing, subject matter, sequencing and arrangement, in the BA course Textbook Evaluation and Content Analysis of High School Books for English-major students, was set on scrutinizing the possible amount of (mis)match of the said materials with the macro-policy text on which they are based. He further set out to detect the likely representational patterns in the reflection of values. The unit of analysis in the study was clauses and phrases.

#### 3.2. Data Analytic Procedure

The method employed in this study is qualitative content analysis (QCA). According to [Schreier \(2012\)](#), "QCA is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material. It is done by classifying material as instances of the

categories of a coding frame" (p. 2). Some properties of the method, which is widely used in materials evaluation, include: being data-driven, being situational and context-specific, emphasizing hidden meanings, and being inductive (Schreier, 2012).

The following stages were involved in the current investigation: First, ten percent of the content of each book from among the six textbooks (three student books and three workbooks) was closely examined in an attempt to identify the instances of realization of the intended values in the National Curriculum Document in relation to God, self, people, and creation in the analytical units of clauses and phrases of the books. This was done to ensure the 'variability' criterion recommended by experts on the methodology (Schreier, 2012, p. 149) by examining a portion of each subset of the mini-corpus.

In fact, the investigation was guided by these four broad categories at the early stages; However, they were subsequently fine-tuned into and recorded as more specific and detailed instances forming the basis for a coding frame. As the study progressed and gained momentum, and was further removed from the pilot phase of analysis of ten percent of the corpus, the codes extracted were modified and became more descriptive. Ultimately, a coding scheme consisting of eight categories of values was developed and it formed the basis for the identification of their instances

in the textbook series. The eight components include:

1. personal-growth values
2. health/hygiene-related values
3. community-related values
4. artistic/cultural/esthetic values
5. nationalist/patriotic values
6. religious values
7. environmental/ecological values
8. work/labor-related values

A point worth mentioning at this stage is that although some inevitable overlap among categories can be detected, it was decided to treat such categories as separate ones considering they were repetitively used in the study corpus. As a case in point, initially work-related values were subsumed under the more general component, individual (growth) values, but later they were isolated as a distinct analytical category for the reason already mentioned above.

Finally, owing to the inaccessibility of a competent coder, itself being one of the limitations of the present research, to help ensure the reliability of all the data (the six English textbooks taught in the Iranian senior high schools), a second round of coding the same corpus using the eight-category grid was performed with an interval of two months. It was intended to maximize intra-coder reliability, or what Schreier (2012, p. 167) calls 'comparison across points in time'. Another aim of doing

this was to clear up any ambiguity or help resolve overlap in the categories.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1. The Nature of Reflection of Values in the Vision Series

In conducting this research, as already alluded to, the finer components of the four general categories of the values intended by the policy-maker in the macro-policy text of the National Curriculum Document, that is, those in relation to God, self, people, and creation, and included in the school English textbooks, the Vision series, were identified, recorded, tallied, and shown in diagrammatic presentation. A point worth mentioning initially is that in the rare cases where the eight afore-mentioned values were concretely rendered in the books, such explicit coverage took on one of the two forms:

As another case in point for the explicit rendition of values to the end-user of the afore-mentioned series, on page 41 of Vision 3 student book, the necessity of attending to the Iranian national values and past heritage has been delineated using the value-added attribute of 'important':

Yet another **important** thing is our heritage and culture. We have much to learn from

our parents regarding our heritage, to be proud of our past.

As for the nature of treating the intended values in the textbooks, it should be mentioned that another way the authors have adopted in the explicit provision of the values is the use of deontic modal verbs such as *must* or *should* in the context of the relevant clauses. Exploiting deontic modal verbs will guide the reader in such a way that they notice a text is addressing a socially accepted value. As an illustration, on page 25 of Vision 2 student book, respecting and recognition of other languages, as a kind of community-related and pluralistic value, have been highlighted using the deontic modal verb *should*.

... we **should** respect all languages, no matter how different they are and how many speakers they have.

As another instance of grabbing the reader's attention to a specific value using the above verbs, on page 62 of Vision 2 workbook, the following value-intensive sentence has been foregrounded and offered to the reader as an obvious realization of an accredited value – a kind of value which indicates in this particular context cultural understanding and respect, having being subsumed under community-related values:



When we meet local people, we **must** not forget that we are guests! So, we **must** respect their way of living. When visiting historical and especially holy places, we **must** respect them, too.

On other occasions, being great in number, in which the intended values have been implicitly provided, an attempt has been made to render them to the learner and the teacher via the surrounding pictorial or sufficient and appropriate linguistic context. For instance, on page 59 of Vision 2 workbook, the phrase *turn off the TV or computer and get active* and the phrase *choose water as a drink* have occurred at the margin of a picture portraying in an unambiguous way healthy lifestyle habits as a reflection of health-hygiene-related values. Similarly, as an example of provision of a linguistic context in highlighting the textbooks' intended values in the secondary schools, one can cite the following sentence on page 49 of Vision 2 student book in which the authors, using the value-added adjective *brave* and the first-person plural pronoun *our*, have tried to attract the ultimate consumers of the textbook's attention, namely the students and possibly the teachers, to the nationalist or patriotic values through establishing a sense of belonging in them:

The **brave** soldiers defended **our** country.

#### 4.2. The Amount of Representation of Values in the Vision Series

Analysis of the findings of the present research in terms of the inclusion of the educational policymaker's intended values in school English textbooks obviously indicates that the authors have sought to take into account all the values mentioned in as significant document as the National Curriculum Document throughout the books used by students, especially secondary school ones, which consist the data for the current investigation. However, as is evident from the pie chart below regarding the percentage of inclusion of each subcategory of the intended values in the aforementioned policy text, such reflection is not free of its own limitations:

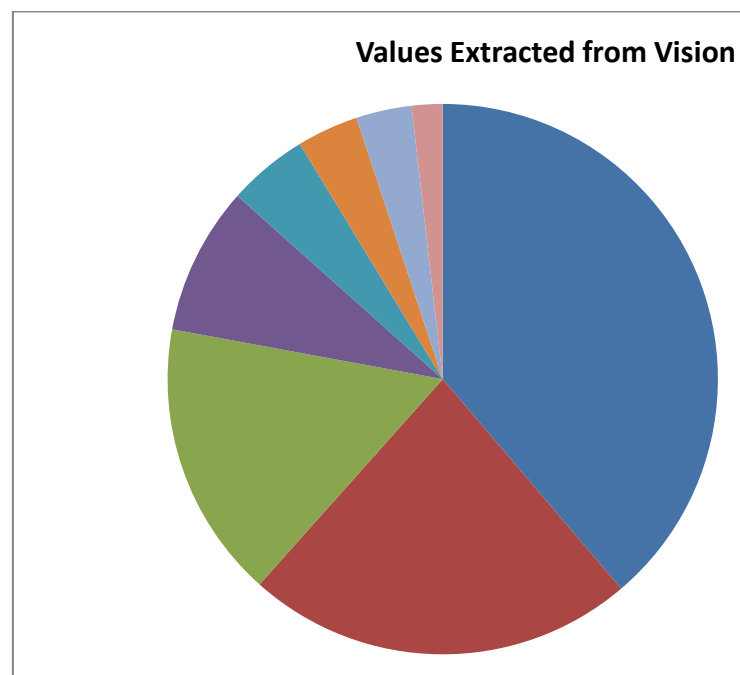


Figure 1. Extent of Inclusion of Values in the Vision Series

The problem detected after considering the above pie chart is that values are not rendered as balanced and

symmetrical; in other words, almost the same weight has not been given to the policymaker's intended values. As can be seen from Figure 1, the four categories of artistic/esthetic, nationalist/patriotic, and work/labor-related values account for less than 15% of all the cases of values in the Vision series, whereas the four categories of personal growth, community-based, health/hygiene-related, and environmental/ecological ones comprise over four fifth of the all instances covered.

A point worth taking into consideration is that the values of the first four categories, that is, personal growth, community-related, health-related, and environmental ones, which account for approximately 86% of the total number of all the values reflected in the books, are mostly values dealing with human survival, and that without due attention to them human life on earth will be at serious risk. The high amount of coverage of such values, which are based on modern man's here-and-now needs, reflect, in a way, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century dominant discourses greatly influenced by globalizing forces and sustainable development and also the neo-liberal thought prevalent in various relationships in society.

Additionally, in regard to the values displayed in the textbooks, the analysis indicated that new values which, due to the influence of technological advances and the

resultant change in people's lifestyle, have emerged and been highlighted, are also present to some extent in the Vision series. One of these contemporary world values is those related to the existence of netizens. For example, on page 59 of Vision 2 student book, a reference has been made to the unpleasant impact of technological resources on the mainly digital contemporary life, and implicitly to the values pertinent to netizenry:

Addiction to technology such as using computers for a long time is also dangerous.

With regard to the communal values in general and pluralistic ones in particular, it should be said that, unlike the books that were taught previously in schools (English 1, 2, 3, and Pre- University English), and that gave a uniform and homogenized view of the Iranian society, and that were in a sense responsible for the othering of ethnicities ([Mirfakhraie, 2008](#)) due to the exclusion of individuals and social groups, the present series renders an account of Iran as a tapestry interwoven with a range of ethnicities with their own unique symbols and indexes of culture. In the textbooks, references have been made to some major ethnicities inhabiting the Iranian Plateau, including Kurds, Azeris, and Qashqaees, having already contributed synergistically to the development of the country and its rich

culture. The sentence below, taken from one of the reading passages in Vision 2 student book (p. 91), illustrates such indirect references to the values of multiculturalism and pluralism:

Many people of the world appreciate the art and skill of a young Iranian girl who weaves a beautiful silk carpet in a small village of **Azarbaijan** or **Kordestan**.

In the final analysis, and for all the positive changes deserving to be praised, it should be pointed out that the books in regard to the coverage of realization of values, especially those accepted by the world community, are removed from the reality, and that it behooves well to reconsider them. In fact, the kind of picture given to the reader about the kind and nature of the values available in the school English textbooks is a conservative one based on the values promoted and stressed by the present social structure. From the perspective of the world trends, it can be said that a specific, inclusive, and balanced view of the contemporary world informed by globalization has not been rendered – one which has come under fire by the researchers of the Critical Paradigm investigating curriculum and in effect the National Curriculum Document in Iran ([Mirfakhraie](#), 2018). As a case in point, the two contemporary values of multiculturalism and pluralism, having close affinity with the democratic values highly

accredited by many nations and subsumed under them, have been implicitly and partially shown vis-à-vis the interaction of the native people with the foreign tourists. This has been a one-way relationship and in the books the Iranians almost always are hosts to foreigners.

## 5. Conclusions

Using qualitative content analytical methodology, the investigator in the present study set out to give a clear picture of the kind and amount of the policymaker and top educational decision-maker's intended values as well as those of the structure with which they are affiliated, reflected in such educational macro-policy texts as the National Curriculum Document. The findings showed that the greatest and the most noticeable occurrences of the all the values found were such universal and immediate ones as personal growth, community-related, health/hygiene-related, and environmental/ecological values. Research carried out such as this one bears significance in that textbooks are a vehicle for the learners' socialization ([Kalmus](#), 2004; [Weng](#), 2010), and it is therefore imperative that learning materials, especially schools textbooks, be closely and thoroughly scrutinized by the textbook assessors to determine down below the surface of

such books which version(s), if any, of the 'reality' intended by the policymaker have been included.

Future investigations could treat the issue of the extent and kind of representation of policymaker's intended values in secondary schools' English textbooks at a level beyond that of text, that is, at a multimodal one with taking both text and image into account, for the purpose of validating the findings of the present study. Along similar lines, investigations could make an analogy between the textbooks of senior high schools and those of the junior ones to determine how, if any, the instances of the policymaker's intended values have been foregrounded or backgrounded. Other research undertakings could focus on teachers as the end-users of the textbooks at the policy level and ask for their opinions on what values, if any, should come first in future textbooks or in the subsequent editions of the existing ones.

Ultimately, it appears that the developers of such macro-policy texts as the National Curriculum Document should be more transparent with regard to the issue of values. It is advisable that the intended values be dissected more carefully so that teachers can notice their realizations better and, in cases of likely gaps, take agentive action and initiative to redress the imbalance. It might be a good idea if some guide would be at the teachers' disposal

([Kheirabadi & Alavimoghadam, 2019](#)) for the purpose of avoiding an insecure interpretation of the National Curriculum Document in general and its discussion of values in particular. Furthermore, since values, especially moral ones, are a determining factor in the teacher's (lack of) decision-making, and teachers' professional development programs need to attend to it ([Johnston, 2003](#)), it requires that policymakers and educational planners set the scene for designing those programs in accordance with the professional needs of the teachers such as those related to reflective practice ([Tabatabaie Yazdi, Motallebzadeh, Ashraf, & Baghaie, 2018](#)). A likely agenda might be to examine to what extent, if any, teachers' value and belief systems in a given context are bound to be congruous with the intensions of the educational policymaker and decision-maker.

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