

Rural primary school teachers' perceptions of continuous assessment and profiling: A case of Masvingo rural district primary schools, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Both formal and informal modes of education require assessment in order to measure if the learner has comprehended what was being taught. There are many types of assessment implemented in different types of educational institutions. Nowadays, continuous assessment and profiling is topical as a mode of learning assessment in many educational institutions worldwide, including Zimbabwe. This research paper attempts to unlock Zimbabwe rural primary school teachers' perceptions of continuous assessment and profiling in rural primary schools of Masvingo district. This qualitative research was housed in the interpretivist paradigm and used a case study research design. The population of the study comprised rural primary schools from Masvingo, one of the provinces in Zimbabwe. Participants were purposively selected from different clusters to come up with a conveniently selected sample of 30 facilitators. Through interviews, the researcher sought the rural school teachers' perceptions on continuous assessment and profiling of learners. The study established that teachers have positive and negative perceptions/views of continuous assessment. The positive responses showed that teachers view continuous assessment and profiling as a way to keep learners engaged on particular topics being learned. However, other participants stressed that continuous assessment and profiling were being hampered by lack of resource materials, high teacher-learner ratio, too much paper work and too broad content to be covered. The paper recommends that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education reduce the expected targets of continuous assessment, reduce teacher-learner ratio, and reduce the curriculum content, among others.

Keywords: *Assessment; continuous assessment; summative assessment; formative assessment; teacher's perceptions.*

Introduction

Assessment of whether what has been taught has been comprehended by the learners is very crucial in education. It is the duty of the teacher to ensure that what is being imparted to the learners has been understood. To that effect, assessment becomes a core activity of the teaching and learning process. This paper investigates rural teachers' perceptions of continuous assessment and profiling as a measure of comprehension of what was taught during the teaching and learning process. Continuous assessment and profiling is used to describe assessments that are completed during the course module or during the teaching and learning process. The method is also referred to as curriculum integrated assessment or embedded assessment (William,2011). It can be used to replace or can be combined with the final assessment to calculate the final grade. The teachers' perceptions or views of the continuous assessment and profiling exercise determine the success or failure of its implementation.

Background to the Study

According to Barber and Rizvi (2013) continuous assessment and profiling has always been part of the educational curriculum exercises. Teachers and educational administrators often view continuous assessment as a determinant of educational quality. Administrators and teachers use continuous assessment and profiling results to hold schools and their teachers accountable for learner performance. Continuous assessment, an alternative or supplement to high stakes testing of learner achievement (proof that the learner has comprehended what has been taught), offers a methodology for measuring pupil performance and uses those findings to improve the success of learners (USAID EQUIP, 2003). Barber and Rizvi (2013:65) cited in Muskin (2017) report that:

There is compelling evidence from meta-analyses of hundreds of studies to indicate that continuous assessment, when used to provide feedback on a daily basis to both teachers and students, is one of the most powerful interventions ever recorded in educational research literature.

According to Nxumalo (2007) continuous assessment is considered by psychologists and educators as a new trend that not only places less emphasis on the intellectual ability of the learners, but also takes into consideration a learner's skills, attitudes, knowledge and values. Nicholson (2001:29), cited in Nxumalo (2007), concurs that continuous assessment takes into consideration the skills, knowledge, attitudes and values the learner displays in his or her

performance while on his way to responsible adulthood. Hence, there is increasing worldwide interest in continuous assessment approaches to assess learners' achievement.

In their research to investigate teachers' perceptions on the influence of continuous assessment on the academic outcomes of psychology learners in Spain, Carrillo-de-la-Pena and Perez (2012) observed that teachers felt that continuous assessment was associated with improved academic achievement. Learners who were subjected to continuous assessment got higher grades in their second school term than they got during the first term. Carrillo-de-la-Pena and Perez (2012) argue that teachers viewed the learners who were subjected to continuous assessment as more hardworking than those who were not. This was due to the fact that as a result of continuous assessment and profiling, when given daily or weekly assessment exercises and tests, learners were encouraged to concentrate on a unit or chapter they were learning. The teachers argued that daily recapping on a topic or unit learnt gave the teacher insight into whether the unit or chapter had been comprehended so that he or she could move to the next unit or chapter. However, if not comprehended, the teacher would have to redo the chapter or put a note on it so that he/she could come back to it.

In a research conducted in South Africa by Mutendwahothe (2013), most teachers involved were striving to complete the assessment instead of actually helping learners to achieve the learning outcomes and meet the assessment standards. The amount of exercises that require marking on a daily or weekly basis could be so much that the teacher may fail to perform the assessment as intended.

Historically, in Zimbabwe, teachers believe that the thrust of assessment has been summative. According to Nziramasanga (1996) summative tests in form of end-of-term tests have been the only assessment tools in Zimbabwean schools. One of the most important developments in Zimbabwe's educational system of recent has not only been the introduction of new learning areas and the injection of new content but also the introduction of the use of continuous assessment and profiling in the evaluation of learners at primary and secondary school levels (Dokora, 2016). Continuous assessment and profiling is not a new phenomenon in the education system in Zimbabwe for it has been in practice in technical subjects at secondary level. It is currently being extended to all learning areas from Early Childhood Development to secondary level with modifications (Dokora, 2016). Today, continuous assessment and profiling is one of the most used assessment tools in primary schools.

The Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education 2015-2022 takes a holistic approach to assessment. One of the distinctive features of the Framework is the inclusion of a hybrid assessment model of continuous assessment and summative examinations (ZIMSEC, 2017). This approach entails assessing learner competencies in a curriculum that includes knowledge, skills, abilities, values and traits (MoPSE, 2015). According to Dokora (2016:15):

The new curriculum excites many learners who cherish the opportunity to demonstrate their prowess in the new learning areas that previously were not part of the curriculum that Zimbabwe inherited from colonial times. From the point of view of many learners, the old curriculum was no longer fit for purpose and was breeding unemployment.

Continuous assessment in Zimbabwe has been perceived by teachers as useful and as a major tool of providing quality education, thereby making the whole education system productive (MoPSE,2015). However, most rural primary schools still have misconceptions about summative assessment as an advantageous assessment tool,hence, the importance of this study to find out rural teachers' perceptions of continuous assessment and profiling of learners.

This mode of assessment informs the teaching and learning process and contributes to learner profiles. Profile assessment is a quality assessment tool designed for a variety of learners so as to determine their strengths and identify areas for improvement. It helps in the tracking of learners' behaviour, knowledge, attitudes, skills, values and performance on an ongoing basis (MoPSE, 2015). Profiling is compiled by the teacher and other staff members who interact with the learner, for instance, sports trainers. A panel with a minimum of three members, that is, the teacher of the learner, the Teacher in Charge or Head of Department, and the Deputy Head or the Head of the School verifies the authenticity of the learner's profile records. Learner profile data collected will be submitted to the district office, provincial office and, finally, to the national data base and the ZIMSEC data base (MoPSE, 2015).

Muskin (2017) asserts that among the common methods used for continuous assessment and profiling are tests, quizzes, projects and substantive homework assignments along with a variety of discrete tasks and other checks performed during a lesson, and simple keen observation. These methods serve typically to calculate a grade or score at the end of a learning block, which represents the accumulated learning of a particular topic. Kapambwe (2010) asserts that continuous assessment involves, among others, projects, role play, discussions,

posters, presentations, demonstrations, debates, constructions and designs, among others. Combining all these activities for assessment and profiling in a continuous manner often overwhelms a teacher, thus, negatively affecting the teachers' perceptions or views of the whole process.

Birhinu (2013) avers that besides testing, assignments and recap exercises, projects are other forms of continuous assessment strategies sometimes used at primary school level. From Eshetu's (2015) research it was found that there was poor provision of detail and no timely feedback to each learner, poor classroom conditions, and negative attitudes of teachers towards continuous assessment as well as lack of professional skill in line with the new approach. Other challenges noted were lack of instructional materials and school facilities, which seemed to hinder the effective implementation of continuous assessment. All these factors, when considered, cloud the perception of a teacher towards continuous assessment and profiling implementation. These factors, in one way or the other, result in the teacher's failure or success to implement continuous assessment and profiling. Aytaged (2010) cited in Sintayechu (2016) further asserts that the judgmental role (summative) of continuous assessment is more practised than the developmental role (formative) of the assessment, hence the need for this study to explore teachers' perceptions of the continuous assessment.

According to the researcher's experience and informal observations, Masvingo district rural primary schools seem to face certain problems in the implementation of continuous assessment. These problems include lack of teaching and learning materials, high teaching loads and lack of expertise in certain new learning areas. These problems may influence the perceptions of the rural teacher towards the implementation of continuous assessment and profiling at primary school level. This research paper, thus, seeks to examine teachers' perceptions of continuous assessment particularly in Masvingo district rural primary schools.

Research questions

The study was an attempt to get answers to the following research questions:

- What are the teachers' perceptions of continuous assessment and profiling in rural areas?
- How can continuous assessment and profiling in rural areas be improved?

Research Methodology

The researcher used the qualitative case study research design in order to get accurate, trustworthy and valid data. The case study enabled researchers to ask about the teachers' perceptions or views on the strategies they used in continuous assessment and profiling. A case study research design is a qualitative research design whose main thrust is to describe and interpret the existing situations in the form of processes, effects, attitudes and beliefs (Kufakunesu & Chinyoka, 2017). According to Neuman (2011), a case study research design is important and appropriate to use when a researcher wants to learn about reported beliefs and behaviour. The researcher used face-to-face interviews with five qualified female teachers and five qualified male teachers who were conveniently and purposively selected from the six schools from different clusters in Masvingo rural district. Masvingo rural district is divided into six different educational clusters and there are ten educational districts in Masvingo. The choice of Masvingo rural district is justified by the fact of convenience, being where the researcher comes from. However, as a case study, the researcher considered different clusters from one district so that the researcher find different perspectives from as many different teachers as possible considering the high number of teachers in the whole province of Masvingo. This was considered in order to have a fair representation of the population and to avoid sample bias.

Research Findings

Rural teachers' positive perceptions of continuous assessment and profiling

The interviews carried out indicated that rural teachers stressed that use of continuous assessment promotes greater learner participation in both practical and academic activities. The majority of teacher participants viewed continuous assessment as useful to learners. The statements below are some of the views of the 10 teachers drawn from a cluster where three schools were randomly selected.

Teacher 4, School A stated that:

Once learners get used to the idea that their daily assessment of schoolwork like homework, projects and daily exercises contribute to their final examination, they are bound to work hard to ensure that they complete and pass their daily work.

Teacher 9, School B said that:

Learners would also ensure that their parents or guardians are involved in their schoolwork activities because a project done at home as homework would contribute to their end-of-term class position. Obviously, homework will be marked from home before being submitted at school, without unnecessary errors.

Teacher 2, School C impressed that:

My view is that learners have improved in as far as classroom participation is concerned since they are aware that their participation contributes to their final assessed mark.

Rural teachers' negative perceptions of continuous assessment and profiling

Some rural teachers have negative perceptions of continuous assessment and profiling as stated below;

Resource materials

The majority of rural teachers who were interviewed noted that there was lack of resource materials such as textbooks, computers, internet connectivity and electricity in most rural primary schools. The rural teachers stated that they believed that lack of such resources affected the smooth implementation of continuous assessment and profiling. The majority of rural teachers expressed concern that rural schools had inadequate teaching and learning materials.

Teacher 1, School A, stated that:

Our school comprises 720 learners and we have only two laptops, which we use during ICT. However, it is difficult to carry out continuous assessment using these two laptops only. The grade six learners, who are the pioneers of the updated curriculum, do not have any textbook and teachers teach using the syllabi only.

Teacher 7, School B, stated that:

Implementing the updated curriculum requires a lot of teaching and learning materials, which our school does not have. We do not have text books,

computers and power to charge the only computer that the head uses for school business. We also use the same computer for our lessons, so different classes scramble for the same machine

Teacher 2, School C, said:

There are inadequate textbooks and other learning equipment like agricultural tools, computers, experimental tools to use during Science and Technology. However, I own a computer but we do not have Wi-Fi in the school.

Teacher capacity

Responding to the question on teacher capacity, the participants from rural schools stated that there was lack of knowledge on how to assess learning areas such as Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Visual and Performing Arts and Physical Education and Mass Displays. The majority of the rural teacher participants indicated that they lacked certain information and experiences in the teaching of some learning areas and, hence, poor assessment skills in the same areas.

The majority of the rural school participants showed that they were not well-versed with the ICT and Visual and Performing Arts learning areas. The participants indicated that the learning areas were not part of their pedagogical learning areas. A few participants indicated that they had learnt ICT and Visual and Performing Arts at college level although they had not been part of their curriculum at primary and secondary school level. All participants also showed that they had not done Mass Displays. The rural primary school teachers expressed their concern that continuous assessment and profiling were not easy to do, especially in areas that one was not well-versed. Teacher 5, of School A, observed that:

I am of the opinion that it has been very hard to carry out continuous assessment and profiling for those rural teachers who never had pedagogical background in certain New Curriculum areas such as Visual Performing Arts (VPA).

Teacher 2, of School B, stated that:

My view is that certain new curriculum areas such as Heritage and Visual Performing Arts are new as stated and, therefore, most teachers have no idea how to teach them and how to do continuous assessment and profiling in such new areas, especially in rural areas.

Content

The majority of participants stated that there was too much paper work, too broad content and congested timetables. Most of the participants indicated that a lot of writing and recording was needed in comparison to the number of learning areas. There are too many learning areas that broaden the curriculum content and hence create a congested timetable which means too much work. Teacher 5, of School C, expressed her concerns thus:

Considering that learners need to take homework daily, and that there are daily exercises to be marked as well as projects to be done, coupled with tests, it means the paperwork for the teacher may be overwhelming.

Teacher 8, of School A, stated that;

Project-based education on its own requires lots of monitoring and a lot of paper work. To add other daily assessment work means the teacher may not be able to cope.

Teacher learner ratio

The majority of rural teacher participants indicated that they felt that teacher-learner ratio was too high and, therefore, indicative of a barrier to the successful implementation of continuous assessment and profiling. All the ten participants noted that the teacher-learner ratio of 1 as to 40 was too high to guarantee the success of continuous assessment since each learner has to be measured individually.

Discussion of Findings

It emerged from this research paper that rural teachers have both positive and negative perceptions concerning how assessment can affect learner performance. Teachers with positive perceptions indicated that once learners are subjected to continuous assessment and profiling, they tend to perform better and they become more hard working, especially when they become

aware that continuous assessment contributes to the final mark at the end of a learning period such as a term, a year or a level. This was in line with Ahukama, Onu and Ukah (2016) who assert that Continuous Assessment (CA) is advantageous to the learner because it reveals the ability of the learner early enough to make necessary adjustments for improved performance on the part of the teacher. Ahukama et al. (2016) aver that CA enables teachers to assess learners early enough, which helps teachers to integrate the feedback for improved instructional techniques for the benefit of learners.

However, it also emerged from this research paper that the majority of rural teachers (8 out of 10 or 80%) feel that due to lack of resources most of the continuous assessment done is only testing. Some rural school teachers indicated that they only recorded learners' marks in their progress record books instead of properly assessing the learners continuously. This was in line with Kapambwe (2010) who says that some teachers are of the wrong view that continuous assessment is synonymous with continuous written tests especially where there are no or fewer resources which also emerged from the responses. Obioma (2010) cited in Awofala and Babajide (2013) establishes that many teachers misapplied the continuous assessment instruments leading to more continuous testing instead of continuous assessment.

Responses from the majority of the rural primary teacher participants showed that most of them did not have a pedagogical background of some new learning areas in the new curriculum and had no idea how they could do a continuous assessment of such subjects. They raised concerns of lack of resources and insufficient knowledge in learning areas such as Information and Communication Technology, Visual and Performing Arts and Mass Displays which had been recently introduced and required them to research and read around. Continuous assessment and profiling in such areas was seen as rather lacking. This is in line with Seifu (2016) who asserts that both teachers and learners do not clearly understand the basic concepts of continuous assessment, especially in areas of learning that have just been introduced as those in Zimbabwe's new curriculum. Birhun (2013) similarly observes that teachers' perceptions of the implementation of continuous assessment in rural primary schools has been based on some problems which include the fact that teachers are not adequately educated in implementation of continuous assessment, especially in new areas of the new curriculum.

In addition, this study also revealed that rural primary school teachers think that there is no importance being placed on continuous assessment as a practice. They bemoan the fact that continuous assessment is used more as a quality control and assurance tool than in improving individual learner performance. It also emerged that rural teachers perceived lack of resources such as electricity, computers and smart phones in the rural areas as impeding the implementation of continuous assessment and profiling in such areas.

Further indications from the rural primary school teachers were that some schools did not have resources such as textbooks for the new curriculum. Some of those rural schools neither had internet connectivity, computers nor electricity. In such circumstances it becomes a challenge to carry out continuous assessment in ICT which requires both the gadgets and practical work. Muskin (2017) opines that in a small but ever growing number of countries, systems are asking teachers to use computers, the internet, and other information and communication technologies (ICT) to improve the quality of assessment and to stretch its scope. The majority of participants had shown that each school has a single laptop each for administrative use by the Head. This implies that continuous assessment becomes a tough task to undertake.

It has also been established in this paper that the teacher-learner ratio of 1:40 is too large and has an impact on the implementation of continuous assessment. A significant number of participants (40%) indicated that their classes had above 45 learners, which made it a challenge to continuously assess individual learners. Abera (2012), Eshetu (2015) and Muskin (2017) comment that the number of learners in a classroom may have a sizable and significant impact on the amount and nature of continuous assessment a teacher can undertake as well as on the amount and usefulness of any feedback. This implies that a large class size is a challenge to teachers and this negatively affects assessment. Muskin (2017) adds that it is the reason why classroom-based continuous assessments in classes with even thirty or forty learners so often involves exercises in multiple choice, true-false, short-format, or other discrete, fact-based right or wrong questions.

Tight schedules, broad course content and absence of continuous assessment and clear guidelines are some of the perceived issues faced by rural primary school teachers (Abera, 2012; Eshetu, 2015; Muskin, 2017). This research paper concurs that rural primary school teachers think that their timetables are too congested and that the ten learning areas for junior

classes and eight learning areas for infant classes have too broad content which requires more time. Continuous assessment and profiling in such a situation involves massive paper work for the teacher. The participants indicated that the timetable for the old curriculum used to end at lunch which would give the teacher time to mark the work done during the day, whereas for the new curriculum the timetable extends beyond lunch. This does not give the teacher enough time to do the assessment and profiling of work. Some of the participants commented that some of the content was beyond the cognitive level of the learners. The rural primary school teachers further indicated that there were no clear guidelines on how profiling could be done. Workshop facilitators who cascaded the information on continuous assessment and its implementation did not clearly explain how profiling was done. The majority of participants felt that there was too much paper work involved in continuous assessment and profiling. They indicated that the number of records they were supposed to keep was so big that they could not satisfactorily meet the requirements of CA and profiling. As a result, they ended up assessing learners' performances using summative assessment.

Conclusions

The study established that, generally, rural primary school teachers think that if continuous assessment were done properly, it would have a positive contribution to the success of learners. It was also established that lack of knowledge on the part of teachers on how continuous assessment was conducted in some practical subjects, lack of material resources, high teacher-learner ratio, unclearly laid down guidelines, broad course content and a lot of paper work present barriers to the successful implementation of continuous assessment and profiling.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this paper the following recommendations are made:

- Administrators should monitor the implementation of continuous assessment and profiling by teachers .
- School administrators and parents should help each other acquire adequate resources for schools together with the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, especially in rural areas.
- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should reduce the teacher-learner ratio as it affects the implementation of continuous assessment and profiling.

- Since timetables are congested throughout the day, the researcher recommends that teachers be exposed to the new curriculum content through refresher courses and workshops.

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