Article

Perceptions of Teachers towards Assessment Techniques at Secondary Level Private School of Karachi

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Abstract

This paper sets out to explore the perceptions of teachers towards assessment techniques at a secondary level private school of Karachi. This was conjectured on the basis of the circumstances of parallel boards in the education system of Pakistan and its effectiveness within the context with respect to the curriculum. This was gauged in line with the forms and techniques of assessment corresponding with the curriculum. A qualitative research design based on interviews was chosen for this study. Purposive sampling was used to select the teachers from a school. The findings of the study revealed that the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is best suited to assess students' knowledge and skills and the teachers viewed that in order for students to be accomplished in this board, the ways of assessment must take a more meaningful measure of evaluating student's progress.

Keywords: assessment techniques, curriculum, GCSE, secondary level

Introduction

The concept of quality with relevance to task and decision about student's work is an attribute of a teacher (Australian National Training Authority, 2001). This attribute deals with the proficiency in quality, which is a concept that goes beyond grades and marking criteria. Based on realism, a student must be able to grasp a similar concept of quality borne by the teacher with the changed paradigm, which is a path for improvement in the field of education (Australian National Training Authority, 2001). The process of total quality

management in this aspect has a range of tactics and techniques that enables to build the consortium in the concept perceived by the teachers as well as the students, directed towards academic excellence. The range of tactics and techniques structure the assessments for part of the learning.

Assessment techniques are constructive and built upon the principles of learning (Lipnevich & Smith, 2008). Rote memorization until recently was presumably considered a technique for accumulating intricate understanding of knowledge with the prime focus of knowing the facts and chunks of data. This was significantly essential as the school was proportional to the professional requisites of that time. Those requisites only embarked upon the need for a mechanical workforce capable of materializing the chunks of information acquired at a very basic level (Burbules, 2012). Later on, the professional requirements demanded more than mechanics and the approach to schooling witnessed a change. The added ingredients to knowledge being comprehension, critical reasoning, application, and association in terms of linkages and validity demanded more than usual (Burbules, 2012). Theories of learning earlier based their knowledge consolidation on attaining chunks of knowledge, which then formed into a sequence of criterion for skill to lead to complex higher-order skills. However, constructivism evolved a new dimension to learning (Burbules, 2012). Based on these principles of learning, assessment has also paved new approaches. Formative, summative, and diagnostic assessments are the three main leading techniques. Self-assessment is vital for advancement, acceptance and understanding of tasks and learning targets (Lipnevich & Smith, 2008). Assessment for learning adds on the progress of effective schools by aiding students' learning further, while assessment of learning gives indication of success for record keeping.

There is no direct tool for measuring understanding. Using test scores in isolation is not an effective way of measuring the experiences of a learner and the reasons behind a student's failure (Burbules, 2012; Lipnevich & Smith, 2008; Walvoord & Anderson, 1998). This opens a new scenario of engaging a range of assessment techniques to reasonably measure the understanding and experiences of the learners

(Edutopia, 2008). If not in isolation, test scores produce valuable results with a combination of observations done by the teachers, project based learning, and classroom discussions. Development tools that strike the mind include presentations, projects, reports, and peer reviews which aid in generating more facts and figures about student performance and learning (Edutopia, 2008). Maintenance of these records of performance in the form of a portfolio is a successful method used at the elementary level (Edutopia, 2008). Student involvement is also an essential element of assessment. This pins down the student's involvement in self-evaluation, measuring performance in accordance with rubrics, and student interviews.

Summing up, assessment has digressed from test scores and grades to a meaningful measure of student's understanding, performance, and experiences. The techniques and tools for measurement as an assessment are varied and several approaches can be implemented for effectiveness (Lipnevich & Smith, 2008). The effectiveness in this regard, is primarily based on the perceptions of the teachers. Thus, adaptability and flexibility of teachers is of prime importance considering the setting of private schools. The topic; therefore, revolves around the perceptions of teachers towards assessment techniques at secondary level in a private school of Karachi.

Research Questions

1. How do Pakistani school teachers view GCSE board with regard to other examination boards in Karachi?

2. To what extent do the assessment techniques of teachers align with the assessment techniques used in GCSE?

Literature Review

After the 18th Century, industrialization triggered the need for mechanical workforce (Black, 2002; Meyer, 2003; O'Brien, 2004), hence the significance for public examination emerged. This opened a new vista of understanding towards assessment. Britain paved its way through the General Certificate of Examination (GCE) targeting

the elite and later to the masses through General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) (Roy, 1987). America, by the nineteenth century featured internal written examinations and written entrance tests in the drive of this social change towards industrialization (Meyer, 2003).

The term assessment encompasses methods directed towards appraising the performance (Broadfoot, Weeden, & Winter, 2002). There are aspects that are covered in this appraisal method including knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Written test, an instrument of assessment aligned with the needs of the industries earlier, assessed knowledge gathering for preparing individuals for industries and aptitude for entry into this education system (Dean, 2004). These tests were scientific and standardized. The pseudo-scientific approach to assessment lacked synchronization in the requirements of various examining groups. The education policy borrowing in the third world countries brought these examinations in their systems with its pros and cons (Phillips & Ochs, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012).

The system of assessment in Pakistan has been tangled in the norm-referenced test to choose a limited number of potential applicants for the field of education in the inflationary times of competitive environment (Bishop, 1990; Das, Pandey & Zajonc, 2006). There is now a need for a shift in the assessment tools to suit the needs of the time; therefore, teachers are not just encroaching upon the primitive testing, rather stepping forward towards multiple sets of results of the achievements of students through diverse means. The written examinations also witness various mechanisms of testing: fixed response questions, closed response questions, and essay types (Badger & Thomas, 1992). Tests are categorized into three arenas of assessment: diagnostic, formative, and summative. Diagnostic assessment measures students' present knowledge and skills; formative assessment envelops the process of curriculum and trails along the pedagogical sessions; while summative assessment is a more formal method and measures the overall progress and knowledge of a student at the end of the course, semester or academic year. Innovative tools of assessment carefully synchronize the sensory learning capabilities of an individual (Campbell, Campbell & Dickinson, 1996).

Multiple sets of results to test a student's skills and capacity has gained its importance with the need for 21st century skills and the shift from evolution to revolution is evident in the system of education. The working of human system and the retention capacity with the cognitive capabilities has gained importance (Clark, 1982). This has led to better measures for skills and achievement including performance assessment (Arter, 1994), portfolio assessment (Barton & Collins, 1993), and the age old authentic assessment. Moreover, project-based learning aligned with technology and practicality has formed its own space in the effective techniques of learning and assessment. Self-reflection also engraves the solemn approach to replication of one's achievement (Ames, 1992). Hence, teachers use a variety of techniques to gauge the learning of their students. A question hereby arises as to what role a teacher will play in this route to progression for a student (Calfee & Hiebert, 1988). With the changing needs and the fast paced race going on in the world to achieve success, the roles defined for a teacher have also changed and the facilitator is rather an appropriate term to match the demand of the day. Therefore, the evidence of assessment has swapped its side from mere scores to grades.

Pakistan linked with its Ministry of Education drives the system of its education through a variety of institutions (Khattak, 2012). The Bureau of Curriculum is linked with how the assessment techniques are used in schools. However, private schools tend to deviate from the perusal of systems (Kamrani, 2011). There are various parallel boards working in Pakistan and they are not in collaboration with each other. Within the private school network, schools have embraced their own assessment techniques. Different schools, specifically at the elementary level devise their own school development plans featuring various models of assessment, which ought to point towards quality in terms of relevance to subject matter (connecting the curriculum and pedagogy) and decision about student's work (direct referral to progress and certification). Assessment for learning speaks of the clear picture of students towards their assessment model. The teachers are required to clutch on to their set model to prepare for the assessment of learning (Clarridge & Whitaker, 1994). Hence, it can be said that they practice the assessment model in schools that

best fit their board model of testing. It should not be forgotten that ultimately the students have to go through the board examination system and it is one of the fundamental duties of a teacher to see that his/her students are well prepared to sit in the examintion.

Methodology

The anti-positivists rely on multifaceted and multifarious reality and study on various interpretations of a single phenomenon. The verification done in this regard, of the phenomenon is probing into various unexplored dimensions of it (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The qualitative method chosen for this research was case study as, "Case study research can involve the close examination of people, topics, issues, or programs….they seek to answer focused questions by producing in-depth descriptions and interpretations over a relatively short period of time" (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004, p. 218). Through the case study approach, the researcher sought the answers to the research questions posed.

Participants

The participants for the study were six school teachers: three female and three male teaching different subjects at secondary level. Two male and one female teacher had postgraduate degrees and two female and one male had undergraduate degrees in various subjects. The age and teaching experience varied among the participants. The participants were selected using purposive sampling from a very reputable school of Karachi where they had received termly training based on the new assessment policy implemented in their school development plan. The perceptions of the six selected teachers were analyzed to understand their thoughts towards the new policy.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide having eight questions was developed and individual interviews were conducted that lasted approximately 30 minutes each. The research technique aiming on the qualitative analysis of the perceptions of teachers towards

assessment techniques is usually personal interviews (Mack, 2007). To abide by the research ethics, informed consent form was filled in by all participants verifying that they were voluntary participants and they had the right to withdraw at any point of the study.

Data analysis

This was a qualitative exploratory study with an aim to understand the interviewees' point of view regarding the phenomenon under investigation. The data analysis was done through thematic analysis collected from interviews and field notes, which involved manually coding the data transcript and then obtaining various themes and categories from it. The meanings were generated through categorizing segments of the interviews.

Findings and Discussion

The following themes emerged from the interviews conducted: (a) GCSE-The Best Board, (b) GCSE-Extension of Colonial System, and (c) Assessment Techniques Used.

GCSE – The best board

The participants revealed that the GCSE examination board is the best as compared to the boards that are prevalent in the education system in Karachi to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitude of the students. As quoted by one of the senior teachers Kiran:

"Ordinary Level is the need of the hour for cognitive development of the students."

Sami added:

"GCSE is the best deal amongst the worst lot."

The course content and the relation with Pakistani context specifically in the subject of Islamiat in the board of GCSE is a fallacy in the system. This is clearly directed towards borrowed education

curriculum and policy. According to Javeria:

"The course outline deviates students from rote memorization, specifically in the subject of Islamiat at the cost of the local values."

She further explained,

"They tend to be focused towards viewing the concepts from a different lens-different from the norms of the society."

Tahir was of the view:

"As compared to other boards which do not have a broad vision, this is a better option…. As students advance and join higher secondary level and university, they have to face challenges as they find it very difficult to adjust themselves to the teaching methodology, assignments, and assessment system. On the other hand, those who have not come through GCSE, are bombarded with complex tasks and assessments, which they are unable to deal with and many of them have to struggle for survival at that stage as their skills were not developed in the schools."

Thus, it was concluded that the GCSE is the best system currently running in Pakistan. Based on the first theme, shedding light on the examination and the boards being followed in country, the teachers portrayed GCSE examination as an effective way of escaping rote memorization and encompassing the vast syllabus to effectively nurture the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the students (Jimenez & Tan, 1987). Keeping the context of Pakistan in mind, the examination system of GCSE as an external board is typically considered appropriate due to the misconceptions of other boards.

The parallel boards include the government based Matriculation Board which has its fallacies of rote memorization with no true essence reflected in the knowledge of students who have passed through this system, except for memory recall which is the first step

of Bloom's Taxonomy. The students' ability to analyze situations and effectively face the realism of life and ways of assessment leave a question on the standards of the curriculum and contents of this board. Then the Cambridge International Board leaves the dependence of the students output on the curriculum restrictions set by an international body, has a struggling interface with the needs of the local students in terms of their cognitive development (Bean, 1988). This also embarks upon the enigma of educational policy borrowing. The need of the captivating market and the processes of the student output, demand the exposure of the students to practicality and conglomeration of the job market with the teaching pedagogies in schools (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Along these lines, the assessment techniques require a complete turn in its ways. However, the course content of the GCSE is well appreciated as it caters to the needs of the customers in Pakistan. Islamiat course is widely covered and to the satisfaction of the people, it was said by the head that the necessary facets are covered with appropriate content. This is particularly essential to be discussed as the dilemma oscillates between the extremes of rigidly following the curriculum content (Bishop, 1990) and the extensiveness of the prospective curriculum content, that target towards the cognitive development of the students.

GCSE-Extension of colonial system

There seemed to be a fear amongst teachers that much of the colonial values will find their way through the GCSE system. It was viewed by Javeria:

"A system which still relates us to the colonization of British and history of the subcontinent with it being a learning point for individuals and much relevance to the all-encompassing system of the world order today."

Sami added:

"The knowledge is really grasped by the students at the cost of cultural, linguistic and moral embargo, which is questionable

when speaking of UK oriented GCSE."

However, there are certain challenges faced in terms of flexibility in the curriculum (Arter, 1994) of GCSE and the adaptability of the course content in accordance with the culture and prevalent multilingual and multifaceted citizens (Ames, 1992). Considering the culture of Pakistan and the diverse background of the individual citizens, the not-so-flexible GCSE curriculum borrowed from the UK has its limitations in relation to its implications and adaptability for course effectiveness, in the subjects of History and Islamiat specifically. Also the thematic topics taught in English Language and Literature novel context have proved to be questioning its appropriate association with the effectiveness of the contents and its relation with the Pakistani context. This is catastrophic in the current situation of Pakistan. A country that is home to multilingual and multicultural citizens has the platform of schooling to bring out the essence of varied cultures and provide assets to the nations on a united forum, with a curriculum that is not distinguished on the grounds of linguistic differences and differences in ownerships, social classes, and sectarian dregs.

Assessment techniques used

The participants also focused on the theme of the techniques of assessment and the three forms of assessments – diagnostic, formative, and summative. These techniques include project based learning, portfolio assessment, and reflections as practiced by Kiran and much emphasized towards its effectiveness. It was parroted by the participants and as per Kiran:

"Diagnostic assessment is an effective tool for synchronizing the previous crux of student learning with the present."

It was also highlighted strongly by Tanvir and other participants mentioned it at some point or the other that:

"Leaving certain arenas of assessment at the discretion of teachers has evidently resulted in the dawning of the use of effective

techniques for assessment… such as project based learning, portfolio assessment, and reflections…. However, there is much left to explore in this regard."

The teachers mostly demanded flexibility in their teaching pedagogies to be able to effectively implement the varied techniques of assessment. The last theme provides the base for the present assessment policy. Assessment has divagated from numbers to a meaningful measure of student's understanding, performance, and experiences. The perceptions of teachers towards assessment techniques at secondary level in private schools of Karachi are reflecting a transformation. At the beginning of the academic year, diagnostic tests (Broadfoot, Weeden & Winter, 2002) are conducted in core subjects to test the previous knowledge retention of students. The use of this form of assessment is a vital practice since it is a captivating tool to build onto certain facts of whether the students have a required capacity of memory retention. However, the hitch in this policy was well acquainted by one of the senior teachers when she explained the raw mindsets of students coming back from the break when their absorption capacity is at maximum, but testing without brainstorming of previous concepts does not give complete picture. Tanvir explained:

"The teacher is in a position of knowing the teaching effectiveness through self-evaluation alongside the reflection of the potentials and capabilities of students. The objectives of the lesson communicate the imparting of knowledge by the teacher during the lesson, providing a true picture and how effective the pedagogies or the strategies have been… what can be done to improvise it…. where reinforcement is required."

As worded by Eman:

"Learning schema has transformed from mere knowledge consolidation of attaining chunks of knowledge to more clearly concepts through mapping etc. This gives a direction to our justification for changes in recent assessment policies."

Kiran tethered onto the next form of learning and specifically associated it with the subject of mathematics by stating:

"Chunks of knowledge in a sequence lead to higher-order thinking".

This concept of constructivism has paved new approaches to assessment. The appropriateness of assessment requires several parameters to be created, the awareness and familiarity of which is to be made known to educationists and the students to enhance their assessment based decision making and gives rise to other forms of assessment that are part of the formative and summative dimensions (Black, 2002). Hoorani (2014) is of the view that the objectives make way for the lesson plans and assessments and if the objectives are clear in a teacher's mind than the assessment and their outcomes will also be genuine. As Sam highlighted:

"Based on the multiple intelligence classrooms, the sensitivity, specification, marking criteria, there arises a need for variations in assessment techniques in compatibility with the time, situation, and the intelligence of the person being assessed."

Tahir brought up the practice of considering three assessments and selecting two best marks policy that brings in the pick and choose aspect for the student. He argued:

"This leaves the child in a compromising and complacent position."

It was argued by almost all participants that assessment without choice is crisper and comprehensive, which can acknowledge the student with better learning, as such techniques train students for higher education and reflect learning of the learner and the concepts are well grasped. It was highlighted that the learning can be well monitored, if the records are genuinely maintained of each student free from bias and prejudice in the subjective evaluation, based on the rubrics (Clarridge & Whitaker, 1994) provided to the teacher for his/her facilitation in grading them. This reflected a clear picture of what the teachers thought of the assessment techniques carried out by the teachers.

Conclusion

Thus, it was concluded from the data, that according to the perceptions of the teachers who were interviewed, GCSE was the best system that prevailed in Pakistan to date. The reasons for this perception were clear as the system provided up-to-date knowledge and skills required for today's world. Also, it was apparent that Pakistani school teachers were aware of the fact that some portions of the GCSE system were not aligned with Pakistani values, yet they seemed to have little choice over this drawback.

Quality was directly proportional to teacher responsiveness. This opens a new vista of our understanding towards assessing student quality and the measures being used. Constructive assessment techniques bring out the quality and essence of learning. It was quite evident from the interviews that the perception of teachers towards assessment has deviated from mere scores to student's development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The techniques and tools for measurement as an assessment are varied and several approaches can be implemented for effectiveness. Based on this principle of learning, the variations throw beacon light on formative, summative and diagnostic assessments in its true form. Self-assessment, assessment for/of learning, portfolio assessment, reflections and other techniques are some forms of variations being effectively used in schools today. The prime focus, hereby, is adaptability and flexibility of teachers considering the setting of private schools and school teachers. The setting configures time constraints, curriculum dependence, grading policies of schools, rigidity in policies, and resource mobility in the school premise in the queue of concerns regarding implementation of assessment techniques. The adaptability of such techniques in schools is undergoing a teething stage, where the teacher vulnerability to the norms of the school and the flexibility to bring about effectiveness is of prime importance.

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