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IMPROVEMENT OF ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

Continuous Assessment (CA) Practice in the secondary schools in Nigeria is wrongly practised while the Assessment For Learning (AFL) which should be a complementary aspect of CA is not well known or practised. The main objectives of this paper are: (i) to intimate the stakeholders in education with the level of awareness of CA and AFL in secondary schools in Nigeria, (ii) to enlighten the classroom teachers on the effective way of practising CA and AFL, (iii) to enlighten the learners on self-assessment through the remarks of teachers on their performances in various tests, and (iv) to encourage and prepare learners and teachers on effective implementation of CA and AFL. The end product of this exercise is to enhance effective assessment, which will eventually lead to improvement in the learning process. The paper looked into the antecedent of CA and AFL in the secondary schools, as well the current level of practice of the two approaches in some states of the federation. The paper emphasized the fact that CA practice is guidance- oriented and formative in nature while AFL encourages the learners to have individual assessment of themselves hence the two approaches are learner centred. The writer made use of research findings of other academics as well as her own wealth of experience as classroom teacher and principal of a school in her last 25 years in the secondary schools in Oyo State of Nigeria. Lastly, recommendations were made for Federal and State governments on capacity building for teachers and quality control personnel so that teaching and assessment could be effective in the Nigerian secondary schools.

Key words: Continuous Assessment (CA), Assessment For Learning (AFL) and Secondary School Education.

Introduction

The importance of assessment may be better understood if we look at the roles of educational assessment in general. Thorndike and Hagen (2000), in describing the role of educational assessment said "The role of educational psychological assessment procedures can be no more than to provide some of the information in terms of which decisions may be made. We hope they provide useful information and provide it better than can alternatives". This useful information to be provided can be gathered during the teaching-learning process in the classroom.

The main purpose of classroom instruction is to change learners' behaviour in desired directions. Learners' behaviour refers to all changes in the intellectual, emotional and physical spheres. To be able to know the direction of change, assessment and evaluation are very essential parts of teaching and learning process. These desired directions are often established by the instructional objectives, and the learning progress is periodically assessed by tests and other evaluation techniques.

There are different types of tests or examinations being given in schools; there is the termly or yearly examination, as well as end of course examination such as WAEC and NECO. All these types of examinations have their shortcomings. In recent years, the experiences of examination malpractices and waste in education have compelled educationists all over the world including Nigeria to become concerned about the undesirable side-effects of the one-time term-by-term or yearly summative test or examination. Some educationists in Nigeria have therefore identified a number of problems associated with our former system of evaluation of students' achievement in schools, some of which are listed below:

- (1) The treat factor of single examinations is such that candidates are tempted to engage in irregular practices in an effort to pass the examination at all cost.
- (2) Single final examinations do not pay attention to the process variables in the instructional phase which determine success or failure in the final examination.
- (3) The use of single examinations to evaluate several years of work introduces a certain lack of reliability and validity into the results because unexpected fluctuations in the

circumstances of the learner or the examination administration may distort results in unpredictable ways.

- (4) Assessment is mostly directed to the thought aspect (cognitive domain) of learning activities.
- (5) The reporting system whereby the raw score and overall average are used to make interpretation and comparison of results difficult. Thus, the information provided to parents or guardians is usually scanty.

The CA is therefore, the most recent development in the effort to reform evaluation in school, and it aims at solving all the problems listed above.

The NPE 2004 has re-emphasized the place of CA at both the JSS and the SSS in Nigeria. The use of CA in the overall assessment of student in both JSS examination and WAEC and NECO has also gained wide acceptance. With the commencement of the implementation of the 9- year Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) (NERDC, 2007) in September 2008 in Nigeria, the National Council on Education has approved a new national framework for conducting CA in schools in Nigeria. There is a plan to improve the capacity of teachers on the effective implementation of the new BEC and the new national framework on CA. This is against the backdrop of the policy that school pupils proceeding to the Junior Secondary School need not take any selective entrance examination anymore. There is therefore a need to let the teachers be aware and ready to implement CA in the context of the introduction of BEC and the new national framework on CA.

The questions to now ask are mainly three:-

1. Is CA rightly practised in secondary schools in Nigeria?
2. What is the level of awareness of the practice of CA in the context of the introduction of BEC and the new national framework on CA?
3. What are the demands on the teachers on the preparedness for the effective implementation of CA in schools?

To be able to know the answers to these questions, one will need to understand CA as a concept, its meaning and characteristics and experiences on its practice in schools in Nigeria.

Continuous Assessment (CA) Defined And Characteristics

CA has been given several shades of meaning and interpretations by some eminent Nigerian scholars. Falayajo (1981) referred to it as a system of assessment which is carried out at predetermined intervals (usually coinciding with some identifiable units of instruction or level of the educational system) for the purpose of monitoring the progress or otherwise of the students and the general performance of the educational system.

Yoloye (1984) defined CA as a method of evaluating the progress and achievement of students in educational institutions.

Onasanya (1991) defined CA as the strategy adopted in order to find out what the students have gained from learning activities in terms of knowledge, thinking, reasoning, character development and industry. CA is a systematic and objective method of determining the extent of learners' performance in all the expected changes in his behaviour. It aimed at getting the truest possible picture of each student's ability and at the same time helping each student to develop his or her abilities to the fullest. It is a method whereby the final grading of students takes into account in a systematic way their whole performance during a given period of schooling.

Despite some slight variations in the above definitions, it can be seen clearly that some characteristics of CA are either specifically mentioned or implied in the definitions. Five of such characteristics are hereby highlighted.

- (a) It is systematic
- (b) It is Objective
- (c) It is Cumulative
- (d) It is Comprehensive
- (e) It is Guidance-Oriented

Some evaluators believe that essentially, CA contains all the features of what is generally described as 'formative evaluation'. It is a periodic evaluation for the purpose of diagnosis and remedial action. In addition, it requires that results of the periodic evaluation form part of the final assessment of the individual (Yoloye, 1982; Bajah, 1983; and Onasanya, 1991).

CA Practice and Awareness in Schools

Evidences abound to show that CA practice, awareness and usage is very high in the secondary schools but the practice is not thorough. The researcher's experience as a teacher in the secondary schools in Oyo State for 20 years and principal of a secondary school for 4 years showed that CA is wrongly practised. Learners are not given time-table earlier enough, so as to know when the tests will come up and in what forms. Tests are therefore administered haphazardly- some schools administered it once a month, others one before mid-term and one after mid-term. The worst part of it was that the tests are mainly on cognitive aspect of learning, and the affective and psychomotor domains are left unassessed. However, when I assumed the post of a principal, I tried to change the situation. The students were told at the beginning of every term that there would be three types of CA:

- (i) a general test on cognitive assessment;
- (ii) homework given as an individual or group project; and
- (iii) the notes on lessons would also be assessed.

To corroborate the experience of the researcher, Obioma (2008) examined the status, gaps and challenges of CA practices of primary schools and its teachers across the six geo-political zones of the country. The survey sought information from the school teachers, as well as the appropriate application of the CA instruments, whether there are uniform CA guidelines across the country and how school teachers engage in CA practices. Results showed that in general school teachers misapplied the CA instruments leading to more of continuous testing of learners instead of continuous assessment. CA guidelines not only varied across States and Schools but were also different from the guidelines stipulated in the national CA handbook. Only a mastery of class tests was used at intervals not even regular. Other CA instruments such as practical work, anecdotes, observations and socio-metric that could illicit non-cognitive information were hardly applied. He therefore recommends that there is a dire need of the streamlining and adoption of the draft national CA framework initiated in 2007. He also suggests that a course on CA should be integrated into the pre-service teacher education programme, regular capacity strengthening workshops and in-service courses for serving teachers. He also called for a medium term (3-5 years) initiative of computerizing the operations of CA. School inspectors should be empowered to monitor the CA programme in

schools. Lastly, a nation-wide sensitization and advocacy on the usefulness of CA be carried out on parents and other significant stakeholders.

It has been established that there is high awareness and usage of CA in the secondary schools but that CA is wrongly practised. What then is expected from the classroom practitioner, in order to make CA effectively practised?

Demand for Effective CA Practice

The CA practice demands certain preparation from the teacher, they are:

- (a) Learners need to be informed of the when and how of CA.
- (b) Continuous update of the learners' scores so as to have an up-to-date idea of each learner's rate of improvement.
- (c) The teacher too should continually update his own knowledge, and his teaching techniques, materials and objectives should be in line with learners' performances.
- (d) The teacher must design the teaching-learning procedure such that the weight of marking is not unbearable for him and the weight of testing is not too heavy on learners.
- (e) The teacher should use the feedback from each test to guide the design of the next teaching.
This demands that a teacher should be flexible in designing his course work so that changes can be effected easily should the results from earlier tests so direct.
- (f) The teacher would have to take into account the affective and psychomotor domains and not just the cognitive domain alone. Teachers should be aware that learner's interest and attitude towards a subject affect performance (Salawu, 2000 and Olopoenia, 2000). So it is necessary to weigh their interests and attitudes continually for it so that teachers can decide whether to continue using a particular approach or make necessary changes.
- (g) Also, the teacher should note the skills that the learners are good in or have inherent traits for, so as to help them along that line.

From the demands of CA already spelt out, we can conclude that if CA is rightly practised, teachers will be more effective in their teaching and learners will learn better in our schools.

Assessment for Learning (AFL)

AFL is not a new concept in the school system but it is not well known or practised. It is an assessment system that is useful in generating comments that could provide either the teacher or the students or both with direction for improvements of learning or teaching (Faleye and Ojerinde, 2005). Series of literature evidence abound that supports the assertion that formative feedback (given in AFL) contributes substantially to improvement of student learning and performance (Black and William, 1998; William, Lee, Harrison and Black, 2004).

The Curriculum Development Council of Hong Kong (as quoted by Carless 2005) stated that AFL is promoted (in Hong Kong) to 'reduce excessive tests, examinations and dictations and to help provide information for both students and teachers to improve learning and adjust teachings'.

However, one fundamental problem that mankind (especially those in developing world) faces is the fear of change. It is difficult to introduce new concepts in the way people used to do something (NECO, 1999). This perhaps was why AFL appeared to be difficult to implement in Nigerian schools. Instead, teachers appeared to be more concerned with their students passing high-stake examinations with little concern for the nature of the process leading to the writing of formative tests.

Teachers have not been taking formative feedback seriously in the classroom (Faleye and Dibu-Ojerinde, 2005); and the scenario is not restricted to the Nigerian situation alone, it happened in other parts of the world. For example, Harlen and Crick (2003) reported that the use of test scores for purposes that affect the future of students has made teachers to concentrate more of their efforts on how their students will pass rather than using test scores for formative reasons. Thus '...high stake summative assessment squeezes out formative assessment' (p. 170). AFL and formative assessment are related in the sense that both are conducted during the course of a programme or teaching, and both are expected to give feedback to students and teachers. Teachers, instead of embracing AFL because of its numerous benefits to students

and teachers failed to give meaningful feedback to students after any test or exercise.

Nevertheless, there are literature evidences to support the notion that AFL enhances learners' understanding and performance in the school. From the last decade (i.e from the 1990s) to the present period, there appeared to be agreement in the literature on the usefulness of AFL for promoting students' learning and teachers' teaching effectiveness. Learning a change in behaviour due to experience (Crowl, Kaminsky and Podell, 1997) is affected by a number of factors.

Apart from the inherited hereditary traits from parents, what a learner would gain from the activities that go on in the classroom is to a high extent determined by the efficiency with which the teacher does his/her work (Tsui 2004), especially his/her assessment behaviour. This behaviour is determined by the extent of his/her knowledge of assessment techniques and commitment to using them.

The teacher is encouraged to use varying tools for the assessment of different topics and domains as listed in the school curriculum for all subjects (NECO, 2002). However, many teachers seemed to have abandoned the suggested clues in the curriculum for personal preferences or styles that appeared to be easy to use and which will help obtain results quickly, hence the continuous usage of class tests as the dominant (if not the only) instrument for generating continuous assessment scenes (Dibu Ojerinde, 2005). The practice whereby teachers use class tests as the main and perhaps the only instrument for generating CA scores is common to majority of Nigerian secondary schools, especially the public/government schools. Apart from this, the scripts of students (where paper and pencil tests were taken) also show little or no comments at all as to what the learner can do to improve his/her present capabilities in a given subject. Emphasis has been on the total marks obtained out of a given maximum obtainable. For example in 2006 the NECO conducted accreditation inspection to some secondary schools in Nigeria and discovered that 70% of the teachers in the schools gave marks without comments. The types of comments expected here are those that will help candidates discover their areas of weakness and advise for improvements in their school works (Black and William, 1998). This situation seemed not to be in existence, as experience as a teacher educator and inspector to

schools has shown that comments like very good, good, poor, fair, satisfactory, etc were most common in students' notes and report cards/sheets.

The question could then be asked that: why have teachers found it difficult to give comments that could assist students discover their areas of weakness and what they could do for improvement? This could be because teachers are not informed to do so or that they are not trained in doing it. It could also be because of volume of work or large classes, which teachers have to cope with during and after school hours.

The use of AFL demands certain efforts from the classroom practitioners and the learners in order to usher in its effective use. This could be found in the 'black-box'.

The publication inside the black box (1998) is an influential pamphlet that summarises the main findings arising from 250 assessment articles (covering nine years of international research) studied by Paul Black and Dylan William. The document is well known and widely used, and acts as a touch stone for many professional in the field of assessment.

Inside the black box are five key factors which improve learning through assessment:

- Providing effective feedback to pupils ;
- Actively involving pupils in their own learning ;
- Adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment;
- Recognizing the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils, both of which are crucial to learning;
- Considering the need for pupils to be able to assess themselves and to understand how to improve;

The research also identifies a number of risks with regard to assessment:

- Valuing quantity and presentation rather than the quality of learning;
- Lowering the self-esteem of pupils by over-concentration on judgements rather than advice for improvement;
- Demoralizing pupils by comparing them negatively and repeatedly with more successful learners;

- Giving feedback that serves social and managerial purposes rather than helping pupils to learn more effectively;
 - Working with an incomplete picture of pupils learning needs;
- However, beyond the black box, the reform groups (1999) follow up the work of Black and William and emphasize that good assessment for learning:
- Is embedded in a view of teaching and learning of which it is an essential part;
 - Involves sharing learning goals with pupils;
 - Aims to help pupils know and to recognize the standards they are aiming for;
 - Involves pupils in self assessment;
 - Provides feedback which leads to pupils recognizing their next steps and how to take them;
 - Promotes confidence that every pupil can improve;
 - Involves both teacher and pupils reviewing and reflecting on assessment information;

They also emphasized on the factors that contributed to pupils learning which are:-

1. making the learning objectives and learning outcomes clear to pupils.
2. placing the learning objectives in a longer term context.
3. allowing time to think before answering questions.
4. providing oral feedback which helps move pupils on.
5. requiring pupils to self and peer assessment.
6. training pupils with the summative assessment criteria.
7. familiarizing pupils with the summative assessment criteria.
8. focusing feedback on specific targets for improvement.
9. allowing pupils to demonstrate their understanding in different ways.

It could be seen from the works of researchers on AFL that it demands a lot of work on the part of the classroom teachers; but if AFL is properly planned as expatiated above, it would make the work of the teacher easier, and students performance in all areas of learning would be greatly improved.

Also, AFL usage should be seen as the complementary aspect of the CA and other examinations in the secondary schools and should be so emphasized. This is because AFL is good for individualized

assessment by the students themselves, and this will prompt or propel them to want to study hard in order to improve or sustain the level of progress they have obtained. AFL is highly learner-centred; if properly used, and encouraged, it would usher in effective assessment of learning.

Conclusion and Recommendations.

It could be concluded that there is high awareness of the use of CA but it is wrongly practised. The use of AFL is not known to many teachers let alone its usage. There is therefore a clarion call for the proper use of CA and AFL in schools because they are highly formative and learner-centred in nature and they could enhance effective assessment of learning. Hence, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. A course on CA and AFL should be introduced in Colleges and Universities of Education.
2. Workshop and seminars should be organized for classroom teachers on the effective use of CA and AFL, and remuneration and certificates should be given.
3. Parents and learners should be sensitized on the usefulness of CA and AFL.
4. Workshop and seminars should also be organized for principals, inspectors and supervisors in the monitoring of the use of CA and AFL in schools. Certificates of participation should be given.
5. The computerization of CA and AFL should also be done.

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