

Teacher Capacity Building and Classroom Assessment for Sustainable Student Learning

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Abstract Education is a social institution and is subject to change in response to social dynamics. Because the teacher can provide the much needed quality control devices through student assessment, he/she can be seen as the manager, motivator or at best, the managing director and chief executive officer of the educational system. However, the Nigerian teacher is incapacitated in many areas due to the nature of environment he/she operates. The most meaningful information for improving instruction and providing clear and useful feedback to learners is collected daily in the classroom through classroom assessment of the learners. There is a direct relationship between appropriate classroom assessment techniques and higher student achievement, to the extent that when practiced effectively, can improved student learning. The academic imperative is for teachers to renovate their professional competence and capacity to be able to respond to the dynamics of classroom assessment. This paper therefore, discussed the status of Nigerian teacher and learning today, areas of capacity building for teachers to be able to respond to challenges of classroom assessment, the relationship between classroom assessment and improved student learning. It recommended among others, the training and retraining of teachers on newer methods/techniques of classroom assessment and teachers sharing ideas with peers through teacher moderation (collective assessment of student work).

Introduction

Education, whether at the basic, secondary or tertiary level, as a social institution is subject to change in response to social dynamics. Curricular changes demand for changes in approaches and methods of teaching as well as the techniques of student assessment. The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) (2004:8) posits, "Any fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of any society has to be preceded by an educational revolution". Education exhibits "permanent as well as constant changing attributes that try to adapt to new demands and circumstances (Okeke, 2004:3). One of these new demands is building of teacher capacity in classroom assessment.

In Nigeria today, we hear many remarks about the teacher and the teaching profession. We read and people inform us that:

- The standard of education among our learners at all levels of education in Nigeria has fallen;
- Graduates of tertiary institutions are of low quality;
- Those who can, do; those who cannot, teach; those who cannot teach, teach;
- Examination processes have been bastardized;
- Teachers do not objectively assess students;
- Very fascinating question still: Do parents and guardians know who is teaching their children, what they teach, how they teach and how the children are assessed?

The implications of all these statements are critical to the development of Nigeria as a nation. They point to the fact that Nigeria has a defective educational system and the sector worse hit is the basic education level. FGN (2004), emphasizing on the primacy of basic education states that the rest of education system is built upon it and it is the key to the success or failure of the whole system. It proceeds to give the goals of primary education as follows:

- a) To inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively;
- b) Lay sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking;
- c) Give citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society;

- d) Mould the character and develop sound attitudes and morals in the child;
- e) Develop in the child the ability to adapt to his changing environment;
- f) Give the child the opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable him to function effectively in the society within the limits of his capacity; and
- g) Provide the child with basic tools for future educational advancement, including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality.

These goals will form the basis of basic education in all the states of the federation. It further states that basic education shall be tuition free, universal and compulsory and gives its curriculum as:

1. Language:
 - a) Languages of the environment.
 - b) English.
 - c) French.
2. Mathematics.
3. Science.
4. Physical and Health Education.
5. Religious Knowledge.
6. Agriculture/Home Economics.
7. Social Studies and Citizenship Education.
8. Cultural and Creative Arts (Drawing, Handicraft, Music and Cultural Activities).

It goes further to prescribe educational services to be provided to include:

- i. School Library.
- ii. Basic Health Scheme.
- iii. Counseling.
- iv. Educational Resource Centre.
- v. Specialist Teachers of Particular subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Physical Education, Language Arts (in relation to English and Nigerian Languages), Music, Fine Arts and Home Economics.

The instrument through which this curriculum is to be executed or implemented is the teacher. The Nigerian teacher plays significant responsibilities and roles in the development of a functional and relevant educational system. The quality of the teacher and his inputs into the development of the instructional system will influence the learners and graduates produced at all levels of our educational system. The teacher can provide the much needed quality control devices in our educational system at all levels and therefore, he/she can best be described as a manager, a motivator, the captain/pilot, interactive agent, as a manager, and above all the chief executive officer and managing director of the Nigerian educational system (Ibe-Bassey, 2001).

Education change is likely to accompany, not only change in curriculum (learning) in terms of subjects taught, syllabi, approved textbooks, etc, school conditions such as environment, class size, infrastructure, but also the quality of classroom assessment. For teachers to meet these multiple contemporary challenges for basic education, certain capabilities for effective response must be built in today's Nigerian teacher.

The Nigerian Teacher and Learning Today

A teacher is a professional who earns his/her professional status. He/She is just not conferred with this status. The teacher can teach and he/she knows what he/she wants to teach and how he/she will teach. He/She has the knowledge about teaching as an art and he/she is skillful. The teacher can actualize the potentiality for knowledge already in the learner and can accurately assess or evaluate the level of achievements of the learner without any biasness. The teacher can translate knowledge, skills, attitudes and values with certain professional principles. Unfortunately, today, what we find in some of our public and

private schools are cheaters, because they cannot teach in such schools with the basic and fundamental professional principles within any instructional process which classroom assessment is a critical part.

Most of the teachers at the basic education level lack the qualities of a professional teacher. The professional teacher according to Ibe-Basse (2000), is a:

- Mediator of learning
- Manager of instruction
- Planner of instruction
- Disciplinarian/Controller of student behaviour
- Confidant of student
- Parent substitute
- Judge of achievement
- Scholar/Research specialist
- Curriculum implementer, etc.

Teaching and learning complement each other. For a teacher to teach there must be a learner or student. A learner or student acquires knowledge, skills and inspiration from the teacher who teaches. The Longman Active Dictionary defines learn as to get knowledge of subject or skill by studying or doing it. The Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines it as to gain knowledge or skill by study, experience or being taught (Hornby, 1995). By way of summary, "learning is a change in human disposition or capability, which persists over a period of time, and which is not simply ascribable to process of growth... it exhibits itself as a change in behaviour, its interference is made by comparing what behaviour was possible before the individual was placed in a 'learning situation' and what behaviour can be exhibited after such a treatment' (Gagne, 1977:3). Simply put, learning is said to have taken place when a person gains knowledge or skill by studying, doing or being taught. Classroom in its ordinary meaning is a room that holds a class of pupils (learners) to be taught by a teacher.

Translating is a systematic, rational and organized process of translating knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in accordance with acceptable professional principles and practices. Classroom assessment is very critical in teaching and learning, since teaching is simply a process of making things known to people and which has a learner/student-centered dimension.

A professional and effective teacher is continuously involved in systematic instructional planning if learning must be achieved effectively and efficiently. In instruction, the teacher arranges, orders, and organizes all human, material, temporal and spatial resources to facilitate the learning of his students and learners. Since the teacher is involved in the systematic instructional planning, an effective classroom assessment will help him integrate into the instructional situation the following:

- * Learner's characteristic
- * Instructional objectives
- * Instructional strategies
- * Instructional responses and
- * Evaluation techniques

The Need for Building Teacher Capacity in Classroom Assessment

The most meaningful information for informing instruction and providing clear and useful feedback to students/learners is collected daily in the classroom (Asp, 2000). This overall process carried out by the teacher is referred to as classroom assessment. Generally, student given account of students and determine whether the intention or goal of the teaching has been realized. This is a vital indicator of student's capability and a justification for parents' /guardians' expenditure of scarce resources.

FGN (2004) recommends the use of continuous assessment evaluation method in schools. Continuous assessment is a "method of ascertaining what a student gains from development, taking account of all his/her

performance in tests, assignments, projects and his/her general attitudes and interest in the school performance" (Igwe, 2005:206). The main characteristics, he explained, are its coverage in terms of special knowledge, attitude, and interest and skill development of the students. This task for the teacher requires hard work, mental energy, thoroughness and diligence considering large class size and diversity that characterized Nigerian schools today.

There is no doubt that no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers (FGN, 2004). This means to achieve a functional educational system, the teachers must be able to respond to educational changes meant to achieve such objective. Fear of change is very fundamental to human nature. Consequently, in most cases, teachers have the tendency to resist change and insist on old practices. To allay fears of teachers, their capacity to deal with the new challenges must be built for improved performance.

Capacity is "the ability to understand or do something" and building is "an increase in the amount of something over a period of time" (Hornby, 1995: 219). Building capacity of teacher in education process therefore, is the conscious attempt at upgrading, renovating, and acquiring skills, abilities and strategies that must increase consistently over time and enable teachers react appropriately to academic dynamics including professional training, lesson delivery, effective use of instructional materials, teachers communication skills, provision of effective role model, effective discipline and students' control, improved conditions of service and most importantly, quality of classroom assessment to determine the needs of his/her learners in the learning process.

Appropriate classroom assessment techniques and tools can help teachers at the basic education level plan or modify instruction, communicate important learning goals to pupils, and result in corrective feedback about how to improve. High quality classroom assessment techniques have also been linked to higher student achievement. For example, Black and William (1998) summarized a number of studies showing that the introduction of formative assessment techniques helped low achievers more than other students and thus, can raise achievement overall by reducing the gap. They further found that there is considerable evidence that assessment when practiced effectively, can improve student learning.

One of the most powerful research-based strategies for linking assessment to improved instructional practice is teacher moderation. This process involves teachers in a collaborative discussion of student work, based on predetermined assessment criteria. Teachers who engaged consistently in the moderation process of student assessment are likely to:

- assess student performance more consistently, effectively, confidently and fairly;
- build common knowledge about curriculum expectations and levels of achievement;
- identify strengths and areas for growth based on evidence of student learning;
- adjust and acquire new learning by comparing one's thinking to that of another student teacher; and
- Share effective practices to meet the needs of all students, monitor progress, and celebrate growth.

The most powerful aspect of teacher moderation as a strategy for effective classroom assessment is the collective sharing of effective strategies in planning next steps for instruction.

Crooks (1998:445) in a review of the impact of classroom evaluation practices on students, noted that "the choice of evaluation approaches seems to be particularly potent in its effect" and suggested that "there is something approaching a law of learning behaviour for students namely, that the quickest way to change student learning is to change the assessment system"

Stiggins (1999), has popularized the use of term "assessment literacy" as a way of defining the particular kinds of assessment skills teachers need. He noted that many teachers did not have course work in their pre-service programs to develop these skills. Shepard (2000) defined the need for new classroom assessment skills based on emerging research and discipline-based standards. She suggested that teachers need to make the following changes in their assessment practices:

- change the nature of conversations with students so that students develop greater knowledge of and responsibility for learning goals;

- assess students' prior knowledge and use that information in planning better instruction to meet student needs and match student interests;
- give students feedback in ways that go beyond grades such that they are helped to understand what quality work or thinking looks like; and
- get clear about the explicit criteria for open-ended/performance tasks and involve students in self assessing.

In addition to the improvements listed above, others have found that the typical assignments and assessments given to students received low-level, less than challenging work assignments (Karweit, Price, Riocciuti, Thompson, and Vaden-Kiernan, 1997). To complicate matters, studies show that teachers think they are providing challenging learning opportunities to a greater extent than they actually are. Even in our college, polytechnic and university classrooms, those who have studied assessment practices have found that teachers tend to think they are teaching to higher-order thinking goals tend to weakly represented (Angelo & cross, 1993).

Where does the responsibility for building teacher classroom assessment capacity lie? Recently, several reports have suggested that improvement efforts, in general, have focused exclusively at the school level for too long. Elmore & Burney (1998), Spillan (2000) suggest that more models of how Ministry of Education develops strategies for influencing changes at the classroom level are needed. As a first step, Ministry of Education and the school must have a clear sense of what good classroom practice looks like.

Teacher Capacity-Building for Effective Response to Challenges of Classroom Assessment

Actualizing assessment reform at the classroom level is a long-term endeavour that will not happen as a result of a single workshop or conference. Such reform involves learning about and then implementing more effective assessment methods and strategies in the classroom with their pupils/students. To achieve these, the following initiatives are vital in building teacher capacity in classroom assessment to improve student learning:

1. **Creating Effective Classroom Assessments:** this can be achieved by:
 - Teachers being trained on how to develop high quality classroom assessment through workshops and use of models;
 - Government preparing and providing explicit guidelines describing good classroom assessment practices;
 - Teachers creating assessments and asking for "expert" feedback on their quality; and
 - Mandating teachers to participate in professional development at all times.
2. **Examining Grading and Reporting Practices:** To effectively practice this:
 - Guidelines that articulate principles of good classroom assessment must be developed and revise with much teacher input;
 - The idea of distinguishing between the formative and summarative purposes of particular assignments such that not all student work has to be graded will make more sense to teachers;
 - Teacher capacity should be developed here to understand how to use assessment to improve the quality of student learning and not just to grade;
 - Teachers capacity need to be developed in the areas of understanding the importance of (i) focusing on the more recent assessment evidence (ii) viewing grading as more than number crunching (i.e. reporting achievement on targets or standards) and (iii) reporting achievement separately from behaviour.
3. **Implementation of Classroom Assessment:** The capacity of teachers needs to be built here because:
 - Teacher must regularly examine the quality of student work and the quality of work they assign students (i.e. cognitive challenge, purpose);

- Leadership support and time are critical for teachers to be able to work together on improving assessment;
- For sustained results, there must be balance between pressure and support (i.e. teachers must be expected to improve the quality of instruction and should be supported in doing so by all the means at the disposal of the school).

There are many ways teachers at the basic education level can work together to improve their assessment practices if their capacity is built in the above three areas. For example, the teacher may:

1. Have to understand the standards set and clarify instructional goals as a first step toward better assessment;
2. Work together on integrating more performance assessments into their assessment methods;
3. Work together to find and use assessments as windows into students' thinking in an effort to become better at diagnosing student needs;
4. Design institutional interventions based on assessment information;
5. Look together at the quality of student work;
6. Design grading and reporting system (McColskey & McMunn, 2000);
7. Examine the quality of their assignment (Matsumura, 2003);
8. Formulate vertical and horizontal curriculum linkages (Kinght, 2002).

Through these activities, schools can develop into communities of practice that continuously revisit and restructure the learning environment for the benefit of the student through student assessments.

Conclusion

The need for teachers to possess skills in classroom assessment methods through improved capacity building has been highlighted in this paper. Only through classroom assessments can teachers gain a holistic picture of what students know and are able to do. Classroom assessments allow teachers especially at this basic level of our educational system to diagnose problems of student achievement, provide formative feedback to students, and make reliable and valid evaluations of student performance using multiple methods. Using classroom assessment as a formative process can help bridge the gap between the classroom and high stakes testing achievement.

Recommendations

The paper recommends among others the followings:

- Teachers should be trained and retrained to update their professional status in order to effectively respond to the changing needs of new methods of classroom assessments;
- Teachers must be developing and trying out new assessment methods that give them better information about how to help students improve;
- Teachers should appreciate and learn to talk to their peers *about ideas* that enhance effectiveness of classroom assessment;
- Increased funding of library services by government where teachers are encouraged to collect, review and read relevant researches as well as searching for high quality instructional materials;
- Teachers should endeavor to attend seminars, symposia, workshops and conferences regularly to update their professional competence in classroom assessments.
- Special allowance called "Continuous Assessment Allowance" should be provided for teachers at the basic education level to help them provide (where inadequate) the requisite inputs for pupil assessment; and

- Teacher moderation through collaborative assessment of student work is highly encouraged to achieve/enhance consistency and reliability, collaborative planning, fairness and equity and alignment of instruction.

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