

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING PERFORMANCE IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

Any reform in every process or undertaking brings with it issues and problems of concern. This paper examined current issues and problems surrounding educational measurement in primary schools in Nigeria. Some suggestions deemed necessary were offered for considerations.

Introduction

There are three major levels of education in Nigeria: the primary, the secondary and the tertiary levels. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) (2004), described primary education as the education given in institutions for children aged 6 to 11 plus. This level of education forms the foundation upon which other levels are built and it is the key to success or failure of the whole system. According to FRN (2004), the duration of primary education shall be six years and the goals are to:

- (a) inculcate—permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively;-
- (b) lay sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking;
- (c) give citizenship education as basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society;
- (d) mould the character and develop sound attitude and morals in the child;
- (e) develop in the child the ability to adapt to the child's changing environment;
- (i) give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable the child function effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capacity;
- (g) provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement, including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality (p. 14).

The processes of striving to achieve the above goals involve the participation of educational administrators, teachers, pupils, parents, communities, governments etc and the employment of infrastructures and materials, which become useful for the attainment of the desired goals. The march towards the goals, from time to time, generates issues of concern and interest, which attract the attention of many people in the education circle. Some of such issues now in primary education include the re-emergence and increase in the number of private primary schools, the issue of basic education, the issue of School Based Assessment (SBA) and advancement and certification of pupils based on continuous assessment?

The School Based Assessment (SBA)

In a manual for retraining of primary school teachers, the National Teachers Institute (NTI, 2006), described SBA as, "an assessment practice that broadens and expands the form, mode, means and scope of assessment in the school to facilitate and enhance learning." It is believed that the ultimate purpose of assessment is to promote learning, so in this case, the assessment base is broadened to include not only the teachers but also all the significant others that impact on the child's readiness, capacity and interest to learn. Accordingly, "these include the subject teachers and other teachers, class peers, parents relevant education agencies (such as school inspectors) and of course the child". The NTI (2006) explains that, all these categories of people are incorporated into the assessment process to support, motivate and enable the child to want to learn, to actually learn and to steadily make learning progress.

The Modes and Means of SBA

According to NTI (2006), the mode and means of SBA are expanded to include not only the written tests, but also more attention being given to assignments, homework, projects, group work and portfolios. In the manual it was explained that all elements of continuous assessment (CA) such as planning and consideration, previous assessment, providing pupils feedback and use of variety of tests (oral, written and performance) are all incorporated into SBA (NTI, 2006).

It might become necessary here to review the concept of CA but before then, we have a brief overview of policy statements on continuous assessment.

The National Policy on Education and Continuous Assessment

The FRN (2004), stated in her National Policy on Education in paragraph 9 (g) that "educational assessment and evaluation shall be liberalized by their being based in whole or in part on . continuous assessment of the progress of the individual", p.9. Furthermore, in section 4 of the policy on primary education, paragraph 19 (h and i), it was stated that "advancement from one class to another shall be based on continuous assessment; the primary school leaving certificate shall be based only on continuous assessment and shall be issued locally by the head teacher of the school" (p. 16). Then what is this continuous assessment?

The Concept of Continuous Assessment

Continuous assessment may be referred to as all the processes involved in collecting and recording information on pupils' learning performance over a period of time and using same data to monitor and guide pupils' progress in a learning programme. In a handbook on continuous assessment, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (1985), define continuous assessment as:

A mechanism whereby the final grading of a student in a cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of behaviour takes account, in a systematic way, of all his performances during a given period of schooling, such assessment involves the use of a great variety of modes of evaluation for the purpose of guiding and improving learning and performance of the student. P.8

The handbook went further to state the attributes of continuous assessment as comprehensive, cumulative systematic and guidance oriented. Ohuche and Akeju (1988) explained continuous assessment as being comprehensive because it looks at all aspects of a pupil's behaviour of cognitive, affective and psycho-motor outcomes and it uses varieties of instruments to ascertain the behaviour of pupils. Continuous assessment is also cumulative because a wide variety of records are kept about a student's behaviour, which are used in making decisions about the student etc.

Harbour-Peters in Nworgu (ed) (1992; 38), explained some rationale for adopting continuous assessment. It makes it possible for the teacher to be involved in the final assessment of the pupils he/she has taught. Continuous assessment is more indicative of the child's overall ability than a single examination. It also encourages the teachers to be flexible and introduce innovations into their teaching, which a final external examination does not allow. From time to time it enables the teacher to have a feedback on his instructional methods and to improve on its efficacy etc.

The techniques of continuous assessment include tests, examinations, assignments and projects, observations, questionnaire, interviews, anecdotal records and sociometry (Ohuche and Akeju, 1988). Thus, various techniques are used in continuous assessment.

The SBA and CA

It has been pointed out that all elements of CA are incorporated into SBA. The SBA is more embracing and wider in scope. According to NTI (2006), the teacher is perhaps the only assessor in CA while in SBA the child is even given the room to participate in his own assessment to assist the child to keep on learning whether alone, in class, among peers or at home.

Having discussed the concepts of SBA and CA, it is now pertinent to examine some of the problems involved in the practice of the assessment system.

Contemporary Problems in Assessment of Learning Performance

Many problems exist or are expected in the use of School Based Assessment for promotion and certification of pupils in primary schools. Some of the problems may emanate from teacher- while others arise from the pupils.

The Teacher Factor

One major problem militating against school based assessment is that many teachers are inadequately trained for the practice of the assessment system. The assessment system is supposed to be comprehensive involving cognitive, affective and psycho-motor domains of learning. Unfortunately

majority of teachers do not even form the affective and psychomotor objectives in teaching of their lessons. We all know that psychomotor activities are very important in human living and Mkpa (1985), stressing the importance, noted that most of man's activities are psychomotor in nature. But many teachers do not teach and do not assess these psychomotor and affective domains of learning. They rather concentrate on the cognitive learning. This was why Asuru (1990), noted that the attributes of comprehensiveness in continuous assessment in schools are completely lacking.

With regards to primary education Ovute (2001) showed that primary school teachers very often assess the pupils in primary science and mathematics examinations in the area of cognitive domains and little or no assessment in the affective and psychomotor domains respectively. He further indicated that, the assessment techniques employed mostly by teachers for assessment of pupils' learning was paper and pen techniques.

It is clear that even the teacher made tests used in assessing the objective domains of learning are not standardized and so their validity and reliability are questionable. The assessment practice and results will even show disparity among different teachers, subjects, schools, and locations. Even if teachers impart knowledge and skills in affective and psychomotor domains of learning, they hardly assess it because majority of them are ill trained in instrument development especially for assessing psychomotor and affective learning. Thus, Ibe (1992) observed that "the major problem of measuring the affective and psychomotor behaviour is the lack of appropriate and objective instruments." Then how should one use such an incomprehensive and unreliable assessment results to promote and issue certificates to pupils?

Another problem that may arise on the part of the teacher adopting the school-based assessment is that the workload of the teacher would increase. In trying to use various techniques of assessment to appraise the pupils on comprehensive and cumulative attributes and keep record of the results of the assessment accordingly, the teacher would have been over working himself. To escape from this excess workload the teacher goes ahead doing continuous testing with minimal teaching only to get some scores to record on/behalf of the pupils. This condition is not conducive to achieving curriculum objectives.

Another question that the teacher must answer concerning SBA is on the issue of honesty. Many teachers are dishonest regarding pupils' assessment. Some display the attitude of partiality in award of marks. Some inflate scores and others sometimes award marks arbitrarily. NT! (2006) noted that the correlation between such scores and those of central examination bodies are usually negative. One can imagine that under this condition, a pupil may have nice results on records without being able to show anything in defense of the results. Thus, the promotion and certification of pupils based only on school assessment should not be done in haste.

The Pupil Factor

There are certain problems that may arise from the pupils in the practice of school-based assessment. The mode and means of SBA are expanded to include written tests, assignments, homework, projects, group work and so on. The problem in accomplishing this as expected is that many pupils are lazy and over pampered from their families. Such lazy pupils would not be able to carryout the projects, homework, assignments and group work as given.

On the other hand, the issue of dishonesty is still found among pupils. Many projects, home works and assignments given to the pupils and even college students are not done by them but by friends and relatives who, in most cases, are not concerned about teaching the learners how to carryout the work on their own. This is why some students grow with the false idea that one needs another person to help him play fraud to pass an examination. Then which way out?

The Way Forward

The following recommendations are deemed necessary for effective school based assessment of pupils' performance in primary schools. Onyishi (2003:177) had suggested some innovations and modifications to reform performance evaluation in schools. Some of these were as follows:

- a. increasing continuous assessment marks to fifty percent.
- b. employment of experts on Affective and psychomotor instruments.
- c. regular workshops/seminars on continuous assessment.
- d. use of standardized Instruments in primary and secondary schools.
- e. monitoring teacher's attendance to classes.

- f. enhanced and regular payment of Teachers' remunerations.
- g. judging people on what they know and can do.
- h. eradication of bribery and corruption (dishonesty) in our society.

There is one issue that needs emphasis here. This is the need for full training and employment of experts for development and use of affective and psychomotor instruments in primary schools. These experts could be drawn from anywhere but should be made to work in primary schools after training. This is necessary because the current re-training exercise for primary school teachers indicates that many teachers cannot meet up with the demand of comprehensive assessment. Though many are intelligent and diligent, a good number are the opposite. There is need for a help of experts in instrument development and assessment.

On the other hand, we cannot expect every primary school teacher to keep complete required records of school based assessment. Such records need computerization. This means that computers should be acquired for primary schools. Computer experts should also be employed and primary school teachers should be trained in the use of computers. This will ensure accurate, systematic and cumulative recording of pupils' data.

School Based Assessment for Promotion and Certification of Pupils

It is the wish of this writer to state that the proposed use of SBA only for promotion and certification of pupils is not to the best of our education system. How can we use the results that are largely neither valid nor reliable to promote pupils and issue them with certificates? Are we no more concerned about the issue of quality? Would it not be possible for one to be admitted in a higher class or from primary to secondary school without knowing anything? The emphasis being laid here is that there should be an externally moderated assessment at the end of primary school course and an externally moderated examination or assessment for entry into another level of school. Thus, the use of common entrance for proceeding from primary to junior secondary schools should not be discontinued. Externally moderated assessment, even if within a local government area makes teachers and pupils to work harder. Such assessment instrument is more standardized than the school teacher-made tests.

Basic education is compulsory for every Nigerian child as stipulated in the national policy. This is good. But we must have a way of establishing quality. Externally moderated assessment should be combined with SBA to ensure quality in pupils' performance.

Conclusion

The importance of learning performance assessment cannot be overstressed in our school system. While it is diagnostic and curative, it also serves a placement function. In the present level of educational development in Nigeria, it is necessary to suggest that the SBA currently emphasized should be combined with externally moderated end-of-programme evaluation for primary school pupils. In the same manner the common entrance examinations into junior secondary schools, which is organized by the state ministries of education should not be discontinued. Otherwise the exercises would appear too local, invalid and unreliable.

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