



Assessment Challenges in the Primary Schools: A Case of in Gweru Urban Schools

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ABSTRACT

Taking cognisance of the importance of assessment in schools, this research sought to investigate the problems teachers incur in carrying out the assessment process. The research assumed that teachers encountered some problems during assessment and that teachers' knowledge on assessment was limited. Given this background, the researcher chose to target primary schools in Gweru urban. The study adopted a qualitative interpretive research methodology. The purposive sampling technique was used to sample 12 schools, 8 teachers, 2 Ministry of Education officers, 2 ZIMSEC officers, 6 head teachers of schools in Gweru urban, 3 teacher focus groups and 1 college lecturer focus group. Data was collected over 6 months through focus groups, individual interviews and document analysis. Data analysis was conducted by transcribing verbatim audio interviews and the results were cross checked with the participants. The findings that emanated from this study revealed that assessment in the primary schools was bedevilled by a number of problems. These included lack of teacher competences to carry out assessment, teacher's use of summative assessment more than formative assessment and lack of resources. It also emerged from the study that high teacher/pupil ratio, absenteeism of pupils and low teacher morale all contributed to assessment problems in the primary schools. The study recommends that the teacher's college curriculum should expose teachers to a variety of assessment skills. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture needs to regularly provide staff development programmes on assessment for teachers who are already in the field as well as reducing teacher pupil ratios. Schools need to provide resources so that assessment is effectively implemented.

RUNNING HEAD: Assessment in education**Background**

Assessment is a key component to effective teaching and learning. It is the heart of effective teaching and learning. Regular, reliable and timely assessment is key to improving learning and enhancing quality education (UNESCO, 2005). It provides opportunities for independent practice (Boston, 2002) thus providing good ground for self assessment. Classroom assessment is seen as helpful because it gives a more immediate measure of progress and achievement of students, guides and improves instruction and diagnoses student knowledge of a topic (Hurly and Tinajoro, 2001). The assessment process fits into a variety of classroom decision making contexts and serves as a means of conveying information to students (Stiggins and Conklin, 1992:179). Teachers are expected to be assessment literate and capable of using assessment knowledge to inform instructional practice, yet despite these expectations limits in teacher's assessment, knowledge and training are well documented (Bookhart 2001, Cambell and Evans, 2006).

Researches carried out by the Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council and Kenya National Examinations Council (2000) revealed that teachers hardly used a variety of instruments such as tests, class work, homework, observations, questionnaires, reports checklists, rating scales inventory and practicals. Furthermore, too many responsibilities on the teachers and scarcity of facilities made it difficult for teachers to carry out assessment. Greaney and Kellaghan (2004) also commented that "Classroom assessment practices include the prevalence of poorly qualified teachers, large class sizes, poor facilities and shortages of teaching materials (including books and places to store them)." Delandshere (2001:130) finds it striking that in countries such as United States, the assessment situation is gloomy when he posits that,

In countries such as the United States, educational assessment practices still reflect for the most part the legacy of the past; the purposes that are narrow and methods used generate limited data. The assumptions and theories of learning are implicit; examinees submit to the process without active and equal participation (e.g. critique, reflection), and secrecy, rewarding and punishment remain key concepts.

The researchers presented a paper on assessment, measurement and evaluation to fourteen schools in the Midlands Region. During the visits to schools, it was observed that there was a casual approach to testing, measurement and evaluation in most schools. Some teachers would set tests that would address only one level of the taxonomy of objectives, while others would duplicate items from past examination papers. It was

also observed that some test items were poorly structured and that assessment procedures lacked variety. Interviews with heads of schools visited indicated that assessment was a grey area.

The above observations were also made during the primary researchers' sixteen years of experience in the primary schools. Summarising research findings published between 1990-2000, Bookhart (2001) concluded that teachers needed additional instruction in assessment. Metler (2000), recommended professional development and improved teacher preparation. Stiggins (1991) argued that testing and measurement courses have not met the day-to-day assessment needs of the classroom teacher.

The above experience and observations presented a fertile ground for the researcher to carry out a study on "Assessment challenges in the Zimbabwe's Primary Schools": A case of Gweru Urban.

Teacher Competences

According to the Fair Test Examiner (1999), high quality assessment is relatively rare in classrooms because most teachers do not know how to engage in such assessment. A few teachers' preparation programmes provide adequate training for a wide array of assessment programmes (Nole 1996). Most state certification systems and half of all education have no assessment course requirement nor do they have an explicit requirement that teachers have received training in assessment (Trice, 2000). A research by Ndlichako (2004) towards understanding of assessment practices of primary school teachers in Tanzania, revealed that teachers heavily relied on traditional methods of assessment such as homework, tests, classroom exercises, quizzes and that assessment practices that require extended time to accomplish, like projects and observations, are rarely used.

Zindi (1989) found that secondary schools used crude methods of assessment to make important decisions and these methods are mostly a poor replication of external examinations that are based on psychometric practice. Zindi in his research further revealed that during training, most courses available on assessment are often mathematical or statistical in tone and teachers without a mathematical background regard the courses as difficult to grasp.

During teacher training, assessment techniques are not included in the course.

And yet, the typical teacher spends as much as a third or half his/her time in assessment related activities (Crooks, 1988). Competence is required to do this job well (Stiggins, 1999).

Teacher perceptions on assessment

Teacher perceptions act as a framework through which a teacher views, interprets and interacts with the teaching environment (Marton, 1981). Teachers' conceptions on assessment are important because evidence exists suggesting that teacher' conceptions of

teaching, learning and curricula influence strongly how they teach and what students learn or achieve (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Calderhead, 1996). Teachers' assessment practices are directly related to instruction and student learning (Elkader, 2008:25). According to Good and Brophy (1995) teachers' perceptions of assessment modify procedures teachers use for lesson planning, delivery, instruction and teacher interaction throughout the school term. Research suggests that teachers' perceptions of teaching and learning strongly influence how they teach and what students learn or achieve (Brown, 2004; Marshall & Drummond, 2006). Research also suggests that changes in teachers' attitudes are associated with changes in classroom assessment (Dekker & Feijs, 2005; Lee & William, 2005). Tittle (1994:51) proposed that teachers' construct schemas or integrate representations from assessments into existing views of the self, of teaching and learning and of the curriculum, broadly construed. Indeed, teachers' beliefs about student self-confidence, morale, creativity and work are 'closely linked to one's choice of evaluation techniques' (Asch, 1976: 18).

Studies have shown that to a certain degree, teachers are satisfied with their classroom assessment practices (Yildrin, 2004). Unfortunately, some teachers' perceptions included poor teaching assessment training, not enough time to properly assess their students (Bensur 2000; Mettler, 2005) and a large amount of teaching conceptual material in their courses (Beal & Bearka, 1998).

Brown (2003:1) provides a strong argument that, "All pedagogical acts are affected by conceptions teachers have about the act of teaching, the process and purpose of assessment practices and the nature of learning". Teachers influence their classroom practices (Thompson, 1992). In turn teachers' actions significantly impact on pupil learning (Muigs, 2006). Research has shown that student assessment is one of the most important tasks of a classroom teacher (Race, 1995) and that it has the greatest influence on students perception of assessment (Brookhart & Delan, 2003). Perceptions can lead a teacher to interact with students in a unique manner (Gutierrez, 2000).

In the same vein, post independence, Zimbabwe's assessment procedures may be influenced by the pre-colonial assessment methods, which also emphasised content and high stake summative assessments. It should therefore be noted that the way teachers perceive assessment definitely impacts on the manner in which they carry out assessment in the classroom. Several researchers argue that educators' conceptions of assessment are strongly interwoven with their views on broader issues of learning/teaching (Brown 2003).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive research methodology because it allowed the researchers to get the data directly from the participants themselves, by sitting with the respondents and hearing their views, voices, perceptions and expectations in detail. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their

natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln 2001). The researchers recognised several nuances of attitudes and behaviours that could not have been noticed if other methods had been used.

A case study research design was adopted. A case study is described as a form of descriptor research that gathers a large amount of information about one or a few participants and thus investigates a few cases in considerable depth (Thomas and Nelson 2001). The case study, also emphasise on field work with the aim of coming to know the insider perspective by observing participants going about their ordinary business in their natural setting (Stark and Torrance, 2005). Assessing participants in their natural setting allowed the researcher to study how the participants managed assessment in their day to day schedules. Data was collected from 6 (six) urban schoolthrough 3 focus groups held with teachers and individual interviews held with 8 teachers. Two (2) Ministry of Education, Arts Sport and Culture officers and 2 ZIMSEC officers were also interviewed. A focus group was also held with college lecturers. A series of interviews were conducted within a period of two months and the respondents were purposefully selected. "In purposive sampling the goal is to select cases that are likely to be information rich with respect to the purposes of the study" (Gall, et al, 2007:18). The logic and power of purposive sampling derives from the emphasis of in-depth understanding (Patton 2002:46).

The researcher used multiple sources of data. The combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials and perspectives in a single study is the best understood as a strategy that adds rigor, breath, complexity, richness and in-depth in any inquiry. (Flick 2002:229).

Data analysis

Data analysis begun during the data collection period where emerging themes were identified. Themes which emerged from interviews, document analysis and focus groups formed the basis of further collection.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented and discussed in relation to the following aspects; teacher competences on assessment, teacher perceptions on classroom assessment, resources put in place to support assessment, limited assessment methods, assessment policies, too many records and work load, demands of the public examination, lack of teacher motivation and economic factors.

Teacher competences

It was found that teachers lacked competences due to poor training in teacher's college; one teacher said, "*We were mainly trained in theory and no implementation. Furthermore, teacher's colleges concentrated on philosophy, sociology and philosophy*". The teachers

blamed teachers' colleges for their inadequate training. Head teachers, ZIMSEC officers and Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture officers and lecturers also shared the same view that teachers' colleges fail to give teachers the needed training. A college lecturer commented, *"Very little is done with regards to how to set tests. I believe students learn through trial and error while they are on teaching practice in the field"*. Apparently, from the lecturer's 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.

Whilst it is true that teachers colleges are responsible for teacher's lack of competences, it is also true that teachers, staff development programmes were a rare phenomenon. The Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture encouraged that staff development programmes needed to be mounted through better schools programmes. From the study, it however emerged that very little was happening on the ground. As such, development of teachers on assessment become a neglected area.

It also emerged from the research that staff development programmes were mounted by the BEST in different areas other than assessment, but were not yielding the required benefits. One Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture officer made the following comments,

"I am afraid to say that even if you carry out staff development programmes, teachers are not enthusiastic. For example we carried out a staff development on HIV. What they will ask is how much they get from it more than the content, so you realise that it is the monetary value affecting teachers."

It is however disturbing that while there might be some efforts by some schools and the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture to mount staff development programmes, some teachers were developing negative attitudes towards these. The last comment made by the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture revealed that teachers' morale had been affected by the harsh economic environment, to the extent that they no longer wanted to participate in development programmes. This was also confirmed by one teacher who said,

"We had just one staff development on assessment, but now the problem is motivation ma'am, honestly I can not sit down to listen to some one teaching me about my job when my mouth is as white as vim"

Another interesting finding was from teachers and head teachers who said that teachers used mainly percentage and sometimes averages to analyse assessment data. Asked why they used these statistics only, the following comments were made,

"We were not exposed to statistics in the Teachers' College. I don't even know any other statistics. Because we did not do well in O' level Mathematics, we still have a phobia for anything mathematical"

One of the teachers colleges lecturer was quoted as saying,

"Very little is taught on statistics. Students who do Maths as a main subject are the ones who do statistics and the rest do very little statistics as part of their research and not in line of analysing student data."

In the same vein, one Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture officer was quoted saying,

"The ministry has not demanded for the use of advanced statistical analysis from teachers so that they go that extra mile. Things are just silent"

Teachers, head teachers and teachers' college lecturers revealed that teachers lacked the requisite competencies to analyse assessment data using other statistics besides percentages and averages. A rationale for these views included the view that, "maths phobia" was prevalent among many educators and hinders informative interpretation and appropriate use of the range of assessment data available in educational communities. This confirms Zindi's (1987) findings that teachers without a Mathematics background regard statistics courses as difficult.

While some of teachers revealed that they could use a variety of statistics, the extent to which assessment data analysis is done in the schools, seemed not to require other statistical components. Teachers who did Mathematics as a main subject revealed that they were exposed to statistics but the education system did not demand for their expertise. This poses a problem in that assessment results are not assessed in depth as such decisions are made on skeletal information.

Most of the head teachers and teachers confirmed that they used mainly tests and classroom exercises. One teacher made the following response,

"We use response exercises and tests because they are prescribed by school policies. Furthermore, when the head teachers supervise us they count the number of exercises in pupil's exercise books. They are not really worried about the quality, but quantity."

The sentiments were evidenced by the records of work which revealed fortnightly recordings of tests. However it is rather worrying that they do not always give actual test scores, but rather teachers created marks without giving the tests. Some teachers in the focus group commented,

"My record book does not always reflect the child's performance because we work under pressure. The teacher pupil ratio is too high; sometimes I create marks because I need to impress the administration.

"The school administration just looks at how many exercises were recorded to satisfy the requirements of the key result areas."

The study further revealed that teachers used both formative and summative evaluation although more emphasis is on summative evaluation. Teachers interviewed indicated that formative assessment was important for student learning but it was difficult to implement with large classes which ranged from 48 – 50.

Teachers gave a series of tests following the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) format of conducting examinations. They did this to ensure that pupils excelled in the summative ZIMSEC grade seven public examinations. Some teachers gave the following responses:

"We have no time for a one to one interaction with pupils"

"I have to drill pupils on examination techniques because my effectiveness is judged on how well the pupils performed in the final examinations."

As pointed out by teachers, while it is important to do the formative assessment factors such as high enrolment, the requirements of the schools and the Ministry of Sport, Arts and Culture on school effectiveness as well as key result areas which facilitated their supervision, hindered them from effectively implementing formative assessment. This supports Stiggins (2002) findings which revealed that, a range of assessment particularly those that emphasised traditional paper and pencil summative measures are over emphasized within contemporary schools. Furthermore assessment to teachers meant drilling pupils so that they performed well in public examinations and for this reason, primary school teachers confined their assessment to the cognitive domain of learning. Teachers and Head teachers and the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture officers indicated that teachers concentrated on the cognitive domain of learning and deliberately ignoring the affective and psychomotor domains when carrying out assessment. One teacher passionately declared *"We concentrate on cognitive domain"*.

One Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture officer subscribed to the above views and made the following comments:

"Ee-ehh! I think the cognitive is the one teachers mostly concentrate on, because it is tested by ZIMSEC and continues to be tested when the pupils get to secondary school"

As reflected in pupil's exercise books and test papers of all schools which participated in the study, assessment concentrated on the cognitive domain and yet assessment should mirror a full range of the child's learning encompassing all the dimensions of the child, (NCCA document 2004).

The ZIMSEC officer on the contrary indicated that their tests covered all the domains of the learning. One ZIMSEC officer made the following comments.

"We test all the domains of the learning. If we are to structure these subjects and say Art, Music, Physical Education test the psychomotor domain and say Maths, Shona, English and General Paper will test the cognitive domain, eeeeh from a psychological view, I don't think that is correct. Because we are saying if we are dealing with Mathematics as a discipline we can test all those domains"

A general consensus of the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture officers, head teachers and teachers was that assessment concentrated on the cognitive domain of learning. While ZIMSEC officers might be claiming that all the domains learning should be tested, the ZIMSEC public summative Grade Seven past examinations rather concentrated on the cognitive domain, ignoring the affective and psychomotor domains. One education officer also said *"It has become the culture of the nation to concentrate on the cognitive domain"*. It was also disturbing to note that even within the cognitive domain, some teachers made tests concentrated on the first level of taxonomy.

Teacher conceptions on assessment.

Brown (2003) stated that all pedagogical acts are affected by the conceptions teachers have about the act of teaching, the process and the purpose of assessment practices and the nature of learning (see literature review). The findings from the interviews of teachers and head teachers indicated that teachers favoured summative and quasi-formative assessment to generate marks. Asked on what they preferred between summative and formative, one of the head teachers gave this response:

"One would prefer formative assessment but the thrust in this school is on summative. We give fortnightly tests and monthly tests which could be considered as formative... eh. It's easier to have summative because formative demands a lot of time and input from the teacher."

The teachers interviewed in the focus groups also gave the following responses,

"I am aware of the importance of formative assessment, but school effectiveness is seen by the ministry in the light of Grade 7 results. Parents also consider end-of-term tests as important to the learning of their children"

"As long as the education system is based on examination performance of Grade 7 pupils, school assessment will always be directly related to school effectiveness."

"The way we assess determines the kind of results that we produce. Good results automatically mean the school is effective, that's why our teaching is exam oriented, we teach for exams"

One Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture officer also advanced the following view when he said,

"Formative is more important but yes..er..we have discussed these things before because you see, we need to come up with the change in the mindset. The whole nation should change and say now we want to focus on formative evaluation. ZIMSEC should be in a position to say we want to consider formative assessment in the primary school."

It emerged from this study that teachers emphasised on summative rather than formative for reasons cited in the comments made by teachers, head teachers and Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture officers. As highlighted in literature review, teachers are not immune to the system in which they work. The research further revealed that the way the teachers assess the pupils was attributed to the culture of the nation which lays emphasis on summative assessment. Literature review has also indicated that the post independent Zimbabwe may have been influenced by pre-independence assessment methods which emphasised high stakes summative assessments. This research revealed that indeed summative assessment dominated in the Gweru urban primary schools and yet both summative and formative assessment are crucial in the teaching and learning environment.

Assessment Policies

Assessment procedures are common in every school. All the six schools studied gave fortnightly tests, end of month and yearly tests as forms of assessments. Some schools drew their own assessment policies while some teachers indicated that they were not involved in school based policies. However all the teachers indicated that they had problems in implementing assessment policies. The following reasons were advanced;

"Policies are forced down our throats, as such they are difficult to implement especially with large classes. It is not realistic to test fortnightly because I don't have time. We have hot sitting and I only have 4 hours in the classroom"

"Too much writing is involved and pupils end up tired"

The statements indicate that teachers end up having negative attitudes towards assessment, due to lack of involvement in formulating assessment policies. Furthermore, teachers were overloaded as such found it difficult to cope with large class numbers.

Too many records

The study also established that teachers found it difficult to carry out assessment because of too many records in the school. One of the teachers who participated in the focusgroups lamented,

The records are too many; scheme book, individual record, extension work, morning challenge, test record and plan books as such we are reduced to mere clerks and the work is just too much.

While perusing documents, the researcher confirmed the teachers' concerns and saw the following records in the majority of participating schools, scheme book, test record book, plan book, individual progress record book and extension book. Teachers highlighted that these records consumed a lot of the teacher's time to ensure that they are updated, as such, assessment becomes difficult because records were an additional load. Some teachers reported that they ended up resorting to unethical uses of the record books, by creating marks and marking false evaluations which do not reflect pupil's performance.

Resources

Resources impacted negatively on assessment in the primary schools. Teachers lamented on the lack of resources such as text books, photocopiers, printers and furniture in some schools which are all crucial in facilitating assessment. It also emerged from the teachers that in most of the schools, teachers were still writing tests on the board which was time consuming and physically taxing. All these factors hindered effective assessment practices.

The findings also revealed that electricity was another stumbling block in assessment. While all schools in Gweru Urban had electricity, load shedding was making it difficult for school to use electricity when processing tests. Some schools had managed to buy generators for use, but at times these schools failed to buy enough fuel for the generator to provide electricity in the schools. These among other resources made assessment in the primary school difficult.

Demands of Public Examinations

It was also revealed during interviews with teachers that teachers aligned their assessment practices to the national examinations. When asked if they taught for examinations, the teachers replied:

"Yes, we teach for examinations because this is what the system demands."

"Yes we teach for examinations because I have to produce good results. If I don't produce good results the head teacher wants to know why. The results are also displayed and I get embarrassed."

"Actually we drill the pupils so that we don't tarnish the image of the school if pupils fail or else, everybody will say, these teachers are not working."

"We want to equip our pupils with exam skills so that they perform well and are welcomed into the secondary schools."

One head teacher also shared the teacher's views when he said:

"Schools compete for the best Grade 7 results at district level up to regional and so on. If your school produces poor results you are invited to the regional office for staff development which is embarrassing."

The Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport, and Culture Officers concurred with the above sentiments and made the following comments:

"To a very large extent, teachers teach for examinations because you find that the subjects that are non-examined give a cursory attention. They attend to the subjects they know will be examined at the end of the year. So they are teaching for examinations rather than for learning sake."

"Teachers teach for examinations because of competitions at price giving. It will be announced that this school got 0%, 20% or 90% pass rate at Grade 7 for example. The head teachers and teachers of schools with a low pass rate are invited to the district for reprimand. Even if they say they have no resources we tell them, 'the teacher is number one resource, see what you can do'"

According to the responses, it seemed teachers were left with no choice but to teach for examinations. One head teacher also confirmed that their tests followed the ZIMSEC format so as to be thorough in the preparation of pupils. These findings indicated that while the teachers might be aware of the proper methods of assessment, competition of teachers and schools negatively impacted on the assessment practices. Teachers were compelled to spend time preparing their pupils to master the content covered in the national examination and coach them on test taking strategies (Black & William, 1998; World Bank Group, 2001; Dhindsa, 2007). This further confirms Falege & Ojerinde's (2005) views that the effectiveness of schools and teachers are judged by the performance of pupils. Such assessment failed to build a complete child as they only succeeded in equipping pupils with test taking strategies which was an unfortunate situation that

school effectiveness was judged by the manner in which schools performed in their summative Grade 7 examinations, as such, all assessments became skewed towards the Grade 7 public examinations.

CONCLUSION

The study found out that teachers lacked competencies in effectively carrying out assessment. This is because teachers college curriculum has allocated little attention to assessment and even when teachers go out in the field very little is done to mount staff development programmes. The assessment problems have been broadened by lack of resources to carryout assessment. These included textbooks, photocopiers, printers and electricity which are crucial for carrying out assessment.

It was also established that teachers used summative assessment more than formative. Teachers tailored their assessment towards the expectations of the ZIMSEC public examinations. A teacher failed to address all the domains of learning but concentrated on the cognitive domain. Teachers mostly found themselves addressing the first level of taxonomy .

The study further revealed that public examinations had a great impact on assessment because teachers wanted to thoroughly prepare their pupils for the Grade 7 public examinations. Sometimes they got to the extent of drilling the pupils on test taking skills. Assessment in this respect failed to address all the domains of learning. It also emerged from the study that high teacher-pupil ratio, pupils, low morale by teachers all contributed to assessment problems in the primary schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the view of the above conclusions, it is recommended that teachers in colleges need to educate teachers so that they are well versed in assessment practices. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture needs to staff develop teachers on assessment so as to sharpen competences to enhance effective assessment practices. In order for teachers to effectively analyse assessment data. Statistics should be part of the college curriculum. The college curriculum should also include a variety of assessment methods so that teachers are able to collect valid, reliable and detailed assessment data. Finally the research recommends that ZIMSEC and schools use both formative and summative assessments in the final Grade seven examinations.

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