

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. Assessment is one way of determining how well this is done; to that extent it is an important component of secondary education. It can 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. In fact the school-based assessments within school nomenclature are composed of continuous assessment, end-of term and end-of-year examinations. School-based assessments are expected to be used as a formative tool to ensure that good, valid and reliable certification examination results are obtained. This paper would attempt to show how well this has been done by highlighting the implementation modes, problems, lessons learned and future directions in classroom assessments.

KEY WORDS: Classroom Assessment, Secondary Schools, Continuous Assessment, Public Examinations, Nigeria

Introduction

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 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). The certification for junior secondary school is expected to be based on continuous assessment and an examination conducted by state and federal examination boards while that for senior secondary school is to be based on continuous assessment and a national examination. The West African Examinations Council and the National Examinations Council presently conduct the Senior School Certificate Examinations (SSCE).

To take the certification examination at the end of JSS and SSS, it is expected that students must have demonstrated competencies on the basis of which they have been permitted to progress through the classes to the final year of each tier of secondary education. Basic education (primary and junior secondary schools) was launched in 1999 in Nigeria to effectively cover the first 9 years of formal education. Classroom assessment is expected to play an important role in this regard. 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 presentation.

Bolts and Nuts of Classroom Assessment

Whenever people talk of classroom assessment (CA) in Nigeria it is generally seen as synonymous with continuous assessment or school-based assessment (SBA). As part of the implementation of the 9-year Basic Education curriculum a framework for implementing CA has been approved (Obioma, 2008). CA is seen within the context of a larger SBA, a reform that is taking a central burner in schools. The interest in SBA is a shift in teaching for examinations to teaching for acquisition of knowledge and understanding. SBA is expected to expand the form, mode, means, and scope of assessment in schools to facilitate and enhance learning (Osunde, 2008). The implementation calls for the utilisation of assignments, projects, practical work, group work, and indeed the conventional assessment techniques and otherwise called authentic techniques. The guiding principle is ensuring that the complete person is what is of interest; focus is on cognitive, affective and psychomotor outcomes.

Classroom assessment in this context is seen as the totality of all processes and procedures utilized within the school to collect information for making decisions about the students. Students' progress in academic pursuit is central to what the school does. To that extent therefore instruction and teaching are at the core of what goes on in the school. Classroom assessment has a complementary and consolidating role in what the school does to enhance teaching and learning. To that extent classroom assessment occupies an important role in whatever is done within the classroom. It invariably directs instruction and plays an important role in an attempt to understand what happens as part of national assessment.

It is no wonder that expectations in classroom assessment involve assessment at three levels: pre-instruction, during instruction and post-instruction. Assessment at each of these levels is

no doubt a necessity. The teacher for example needs to know the students (s)he is going to teach so as to appropriately tailor the teaching. Students are expected to master certain skills like problem solving, manipulative skills among others; the onus lies on the teacher to ensure that students are following what is being taught. In this way mechanisms are put in place to address whatever shortcomings emerge in the immediate-run. Assessment at the end of instruction can be used to find out students achievement and progression rate. This situation requires multiplicity of information covering cognitive, affective and psychomotor outcomes.

Furthermore, right from the introduction of CA as part of assessment in schools the different state governments in Nigeria worked out implementation guides which in most cases reflected what was contained in a book 'Continuous assessment: A new approach' written by Ojerinde and Falayajo (1994). Experience shows that almost all implementations guides stipulate that continuous assessment tests be administered twice every school term in addition to an end of term examination. The tests and examination are to be combined in the ratio: 15:15:70. At the end of the year, the results for the first two terms' examinations and third term examinations are equally combined in the ratio: 15:15:70. This again is a sore area in the implementation of CA. The performance in the last term of the year is generally used to decide on students' progression in many state owned schools. Information on the psychomotor and affective domains are supposed to be collected also but they are not generally combined with scores on the tests and school examinations. There are no item banks available from where the respective tests are drawn; different teachers construct their own tests and examinations though one may notice pockets of states that administer state examinations.

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 nitty 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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