

Making the grade

Classroom assessment is a critical component of the learning and teaching process and crucial to providing teachers with relevant information to better understand what their learners know and can do. However, the ability of teachers to effectively conduct high-quality classroom assessment is a matter of concern. **MATTHEWS MAKGAMATHA** and **MASEBATA MOLEFE** report on a study which determined how assessment was understood and applied in primary schools.

In this article we report on some of the findings from a pilot study conducted on teachers' classroom assessment practices. The study was conducted during 2008 to obtain information on the assessment beliefs, needs and practices of primary school teachers in South Africa. During this period, schools in the country were implementing a revised national assessment policy aligned to the National Curriculum Statement (NCS).

Schools selected to take part in the study were representing different geographical locations and quintile ranks. Teachers who participated in the study were teaching English Literacy and Numeracy in Foundation Phase (FP) (or grades 1 to 3), and English First Additional Language (FAL) and Mathematics in the Intermediate Phase (IP) (or grades 4 to 6). The data was collected from these teachers using survey questionnaires, interviews, lesson observations and learner document reviews. The findings we report were obtained from all teachers across the two phases and the subjects they were teaching and cover the following issues:

Teachers' beliefs about classroom assessment;

Teachers' beliefs about the assessment policy;

Teachers' classroom assessment practices.

We conclude by making suggestions for using classroom assessments to improve teaching and learning.

TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT

Both foundation and intermediate phase

teachers expressed strong beliefs in classroom assessment with regard to the following:

First, teachers regarded assessment information as being useful to them and to their learners. This belief relates to the teachers involving their learners in teaching, learning and assessment processes, such as discussing with them the learning intentions or lesson objectives and assessment criteria to be used to collect assessment information (or evidence of the learning process).

Second, teachers considered continuous assessment (CASS) to be suitable for both formal and informal assessments. They linked CASS to the frequent assessments that occur in their classes and which predominantly serve the purpose of recording marks.

Third, teachers expressed the need for parents to actively participate in matters of assessment of their children. This belief related more to teachers providing assessment reports of learners to their parents than actually involving them in the general assessment processes linked to daily educational tasks. It is a struggle for teachers in some schools to get parents involved in the education of their children.

What can be deduced from the teachers' beliefs is that their classroom assessment understanding seems to be burdened by a

compliance routine of producing assessment information for recorded and reporting purposes. The result is teachers have insufficient time and opportunity to carry out learning-enabling assessments.

TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE ASSESSMENT POLICY

Teachers displayed varying understanding of the assessment policy, ranging from seeing it as a useful guide in their work to it being a hindrance and a source of the assessment-related problems or challenges they were experiencing. For instance, one teacher commented on the value of the assessment policy in directing what teachers were doing in class in the following manner:

'It is good that they [Department of Education] give us a policy to look at and guide us. To work without a policy is very difficult. So if I have a formality that tells me that I have to do 1, 2, 3 ... for me it is easier and I can follow that, but if there was no policy that binds me I was going to do whatever I feel suits me.'

Other teachers understood the assessment policy to be a source of their frustrations in conducting classroom assessments. A case in point is the issue of administration workload that teachers were experiencing. Time that teachers could be using for teaching was used doing much assessment-related administration work. One teacher had this to say: 'It could be valuable that when assessing all learners, the teachers would rather concentrate on the things that will help them with the skills to write and to read. The policy doesn't allow that, there is not enough time for reading because [a teacher] has to do all the

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Teachers' varied understanding and interpretation of the assessment policy could be a source of lack of uniformity in their implementation of the policy in the classroom.

TEACHERS' CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

CASS is the dominant form of assessment that teachers used in their classrooms. Teachers understood CASS to refer to the general frequency of conducting various types of assessments with their learners, such as classwork, homework, projects, assignments, and oral tests. To them CASS embodied formal assessments that they are required by policy to record, as well as the unrecorded informal assessments.

The tendency has been that teachers treated formal and informal assessments unevenly. They prioritised formal over informal assessments – due to the feeling that recorded (formal) evidence of learners' progress is more important than unrecorded (informal).

Assessment Task Quality: While most teachers developed their own classroom-based assessment tasks (e.g. tests, exercises), evidence from observed lessons and reviewed learner documents points to the fact that these tasks comprised cognitively unchallenging questions (e.g. questions requiring knowledge or recall type answers). Nevertheless, teachers

used such questions in their assessments for grading (marking) to indicate the achievement levels of their learners.

FEEDBACK

While teachers overwhelmingly indicated that they provided feedback to their learners, especially during written assessments, this consisted mainly of ticks, crosses, marks, symbols and motivational comments. This practice was found to be common across the different types of schools studied. This type of feedback is not geared towards enhancing learning in the classroom.

Teacher Support: Teacher support was stronger inside schools opposed to external support. Inside-school support was provided by the phase or subject Heads of Department (HOD) through class visits and (phase) meetings, and dealt with classroom teaching, learning and assessment matters. Support from outside the schools (especially from the districts) was reported to be fragmented, irregular and compliance inclined.

Regardless of the cognitively low-quality assessment tasks teachers used with their learners most of the time, teachers' classroom assessment practices were focused on recording and reporting learners' marks – a

summative function of assessment.

Suggestions for using classroom assessment to improve teaching and learning:

The current curriculum and assessment policies advocate

a practice of integrating assessment with teaching and learning. However, the kind of teaching and learning that takes place in classrooms may be influenced by the assessment practices that teachers implement. One way of improving the learning outcomes in the South African schooling context could involve orienting classroom assessments to service teaching and learning. This could be done in the following manner: ensuring that teachers' beliefs about classroom assessment and their assessment practices move beyond the current grading uses and begin to reflect a truly formative (learning) focus on assessment. This would require a shift in the current compliance culture of classroom assessment that fosters summative uses of assessment to one that encourages an assessment-process-focus linked to learning development.

The formative (or learning enabling) value of assessment of service teaching and learning hinges on the types of feedback strategies that teachers use in the classroom. Teachers in our study predominantly utilised the strategy of awarding marks and giving motivational comments to learners.

Such strategies are limited as they only indicate what is wrong but fall short of directing learners on how to 'fix the wrong'. To move learners forward would require the use of comment feedback that clearly explains their learning shortfalls and give direction on how to remedy the situation.

Appropriate resources to support teachers should be readily available at classroom level. For instance, making available to teachers a curriculum-based assessment database comprising a range of cognitively challenging assessment items would go some way to alleviating the deficiency of rich classroom questions that teachers in our study displayed. Such a database, when applied in the context of classroom assessment, would help teachers to: (i) obtain information on learner strengths and weaknesses; (ii) identify relevant strategies for addressing learner needs; and (iii) record learner scores so as to monitor their performance over time.

Implementing ongoing professional development for teachers, aimed at promoting their understanding of assessment policy and enhancing their assessment and instructional practices is required. This can be made possible with improved, regular and sustained inside- and outside-school support. ◀◀

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