

Teacher Perceptions: A Missing Link Between Teacher Education and Classroom Assessment.

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Abstract: Assessment is the heart of effective teaching and learning. Teachers therefore must know why they are assessing, what they are assessing, how they are assessing, how to create quality assessment for that particular context and how to communicate results effectively. A qualitative naturalistic inquiry was used to elicit data from teachers, college lecturers and school heads. Two focus groups of teachers and one focus group of lecturers' were conducted to collect data from participants. Each focus group had eight participants. To triangulate data from focus groups ten teachers, five head teachers and five college lecturers were individually interviewed until data reached a saturation point. All participants were selected through purposive sampling. Data from focus groups and in-depth interviews were thematically analysed in line with the qualitative research approaches. The study has revealed that, indeed there is a missing link between teacher education and teacher assessment practices in the Primary schools in Gweru District schools. This was attributed to teachers colleges concentrating on theory of education at the detriment of classroom assessment theory and practice. It also emerged from the study that teachers colleges gave a cursory approach to classroom assessment leading to a production of teachers with limited competences in assessment. This was exacerbated by some lecturers lack of assessment skills, whose experience was based on how they were assessed while they were in school. Furthermore schools were said to do very little in so far as staff developing teachers on assessment was concerned and yet most teachers and lecturers acknowledged that assessment was a grey area. In light of the findings the research recommended a review of the college curriculum to include an emphasis on assessment. Finally, teachers colleges need not to assume that all lecturers are competent in so far as teaching students on classroom assessment practices. There is need to mount staff development programmes for college lecturers as well.

Keywords: Teacher education, assessment, teacher competences, assessment practices, classroom assessment

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is integral to effective instruction. When assessment and instruction work in tandem, improvement of student achievement is likely to occur. Assessment refers to activities undertaken by teachers and by their students in assessing themselves so that they provide information to be used on feedback to modify teaching activities Black and William[1]. All teachers make assessments as they teach every day. Teachers therefore must know why they are assessing, what they are assessing, how they are assessing, how to create quality assessment for that particular context and how to communicate results effectively Stiggins[2]. The procedures of assessment embrace such functions as monitoring students' progress, the diagnosis of students' strengths and weaknesses, and the decisions relating to teaching strategies which are closely tied up with quality learning and provide valuable feedback to both the learner and the teacher Maria and Mukandawire [3]. Teachers are expected to be assessment literate and capable of using such

assessment knowledge to inform the instructional process" Stiggins[4]. Yet, despite these expectations, limits in teachers' assessment knowledge and training are well documented Mertler and Campbell [5]. The limitations that have been identified include the use of poorly focused questions, a predominant of questions that require short answers involving factual knowledge, and a lack of procedures designed to develop higher order cognitive skills. Stiggins [4] concurred and stated that we are seeing unacceptably low levels of assessment literacy among practicing teachers and administrators in our schools. He continues by stating that this assessment illiteracy has resulted in inaccurate assessment of students, causing them to fail to reach their full potential. With this background, this study sought to establish the missing link between teacher education and assessment practices in Gweru District Primary Schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher Competencies on Assessment

Assessment literacy has been defined as the possession of knowledge about the basic principles of sound assessment practice, including terminology; the techniques, familiarity with standards of quality in assessment and familiarity with alternative to traditional measurements of learning Paterno[6]. Teachers with a solid background in this area are well positioned to integrate assessment with instruction so that they utilise appropriate forms of teaching McMillan[7]. Assessment literate educators recognise sound assessment, evaluation, communication practices and they;

- understand which assessment methods to use to gather dependable information and student achievement
- communicate assessment results effectively, whether using report card grades, test scores, portfolios, or conferences
- can use assessment to maximise student motivation and learning by involving students as full partners in assessment, record keeping, and communication Metler [8].

Stiggins [9] states that “Assessment literates know the difference between sound and unsound assessment. They are not intimidated by the sometimes mysterious and always daunting technical world of assessment”. Stiggins[4] describes assessment as comprising two skills; the ability to gather dependable and quality information about student achievement; and the ability to use that information effectively to maximise student achievement. (AFT, NCME, & NEA [10]. According to AFT, NCME and NEA [10] standards for teachers’ competence in educational assessment of students, assessment competence consists of the following principles:

- Teachers should be skilled in developing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions.
- The teacher should be skilled in administering, scoring and interpreting the result of both externally produced and teacher-produced assessment methods.
- Teachers should be skilled in using assessment results when making decisions about individual students, planning teaching, developing curriculum, and school improvement.
- Teachers should be skilled in developing valid pupil grading procedures that use pupil assessments.

- Teachers should be skilled in communicating assessment results to students, parents, other lay audiences, and other educators.
- Teachers should be skilled in recognising unethical, illegal, and otherwise inappropriate assessment methods and uses of assessment information Pophum [11],

Stiggins [12] reported that “teachers spend a third to half of their professional time on assessment-related activities”. According to Nenty [13] “...next to teacher’s skill on how to teach (method), and what to teach (content) is his/her skill on how to assess in order to maximise learning”. Assessment is a part and parcel of every teaching method. It is essential that teachers coming out of training institutions and those in the field are given adequate information on how to use proper methods of assessment and using results for whatever purposes. In his study ,Gullickson[14]reported that the average teacher did not perceive college measurement courses to be pertinent to his /her classroom testing needs and that most teachers learned how to test their students through their own job experiences. Much research suggests that teachers in general are not proficient in student assessment practices in the Western world Popham, [11]Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis [15]. Research continues to characterise teacher assessment and evaluation as largely incongruent with recommended best practice Metler[16]. Many teachers believe that they need strong measurement skills Boothroyd *et al* [17] and believe that their training was inadequate Wise *et al* [18]. They also report a level of discomfort with the quality of their own tests Stiggins & Bridgeford[17].

A study by Obioma [20] on gaps and challenges on continuous assessment revealed that in general teachers demonstrated poor knowledge of the elementary concept of continuous assessment. Many teachers misapplied the continuous assessment instruments to more of continuous testing. According to Mayo [21] general conclusions have been drawn by researchers who have collected evidence through observations, interviews and questionnaires from schools including the US. He contends that the tests used by teachers encourage rote and superficial teaching even when teachers say they want to develop understanding, many them seem to be unaware of the inconsistency. Further research suggests that some teachers tend to ask low-level cognitive test questions and students consequently learn that they do not have to have deep understanding to pass a classroom test Black *et al*[22]; Stiggins[23]. Consequently, teachers too often omit important curricular outcomes and, in their place, test trivia instead of using items that reveal depth of understanding Popham [24].

Knowledge of assessment is an issue with teachers. For example, quoting the Fair Test Examiner [25] high quality assessment is relatively rare in classrooms because most teachers do not know how well to engage in such assessments. Taylor and Nole [26] in their research on practical assessment, posit that few teacher preparation programmes provide adequate training for a wide array of assessment strategies by the teacher. In the same vein, few teacher education programmes require that undergraduates take an assessment course, resulting in practicing teachers feeling unprepared for classroom assessment demands Lomax[27]and yet, teachers are likely to spend one-third to one-half of their professional time on activities linked to assessment, but they possess inadequate assessment skills Mertler [8].This is supported by Nenty [13] who said, “Many persons are certified to teach with little or no training on basic assessment skills. Some teachers’ training institutions do not offer courses that impart such skills at all, while some make such courses optional as if assessment is an optional duty of the classroom teacher.

The formal assessment training teachers do receive often focuses on large scale test administration and standardised test score interpretation, rather than on the test construction strategies or item writing rules that teachers need to create their own tests Stiggins and Bridgeford[17], Stiggins and Bridgeford [19] further posit that teachers do not receive the information learned in traditional test and measurement courses to be relevant to their tasks as classroom teachers. Gullikson and Wise, Lulkin and Ross [14], found that teachers do not believe that they have adequate training. Colleges, schools and departments of education need to prepare their graduates in the areas of assessment literacy. Most state certification systems and half of all teacher education programmes have no assessment course requirement nor do they have an explicit requirement that teachers have received training in assessment Trice [28]. The formal assessment training teachers do receive often focuses on large-scale test administration and standardised test score interpretation, rather than on the test construction strategies or item-writing rules that teachers need to create their own tests Stiggins & Bridgeford [19]. They have failed to meet this challenge in the past. Failure to address teachers’ classroom needs will result in the continued alienation of teachers from systematic assessment and evaluation Stiggins and Conklin [29].

In 1993 Wise and Lilkin found that 60% of sampled teachers in Nebraska schools had less than one course in measurement and 47% of the sampled teachers felt that training on measurement and evaluation was inadequate. A Study conducted by Impara, Place and Fager in 1993 on teachers assessment background, revealed that 70% of the surveyed teachers

had some training in measurement while the rest had no training.

According to Linn [30] the biggest and most challenging job today lies in making assessment do a better job of facilitating student learning and not predicting who will achieve, or describing the achievement of the student. In his study on pupil assessment techniques in Zimbabwe’s secondary schools, Zindi [31] found that teachers used crude methods of assessment to make important judgments about their pupils. These methods are mostly a poor replication of external examinations that are based on psychometric practice.

In another 1987 article entitled, Reactions of Secondary School Teachers to Assessment: The Zimbabwean Experience, Zindi observed that:

- During teacher training assessment techniques are not included in the course. Heavy emphasis is laid on specialist subjects and on psychology of teaching and no attention at all is given to assessment as an integral part of the teacher-training curriculum.
- Most of the courses available on assessment are often mathematical or statistical in tone. Many teachers without a mathematical background regard the courses as difficult to grasp. To them item analysis, facility value, discrimination indices and standard score seem quite alien.
- Some teachers teach over two hundred pupils in any one week and getting to know all of them in one school year is almost impossible .In this case, they may try to make judgment based on quite in-adequate information.
- Teachers also seem to be hesitant to embark on a programme of assessment which includes other testing domains other than those directly linked to their own subject areas, yet, if teachers understand more of their pupils other traits such as personality, they would be in a better position to understand their individual needs.

Teacher education programmes should not assume that teacher candidates are graduating with an acceptable level of literacy. Graham [32] (619) describes ‘pre-service students as being more likely to succumb to their apprenticeship observing and in doing so, seem doomed to replicate more traditional and unexamined assessment practices. The typical teacher

can spend as much as a third or half his /her time in assessment related activities Crooks[33] competence is required to do this job well Stiggins[34]. Finally, when teachers do not have time or effective assessment strategies, they generally resort to testing the way they themselves were assessed, too often ineffectively Guskey [35].

Teachers have reported that they are confident in their ability to produce good student tests Wise, Lukin & Roos[18]. However, teachers are not particularly good judges of their own abilities or knowledge in test construction Boothroyd et al [17]. Teachers' own estimates of ability and actual performance (in test construction) have been found to be negatively correlated Marso & Pigge[36].

Teacher training courses appear to offer little exposure to assessment for professional preparation of teachers. The courses offered offer a very narrow view of assessment in a traditional sense Stiggins and Conkling[37]. Wise, Lukin and Ross [18] found that teachers do not believe that they have the training needed to meet the demanding classroom assessment. Assessment is peripheral in many teacher education programmes Tylor and Nole[26]. Furthermore, in programmes that do include assessment courses, assessment is usually treated as a foundational course focused on a set of generalisable concepts and skills. As Anderson *et.al* [38] noted that survey approaches to preparation of the teacher do not allow for a rich and grounded" understanding". Classroom teachers therefore need a training programme in order to be effective assessors of their students and offer focused teaching rather than where summative reporting dominated.

Research Objectives:

- To explore the missing links between teacher education and classroom assessment practices in the primary schools.
- To proffer possible solutions to fill in the gaps.

Research questions:

- What are the missing links between teacher education and classroom assessment practices?
- How can the missing links be filled in?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative naturalistic inquiry was used to elicit data from teachers, college lecturers and school heads. Qualitative research entails the interpretation of lived experiences of participants Blaster, *et al* [39] and provides rich and deep data which describes phenomena in words Kazdin[40]. Two focus groups of teachers and one focus group of lecturers were conducted to collect data from participants. Each focus group had eight participants. To triangulate data from focus groups ten

teachers, five head teachers and five college lecturers were individually interviewed until data reached a saturation point. All participants were selected through purposive sampling. Qualitative researchers generally rely on purposeful selection of participants Airasian and Gay [40] in order to select information rich cases which can be studied in depth Patton [42]. Data from focus groups and in-depth interviews were thematically analysed in line with the qualitative research approaches.

FINDINGS

Missing Links

Literature indicates that teachers coming out of training institutions and those in the field were given inadequate information on how to use proper methods of assessment and using results for whatever purposes. In the separate interviews with primary head teachers and the teachers, virtually all (100 %) of the school head teachers indicated that teachers were not competent enough to carry out assessment. When asked his view on teacher competencies, one head teacher said, "Most teachers were at 40% competence level.. "The teachers 80% also confirmed this, and attributed it to inadequate assessment training in the teachers colleges. In response to the question on whether they received adequate training, the school teachers in the focus groups confirmed that the training was little to none. The following responses were given.

"We were mainly trained in theory and no implementation."

Teachers Colleges concentrated on philosophy, sociology and psychology."

"We are using trial and error; no skills really were imparted during college days."

"I don't know whether we were trained or not because we were taught that we should record pupils' marks in Individual Progress Record books."

"Assessment was part of our training, but I don't think it was thorough as what the actual situation on the ground demands. I think it was done more on a theoretical level, but would believe there is a need for far more detail than that."

"Ya-ah, it was theoretical, but practically we had to go out and learn on our own."

"I taught myself through experience and sometimes I asked for help from teachers around. We are able to address some aspects of assessment but item writing needs revisiting."

"I met item writing when I was already in the field after completing my college. Even the specification grid I met it when I was already in the field. The college curriculum was shaky with regards to assessment."

“Yes we were taught during teaching practice. We were not taught in class but during teaching practice. We had to go for teaching practice where we learnt through practice and experience.”

“I can say we were taught to do assessment in the sense that, we were taught to evaluate our schemes of work at the same time trying to evaluate the response of our pupils”.

One head teacher also said during his days at college, they were partially trained. He gave the following response:

“We were not exposed to specification grids, we were not exposed to skills to be addressed when setting tests....ummm..yah! We were not taught the variety of items used in setting tests”.

A Teachers college lecturer at one of the colleges confirmed the teachers’ and head teachers’ views and said,

“Very little is done with regards to how to set tests. I believe students learn through trial and error while there are on teaching practice or in the field”

These responses showed that teachers came out of Teachers colleges with inadequate assessment skills since very little thrust was given on assessment when training teachers. Apparently, teachers’ colleges concentrated on theory and neglected the practical aspect. This confirms the findings of Tailor and Nole [26] on practical assessment, that few teachers’ preparation programmes provide adequate training for a wide array of assessment strategies. Teachers also do not believe they had adequate training. According to the responses from teachers and head teachers, both Teachers colleges and primary schools were found wanting with regards to training of teachers.

The study established from teacher focus groups which further confirmed that teachers gained assessment skills while they were already in the field. When asked where they got the skills from, since they already carried out classroom assessment, the teachers had this to say:

“We are still learning in class now.”

“Ee-eh experience is the best teacher. We learnt through trial and error.”

Apparently, from the teachers’ responses, the experiences gained by teachers might be a vicious circle of malpractice. If one considers that teachers were not adequately trained in the field and that very little is done to staff develop them, one can conclude that the experience teachers perceive might be packed with poor

assessment strategies. One head teacher also responded to the question of experience as follows,

“I obtained my assessment skills from Better Environmental Science Teaching workshops, but I was already teaching by then.”

In this study it was also established that some lecturers lacked assessment skills as well and this made it difficult for such lecturers to impart such skills to students. When asked if lecturers were competent enough to teach assessment one college head of department commented,

“When we advertise for lectures we want somebody with at least a first degree and at least and three years teaching experience. If the person has a first degree where assessment was not dealt with it means he lacks the competence to teach assessment. I only learnt assessment when I was trained as an examiner for ZIMSEC.”

The above statement tend to suggest that some college lecturers lacked competences to teach assessment .One lecturer confirmed this and said, *“I never had a course in assessment. I just teach from the experience which I gained when my teachers were assessing me”.*

CONCLUSIONS

The study was set to the missing link between classroom assessment practices in the primary schools and teacher education. This was done in the understanding that assessment plays a pivotal role in the teaching and learning situation. The research concludes that some teachers lack competences and skills in assessment. This was because the teachers college curriculum has allocated little attention to assessment even when teachers go out in the field, there is very little done to mount staff development programmes. The lack of skills was exacerbated by some college lecturers’ lack of assessment skills, whose experience was based on how they were assessed while they were in school. Some lecturers in the teachers colleges had not met measurement and evaluation courses during their education.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made in response to the findings highlighted in the study.

- The teachers college curriculum needs to expose student teachers to a variety of assessment techniques. Furthermore, the curriculum should include statistics since they are necessary in the analysis of assessment data.
- Teachers colleges need not to assume that all lecturers are competent in so far as teaching students on classroom assessment practices.

There is need to mount staff development programmes for lecturers as well.

- Teachers colleges need to provide short courses on assessment for teachers who are already in the field in order to close the existing gap.

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