

Classroom assessment in secondary schools in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

A purpose of secondary (High School) education in Nigeria is to prepare students for tertiary level education though not everybody that graduates from this level of education actually proceeds. Continuous Assessment is the educational policy in which students are examined continuously over most of the duration of their education, the results of which are taken into account after leaving school. It is often proposed or used as an alternative to a final examination system. It can also be looked at from micro and macro levels. At the macro level assessment is designed to collect information for purposes of certification and very often school assessments are integrated into results obtained for deciding on quality of performance in the examinations conducted by the examination boards external to the school. At the micro level assessments are conducted at the school level and these have been variously described as continuous assessments and school-based assessments. These assessments are used for determining progression from one class to another. The methodology employed in this study was derived from books, journals, archives, newspapers, reports, and the internet. This paper would attempt to show how well this has been done by highlighting the implementation mode, advantages of continuous assessment, problems, lessons learned and future directions in classroom assessments.

Keywords: Classroom assessment, secondary schools, continuous assessment, advantages and characteristics of continuous assessment, lesson learned

Assessment can be defined as the process of gathering the data and fashioning them into interpretable form for decision-making. It involves collecting data with a view to making value judgment about the quality

of a person, object, group or event Ajuonuma (2006) Educational assessment is vital in teaching and learning process. Through the National Policy on education, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN, 2004) stated that educational assessment at all levels of education would be liberalized by basing them in whole or in part on continuous assessment (CA).

Nigeria operates a National Policy of Education symbolized as 6-3-3-4. It is one in which primary education lasts for 6 years, with a 2-tier (Junior and Senior) secondary education of 3 years duration each and 4 years of tertiary level education. The junior

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secondary school (JSS) is both pre-vocational and academic. According to the National Policy of Education (2004), students who complete junior secondary school would be streamed into senior secondary school (SSS), technical college, out-of school vocational training centre and apprentice scheme. The transition rate into the senior secondary school is expected to be 60% and it is expected to be 'comprehensive with a core-curriculum designed to broaden pupils' knowledge and outlook' (2004:19).

Continuous assessment, according to Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (FMEST, 1985), is defined as a mechanism whereby the final grading of a student in cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of behaviour takes account, in a systematic way, all his performances during a given period of schooling; such an assessment involves the use of a great variety of modes of evaluation for the purposes of guiding and improving learning and performance of the student. This mode of assessment is considered adequate for assessment of students' learning because it is comprehensive, cumulative, systematic, guidance and diagnostic oriented. Good classroom assessment is expected to lead to the production of learners who are interested in learning, shun unethical assessment practices and would eventually come out successful in certification examinations, ready to take their rightful place within the national development horizon as well as being adequately prepared for higher education. Observation shows that these expectations are possibly not being met as there has been great public outcry about the quality of school products.

Therefore it is necessary to critically examine classroom assessment practices to see where its implementation has fallen short of expectation so as to make recommendations to move the educational system forward. This is the focus of this paper.

Characteristics of Continuous Assessment

- ❖ It is comprehensive
- ❖ It is cumulative
- ❖ It is diagnostic
- ❖ Continuous assessment is formative

- ❖ It is guidance-oriented
- ❖ It is systematic in nature

Advantage of continuous assessment

Continuous assessment can provide early indicators of the likely performance of students, something that can be of great help to the students themselves - as for they have some mistake in your Marks then you would be transfer the marks. And the other hand its use to both students and the faculty. It can also provide to the exactly what has been learned by a particular stage of the course.

Advantages & disadvantages of formative assessment

Formative assessment covers the range of informal diagnostic tests a teacher can use to assist the process of learning by his students. Prescriptive but ungraded feedback enables students to reflect on what they are learning and why. The goal is to improve performance and achieve successful outcomes. Robert Stake, Director of the Center for Instructional Research and Curriculum Evaluation, likens formative assessment to a cook tasting a soup before serving it to a guest. But despite its advantages, formative assessment can be time-consuming, and incentives in the school system tend to favor more objective assessments.

Continuous Improvement of one great advantage of formative assessment for learning is that it is ongoing. This allows for incremental feedback to identify problems at their earliest stages. For example, a student can correct conceptual errors before undertaking work on a term paper. As that student works on the term paper, input from the teacher can inform, guide and validate each step of the writing process. Honesty or Cheating and plagiarism remain significant problems in academic settings. A study on academic dishonesty published in the Electronic Journal of Sociology in 2003 found that 83 percent of the students surveyed admitted to cheating more than once. Compared to graded summative assessments like final exams, ungraded formative assessments reduce the temptation to cheat. This allows students to focus on learning instead of grades Formative assessment, by definition, doesn't easily provide that kind of accountability. This explains

why, although the advantages of formative assessment have been repeatedly articulated since the distinction between it and summative assessment was first made in 1967, empirical studies continue to show that very few teachers consistently make use of it in actual practice.

Ways continuous assessment can help students learn

- ❖ An increased sense of inclusiveness. Continuous assessment provides students with a constant stream of opportunities to prove their mastery of material and sends the message that everyone can succeed if given enough time and practice. This reduces the anxiety and finality around testing and heightens the emphasis on the learning itself. When mastery instead of competition with other students becomes the point of assessment, the focus shifts from superficial competition to true understanding and personal learning goals.
- ❖ Higher learning standards for all. In a system of continuous assessment, advanced students can progress through material at their own pace and remain engaged by pursuing more challenging work as they pass out of the basics. In this sense, the standards for such students stretch to help each student maximize potential. Because success is defined on an absolute and individualized basis, students cannot be satisfied with their achievements relative to others; they are encouraged to seek their own course and take responsibility for their learning.
- ❖ Clarified purpose of assessment. The problem with administering assessments only once in a while is that the primary aim is to compare students while at the same time allowing them to “pass” to the next level. This produces a situation in which the purpose of assessment is muddled: the tendency is to let students level up (because, regardless of standards, everyone is generally expected to pass) although they may not truly grasp the material or have a very weak understanding of it. For this reason, students may start the next level at a weaker state with no opportunity to correct their misunderstandings.
- ❖ Capacity to remediate weaknesses through

strengths. When we, as Christensen suggests, begin measuring the length of time it takes to master a concept or skill and contrast the efficacy of different approaches, we are able to gather data about the learning process and put this knowledge to work for students: “Because learning will no longer be as variable, we can compare students not by what percentage of the material they have mastered, but by comparing how far they have moved through a body of material.” This sort of data solves another problem: the self-perpetuating cycle through which the curriculum and methods of instruction for various subjects are tailored for those who are gifted in them. Math classes, for instance, are taught by those who are gifted at math and through texts written by those who are gifted in the subject as well; and class itself is shaped by the questions and comments of gifted math students. (This leaves those who are not gifted at math feeling excluded and turns them off from the subject.) Imagine an alternative: the confidence students develop in the areas in which they excel helps them learn subjects for which they have less proclivity. And better yet, strategies that have been proven effective for students with specific weaknesses can be used to help other students with those weaknesses. Envision a system that places a student on a proven effective learning path once he displays a learning style and proficiency level that is similar to another student in a network.

- ❖ Increased self-awareness for students who, through continuous assessment, come to understand their proficiencies and knowledge gaps. Time and again, we encounter evidence that self-awareness — understanding of how one feels, thinks, and learns — is one of the most significant factors in professional and personal success. The famous psychologist, Gardner argues that self-knowledge — “intrapersonal skill” — is one of the eight defining types of intelligence (the others being “linguistic,” “logical-mathematical,” “naturalist,” “bodily-kinesthetic,” “spatial,” “musical,” and “interpersonal”). The more continuously we assess students, the more knowledge they can gain about themselves — what it takes for them to master

something, how they can approach problems differently, what their blind spots are, and how to eliminate them.

- ❖ Capacity to uncover interdisciplinary relationships between subject domains and concepts. Continuous assessment allows us to refine our understanding of the content that we are teaching students. We might discover that effective remediation in a subject requires attention to another subject or that the root of common misunderstandings within a subject is something altogether unexpected.

Issues and Controversies

The fact that there is no federally agreed implementation guide and the fact that there are no collection of test items pool from which teachers can draw items for the respective tests, gives too much latitude and consequently variation in the way and manner in which classroom assessment is implemented.

This in itself should not be a challenge as such if teachers have the necessary assessment skills.

According to Osunde (2008) most of the teachers in the Nigerian primary school system lack adequate skill to develop and validate teacher made tests for use in school based assessment. This indeed is true for a majority of teachers in secondary schools. Omo-Egbekuse, Afemikhe and Imobekhai (2010) in a study on teachers' expressed competency on assessment issues found that many teachers claimed that they are competent on almost all issues raised but experience on the field finds no match between what is claimed and what actually is observed. That is the situation with research with human beings; the research yielding reliable scores but lacking in experiential validity.

The need for assessing cognitive, affective and psychomotor behavioural domains is also a herculean task; they may be able to assess cognitive outcomes but experience difficulty when the affective and psychomotor domains are considered. Things are made worse as the implementation guidelines in almost all cases do not specifically indicate that they must be combined with the cognitive performance. The situation is compounded by lack of uniformity in standards for

implementation across schools and therefore there is a problem of comparability of the scores of pupils from different schools. One ugly trend is a situation where tests are not administered but scores awarded because the policy states that there must be two tests in a term.

Assignments, class work and homework are an important component of implementing classroom assessment. There is a lot of hiccups with the use of these assessment methods. Homework is expected to tighten the bond between the home and the school. Good quality homework according to Yeung Sze-yin (2008) should avoid drilling, excessive copying and repetitive exercises. In addition they should help develop students' independence in learning and transfer of learning as well as promote higher order thinking of students. The quality of homework can not be said to meet all these functions. They are in most cases focusing on recall of what was taught in class without any emphasis on aiding students' further learning. Apart from this shortcoming, the homework assignments are hardly marked; the predominant comment being 'seen'. When teachers are asked to explain why assignments are not marked and feedback given to students, they usually would blame it on large number of students in the class.

Classroom assessment as presently implemented is expected to serve a formative function.

Unfortunately, what is observed is a situation where continuous testing is in vogue. Tests are administered, marked and the results put into students folders; no formative or diagnostic purposes are served. This probably explained why Obanya (1979) and Afemikhe (1989 & 1990, 2000) described the implementation as a caricature. Therefore a proper implementation is desirable. Teacher seem not have imbibed the nutty gritty of classroom assessment.

Closely allied to this problem is further faking of continuous assessment scores that examining bodies require particularly for the examination conducted at the end of senior secondary school. An examination of the scores shows return of marks which are highly negatively skewed and exhibiting small variability. This trend is not unconnected with the craze to pass examinations at all cost. A situation like this casts doubt

on confidence of classroom assessments from which the continuous assessments are generated. Examination boards are then given the added burden of trying to remove nuisances from the scores submitted.

Lessons learned

One of the benefits which the educational system was supposed to get from proper implementation of classroom assessment was a corps of dedicated and hardworking students. These students were expected to have developed self confidence in pursuit of academic tasks. According to Obanya (1979) effective implementation of CA should produce better schools, better curriculum materials, better teachers and indeed better students. It was supposed to be a system which because of the input of the classroom teachers into certification grades would lead to a culture that abhors examination malpractice and greater confidence in what is produced by the schools. This has not been the case; examination malpractice continues to thrive despite the efforts of public examination bodies in redressing the malaise.

Good classroom assessment should assist in changing examination oriented to learning oriented behavior on the part of the learners. Being in school should be seen as learning for life and not for certificate acquisition. This is not to say that certificates are not important but that their quality should reflect students' level of knowledge acquisition. The national assessments (2001 & 2009) conducted by the Universal Basic Education Commission have not shown improved performance in this regard.

Performance in the national assessments shows a downward trend in performance of junior secondary students.

Teachers' knowledge and skill are important in proper implementation of classroom assessment. The fact that the teachers claim they are competent in use of assessment procedures is no guarantee that proper assessment would be conducted in schools. Continuous supervision of assessment related issues is desirable. In fact assessment committees recommended for all schools are virtually non existent; the onus to coordinate

assessment related matters are vested on class teachers who collect these scores at the end of term when results are to be compiled for parents and students. To this extent one can say that programmes no matter how beautiful they are on the plan do not meet their catalogued descriptions.

Future directions

Classroom assessments have been and would continue to be a part of students' learning and teachers' role. The public and indeed the education community would continue to strive to improve on their outcomes. To this extent greater commitment on the part of teachers as part of its implementation would be focused on. It won't just be enough for teachers to claim that they are proficient in assessment programme related issues, continual teacher development programmes need to be emphasized. Teachers on their part should attempt to generate a pool of test items to ease problem of implementation of classroom assessment. We cannot rest on our oars, examination boards should focus on moderation of CA scores to remove factors that adulterate them. In this way schools and indeed teachers would be encouraged to implement classroom assessment that would be above board.

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