

## Communicating Assessment Results: Teachers' Views of Recording and Reporting Classroom Assessment

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Doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n2p273

### Abstract

*Communicating assessment results is an integral part of classroom assessment. The National Protocol on Assessment (Department of Education; 2011) provides guidelines on how recording and reporting should be conducted in South African schools. This article explores a narrative case study of how a purposively selected teacher communicates classroom assessment results to enhance teaching and learning. The research was conducted in one primary school, situated in Gauteng Province in South Africa. Based on the data collected, the article concludes that the teacher's understanding and practices of recording and reporting were embedded in the assessment knowledge and experience that she had acquired over the course of her teaching life, particularly in her role as Head of Department in the school.*

**Keywords:** teaching; learning; assessment; recording, reporting, communicating

### 1. Introduction

Assessment is a key element of teaching and learning (Meier, Rich and Cady, 2000; Brookhart, 2001; Brown, 2004). Teachers are responsible for providing feedback to learners and this provision is commonly referred to as "formative assessment" (Brookhart, 2001). According to Smith and Gorard (2005), feedback is pivotal to helping teachers improve the day-to-day assessment of their students, because it improves learning and gives learners specific guidance on strengths and weaknesses. Brookhart (2001) also argues that assessment can be considered formative only if the information is used to improve performance. This places the learner at the centre. Similarly, Smith and Gorard (2005) assert that assessment can only be formative if it feeds back into the teaching-learning process, and that in order for students to improve, effective feedback should enable them to know exactly what they would have to do to close the gap between the actual and desired performance. Brown (2008) shares this view, seeing assessment as a process that involves identifying appropriate standards and criteria and making judgments about quality. Similarly, William, Lee, Harrison and Black (2004) acknowledge that increased use of formative assessment (or assessment for learning) leads to high quality of learning. This is as necessary to lifelong learning as it is to any formal education experience, although it may not be represented in formal ways outside the environment of certification. Assessment therefore needs to be seen as an indispensable accompaniment to lifelong learning, implying that it has to move from the exclusive domain of assessors into the hands of learners. William et al. (2004) maintain that substantial learning gains are possible when teachers introduce formative assessment into their classroom practice, and are crucial to informing the work of teachers.

### 2. Literature Review

Boud (2000) suggests that a renewed focus be placed on the role of formative assessment in order to focus learners' attention on the process of assessment and to permit them to learn how to make these processes their own, rather than ones they are subject to. Formative assessment, Boud argues, has been neglected because summative assessment has dominated thinking in educational institutions and in public policy debates, taking up too high a proportion of staff time, energy and resources at the expense of preparing effective learners. A number of scholars (Boud, 2000; Raveaud, 2004; Smith and Gorard, 2005; Chetcuti, Murphy and Grima, 2006) propose that high quality formative assessment practices be introduced because it is engagement with these practices that provides a secure foundation for lifelong learning and contributes directly to a learning society.

Assessment, as Raveaud (2004) posits, does not stand outside teaching and learning, but stands in dynamic

interaction with it. It is strongly related to other pedagogical factors. Raveaud (2004) illustrated this point by comparing techniques used to teach children to write. In the classes that Raveaud observed in England, writing was usually linked to communication and expression. Children were given a degree of freedom in the message they were conveying, whatever their competence in handwriting and spelling. Some children wrote stories, some drew pictures and others wrote down the sounds. This continued from Year 1 and even through Year 2 for some pupils, until it was replaced by children's attempts to invent their own spelling for unknown words. This procedure is important in assessment because it links to different forms of assessment, which vary according to the level of understanding of the learners.

In their review of literature, Hayward and Hedge (2005) argue that formative assessment is not well understood by teachers and suggest that this has significant implications for staff development. It is important that staff development results in real improvements in children's learning and focuses on the promotion of a deep understanding of formative assessment. That understanding would involve teachers developing skills to help learners perceive gaps between desired goals and their present states of knowledge.

Alternative techniques for assessing learners are becoming more common in the classroom as educators focus on using assessment as a tool for improving teaching and learning. By using a variety of assessment techniques, teachers are more likely to have an understanding of student learning. This is in line with the assertion by Akyeamong, Pryor and Ampiah (2006) that it is through assessment that teachers reflect on their experiences and produce a more sophisticated account of teaching and learning. Assessment, according to Adams (2001), involves the collection of information on what children do and do not know, and their ability to apply this knowledge.

The goal of assessment is thus to determine children's academic strengths as well as their weaknesses, so that teachers can improve instruction and provide more opportunities for learners' cognitive growth and educational experience (Maclellan, 2001). Assessment tasks should reflect the ways in which knowledge and skills are used in real world contexts. Broadfoot and Black (2004) note that assessment can be a powerful force in supporting learning, and a mechanism for individual empowerment. It can help learners at all ages and stages to become more fully self-aware, more expert in mapping an individual learning path in relation to their own strengths and weaknesses, and in facilitating fruitful collaboration with fellow learners.

### **3. Research Methodology**

A narrative case study approach was adopted to elicit information and understanding of recording and reporting assessment. I preferred a qualitative design to explore the diversified underlying understanding and practices of the teacher. The teacher's narrative allowed her to relate her understanding and practice of recording and reporting and served as autobiographical accounts of her attempts to articulate her understanding of the National Protocol on Assessment. The selected teacher was a Head of Department for ten years at a primary school and a grade six class teacher in Gauteng Province, in the Tshwane North District of Education. Her school was regarded as one of the functional and prosperous schools based on overall learner performance in the district.

### **4. Research Finding and Discussions**

When asked about her understanding of recording, Ms Alice highlighted that it was an integral part of assessment. She kept a record book for her learning areas and recorded pieces of work immediately. The school had bought every teacher a laptop computer, which teachers were expected to use to store assessment records. She mentioned that she still preferred to use the old system of recording, on hard copies, mainly because computer systems crashed or acquired viruses. There was an instance at school where one teacher's laptop was stolen and all her data lost.

Ms Alice was aware that pieces of work had to be recorded, but did not substantiate this aspect. Recording, as defined by the National Curriculum Statement (Department of Education; 2007) is a process in which the teacher documents the level of a learner's performance in a specific assessment task and indicates progress towards the achievement of the learning outcomes. Records of learner performance should provide evidence of a learner's conceptual progression within a grade and his/her readiness to progress to the next grade. Such records should also verify the progress made by teachers and learners in the teaching and learning process, and be used to monitor learning and to plan ahead (Department of Education; 2007).

Ms Alice mentioned with great excitement that when the learning area specialists visited her previously, they met with all intermediate phase teachers to discuss assessment in detail. Amongst issues discussed were different terms used in assessment, namely validity, reliability, transparency and trustworthiness of assessment, which teachers have to

consider when planning for assessment. She indicated that this was very interesting as they shared ideas and practices that worked for them. All the teachers, as well as the learning area specialists, had an opportunity to see the learners' books and see what their colleagues were doing and, importantly, to see if they could copy the best practices. This was a kind of internal moderation.

The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (Department of Education; 2007) requires that moderation be adhered to on a sample basis at the different levels of the system. A moderation mechanism should be put in place at school, as is the case with Ms Alice's school as well as at provincial and national level. The moderation of continuous assessment is done for each learning programme by the learning area specialists. Furthermore, the policy states that provincial departments of education should ensure that appropriate moderation procedures at school and district levels are in place to verify and moderate continuous assessment as well as assessment tasks.

Communicating and sharing assessment-related information was a practice common to teachers in Ms Alice's department. She mentioned that there always seemed to be great stress around the time when marks had to be submitted at her school. A number of teachers experienced difficulties, for a variety of reasons, in coping with the deadlines. The school management team decided to implement a policy or guidelines regarding assessment and the submission of recording sheets. It advised teachers to use up-to-date and accurate class lists, and that as soon as pieces of work had been assessed they were to be recorded. The learners' marks needed to be continually recorded so as to identify learners with barriers to learning. Teachers were also informed in the memorandum of what to do when they realised that a particular learner did not have marks. They were expected to contact the parents and have proof of such notifications. If there was no improvement within a week the teacher had to arrange a meeting with the Head of Department and together they could call the parents, interview them over the telephone or detain the child to ensure that he/she completed the work. Each teacher received two copies of the memorandum, signed, with one kept for their own records and the other returned to the HoD for office records. Teachers were expected to record this information on an intervention form.

Ms Alice believed in making learners aware of their strengths and weaknesses. She mentioned that she provided clear feedback in the learners' books:

*I write them little stories and expressions like... here you've got it right, or please pay attention to spelling. In cases where I assess reading I will give them feedback such as... watch out for reading signs - stop, question marks, exclamation marks. I try to make little notes in their copies of rubrics.*

On the other hand, Ms Alice also made parents aware of their children's progress, inviting them to parent evenings, where they had an opportunity to go through their children's work and received feedback and comments on the report cards. She also invited parents to her class throughout the year, to keep them updated with their children's work. This was also an element of the school's assessment policy. She preferred to speak to parents on a one-on-one basis. As soon as she noticed children with learning barriers she involved their parents as soon as possible and discussed strategies for assisting them. This was important for her, in order to understand from the parents' side how they observed their children at home. The challenge, however, was that some parents did not respond, even when proper procedures had been followed to make them aware. There were, however, some who were very supportive because they wanted the best for their children. Ms Alice shared the following experience;

*I once had a problem with one boy in my class, who told his mother every day that he does not have homework. I took it upon myself to design a home work time table for my class, where parents sign and put the date every day, to acknowledge that the child has work to do. This really helped me to alleviate the problem with learners who do not want to do homework.*

Ms Alice also provided feedback in the form of report cards, a system followed by schools generally to update stakeholders of the progress of learners. At the end of every term she prepared report cards and the school organised parent evenings, where they were handed out. She then discussed the children's work with the parents and suggested workable strategies to assist them. For the learners who struggled, an intervention form was used. This form was introduced by the Department of Education, the main purpose being to identify learners with barriers to learning. Teachers were expected to fill in this form with parents, before submitting it to the facilitator for Inclusive Education at the school, whose responsibility was then to devise means to support the learners identified with barriers to learning. When such learners were discussed with parents, this facilitator had to be present so as to explain to the parents the procedure for the process of intervention, and let them sign the form.

Ms Alice's understanding of the reporting process is consistent with the requirements of the NCS assessment guidelines, which state that when assessing learners, teachers and the school need to be accountable to learners, parents, the education system and the wider community. Being accountable implies that schools are required to give feedback to parents on their children's progress and performance using a formal reporting instrument such as a report card. The Department of Education also expects schools to use other reporting mechanisms, such as parents' meetings, school visitation days, letters, telephone calls and a school newsletter.

Most of Ms Alice's responses to the interview questions seemed to indicate that her classroom practice was aligned with the requirements of the NCS Assessment Guidelines and the National Protocol on Assessment, and that she understood assessment to be an integral part of teaching and learning.

## 5. Conclusion

A number of pertinent findings emerged from Ms Alice's narrative case. Her understanding of communicating assessment results appeared to be firmly rooted in her interpretation of the NCS policy and assessment guidelines. The NCS, the National Protocol on Assessment and the NCS Assessment Guidelines were the only sources that Alice consulted, and as such were initially assumed to have played a more significant role on her understanding and practices of recording and reporting assessment. Her understanding was also embedded in the assessment knowledge and experience that she had acquired over the course of her teaching life, particularly in her role as Head of Department in the school. Ms Alice also believed that the purpose of assessment was to inform learners where they stood as compared to their peers as well as to identify their weaknesses and strengths. As far as she was concerned, assessment served to provide information for reporting and forecasting purposes, to identify high and low achieving learners in the classroom and also to direct the pace and pathway of their teaching.

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