

Inclusive Approaches to Formative Assessment: A Case Study

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Abstract

Learning in a classroom is different from that outside. It is structured in discipline, systematic and can be done progressively. Assessment is a key constitutive element that makes such a system possible. This study aims to examine how the current state of assessment undermines its significance as an enabler of learning. A qualitative approach was used for data collection and analysis of the data. Desk review and interview were used to collect data. The participants for the present study are five teacher educators from District Institute of Education Training (DIET) and fifteen research scholars from the discipline of education. An interview schedule including questions regarding school assessment and its practices in classroom is administered. The present studies across the discipline revealed that assessment is used as a device for grading the students rather than enabling the students to learn. Participants viewed that the main purpose of assessment must be helping the learner in learning rather than valuing their output. The participants also viewed that assessment must be guided by defined principles and strategies. A well-structured institutional support is a pre-requisite for the meaningful practices of formative assessment. The study argues that assessment must be done as a supportive enabler for achievement rather than value judging a student. There is a need for dynamic parameters to make assessment more inclusive. This research suggests that the concept and strategies of assessment may be elaborated and published as a policy paper and effective operational procedures be stipulated.

Keywords Formative Assessment, Inclusive practices, Inclusive Classroom

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners and thus can be understood as a key strategy to achieve education for all [1]. The Salamanca conference (1994) viewed inclusion as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning cultures and communities and reducing exclusion within and as a result of education.” Inclusive schools, “... must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula,

organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities” [2].

Inclusivity is no longer defined narrowly by physical and cognitive disabilities but also includes a full range of human diversity with respect to ability, language, age, culture gender, and of other human differences [18]. An education system is inclusive when it has inclusivity in its curriculum, teaching-learning process and above all in the concepts and practices of assessment.

One learns from wherever one interacts. But the learning in a classroom is different from that outside it in that it is structured in discipline, systematically and can be carried out progressively. Assessment is a key constitutive element that makes such a system possible. Assessment motivates and orients the academics and provides learning process with a structure- a progressively planned, time-bound and scheduled target which serves as an enabling ‘limit’ that sets learning in action. On the other hand, assessment can turn out to be demotivating and excluding students and at the moment, the enabler becomes the disabler. Inclusivity of the systems of assessment is the game changing factor here. When the practices of assessment are vulnerable to the ‘unconscious’ factors – the undefined, irrational prejudices of the assessors- rather than objective and verifiable parameters, the assessment misses its point and becomes repressive and dismissive. Therefore, it is imperative that classrooms and assessments be inclusive.

The students must be accepted in their own cultural realities, and they must be taught according to their needs. Culturally Inclusive Classroom is one which is accommodative of cultural differences and positively enabling for students of disadvantaged social groups by virtue of its physical and academic environment and activities. Assessment is the enabler here. What is uniform to everybody is the difference. The uniform feature of the classroom is difference [5]. So individualized instruction and individualized assessment should be ensured in school. What is assessed in the school and classroom should never be determined by the acquired cultures of dominant groups. The identities and peculiarities of the disadvantaged sections should also be part of classroom and learning activities. There should be an inclusive framework and attitude towards assessment of learner by assessing them at their own cultural settings since these are the prime factors which determine what they can do.

The concept of assessment as an enabler necessarily leads to the need for recognising the significance of formative assessment. The core underlying notion of formative assessment is the responsibility of the system and teachers to reach students. Effective formative assessment is in fact feedback to teachers for adjusting

instructional strategies [3]. Formative assessment acts as a motivating factor that causes student and teacher to act properly [13]

Formative assessment can make a significant impact on students learning [11]. The essence of formative assessment is to enable teachers to respond to students learning while the student is in the process of learning [10]. Evidence shows that frequent assessments, when they are formative in nature, enhance the performances of learners. Frequent assessment of learning did in fact result in a statistically significant learning gain in outcomes [4].

Desk review plays a significant role in research, and it aims to provide conceptual framework to the topic under study. In this research desk review is carried out to justify and document the need of the research problem [16]. The desk review is also used to support the findings [6]. There were forty previous works (Ph.D. thesis, Dissertations, Research papers and reports of Government and organizations) relating to the field reviewed. The researchers conducted a desk review with the purpose to verify whether formative assessment procedures are operationally defined in schools around the globe in general and Kerala in particular.

An examination into the current practices of assessment in schools in Kerala reveals many gaps and inadequacies which need research intervention. One most striking fact that has surfaced is the non-availability of any significant documents – either in the form of concept or policy papers or records of procedures practically exercised in schools- regarding formative assessment. There are no verifiable documents available to students and parents regarding the formative part of assessment. Assessment is equalized as exams and examinations are not organized with formative purpose. Even what is called ‘continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE), which is conceived as assessment of students by teachers during the process of learning is part of a summative assessment, as it constitutes 20 percent of annual examination.

Findings of much research in other contexts stand true in the case of Kerala as well. Current literature emphasise the need for formative assessment but in practice the implementation of formative assessment and formative feedback is very limited due to the influence of teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and skills [14]. The teachers’ involvement was found to be moderate in each stage of assessment practices in school [15]. Even though clarification in learning target plays a significant role in creating interest and enthusiasm among learners towards learning, it is found that teachers didn’t clarify the learning target with their students [12]. Students became passive consumers of feedback [17]. The students’ progress is not frequently assessed, in fact teachers have less understanding of what formative assessment mean in

classroom practices [14]. So, the transformation of assessment approaches across education requires strong policy leadership with innovative programme [8].

The major conclusions derived from desk review are sketched below:

- ❖ Formative assessment constitutes the major elements of assessment.
- ❖ Assessment ought to be enabling.
- ❖ In present condition, no verifiable document of formative assessment is available. There is neither any stipulated and particular procedure nor institutionalized forms to ensure it. It shows formative assessment is undermined.
- ❖ Examinations and test papers are still accepted as the sole form of assessment, which tend to be summative rather than formative.
- ❖ Even in the assessment of exam papers, automated and culturally acquired prejudices enjoy free go, rather than defined, explicit and verifiable practices.

It is on this ground that the present research was carried out with a purpose to problematize the currently existing assessment practices in Kerala in a contextualised manner. This study aims to examine how the current state of assessment in Kerala undermines its significance as an enabler of learning, by examining the procedure adopted at present.

2. Objectives of the study

This study aims to examine how the current state of assessment undermines the significance of assessment as an enabler of learning.

3. Methodology of the study

The study adopted qualitative methods regarding data collection and procedures. The entire procedure of the study was carried out in two phases. In the first phase the researchers carried out a detailed desk review (literature review) across the current research to provide a theoretical background for the study and examined the research gap in the field. The introduction part of this study is framed on the basis of this literature review. The first phase also included a case analysis which is used to exemplify the current assessment practices in schools. The case, figure 1, is collected from the personal diary of a teacher who concerns assessment as a prime area in education. It is a worksheet used in primary class in schools in Kerala.

In the second phase the researchers conducted semi structured interviews with experts by employing a semi structured interview schedule. The interview schedule included questions to seek the opinion and feedback of participants relating to current practices of assessment in school and about how curriculum assimilates the concept of assessment. The main dimensions of interview protocol (interview

schedule) are assimilation of assessment in curriculum, current practices of assessment in school and the conceptualization of assessment by stakeholders, particularly teachers.

The type of interview conducted is one-on-one interview as it is popular approach in educational research [6]. The questions included in the one-on-one interview were open ended. There were twenty one-on-one interviews organized, five with DIET faculties and fifteen with Research Scholars. The one-on-one interview was planned according to the check list adapted from Gay, Mills and Airasian [9]. One-on-one interview lasts for one month, only one participant was interviewed on a day. A single interview lasts between 90 minutes to 120 minutes each.

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were five DIET faculties and fifteen Research Scholars. Table 1 details the profile of participants. The DIET faculties, who were selected as participants considered to be experts in the field of education since, they have experience in participating curriculum framework and educational planning. DIET, District Institute of Education and Training is the premier institution under the Government for planning educational activities at district levels of Kerala. The DIET faculties opted as participants in this study is taking responsibility of curriculum framing and educational planning at this level. The research scholars who were selected as participants are prospective teacher educators since they are pursuing their Ph.D. in educational field. They were purposefully selected as participants.

3.2 Research Questions

The entire procedure of the study aims to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the present-day practices of assessment in schools in Kerala?
2. What is the purpose of assessment in school?

3.3 Trustworthiness

The DIET faculties and researchers who opted to participate in the study were fully aware of the nature and purpose of the interview. They were informed in advance that participation is voluntary and optional and they have exercised control over the information they supplied.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The data collected for the study was qualitatively analyzed. Thematic analysis was

used for data analysis procedure in this study. First the researchers transcribe the field notes into codes and then themes. The major themes identified are:

- ❖ Use of assessment as enabler
- ❖ Cultural bias in assessment
- ❖ Impact of infrastructural factors on assessment
- ❖ Learners' involvement in assessment
- ❖ Learners' awareness of learning objectives and assessment objectives
- ❖ Use of formative assessment for modification of teaching strategies
- ❖ The place of formative assessment in teacher education programme.

The source 1. is the worksheet given to 2nd standard students in the state syllabus, Kerala. In the worksheet the students are required to construct a word by rearranging the letters which are given. The Malayalam letters given are 'ka'(ക), 'li'(ലി) and 'ba'(ബാ) respectively. The expected answer from the student is 'balika'(ബാലിക) which means a girl child. The word constructed by a student is 'kabali'(കബാലി) which is the name of a movie in Tamil which was very popular at that time. The teacher put the word 'kabali'(കബാലി) in a circle which indicates that the answer is wrong. Here the teacher really disabled the child by neglecting one's linguistic capacity and missed an opportunity to open a talk with the students. The teacher also missed an opportunity to encourage the student who comes with divergent thinking. Here the teacher could have given positive feedback which in turn would have encouraged all the students in the classroom. This instance raises two issues – that of the approach of the teacher and that of the idea of assessment. The teacher is obviously judgmental in his/her approach. As to the underlying idea of assessment, the disposal of the student's answer is not based on any academically valid concept of the dynamic process of vocabulary in a language. The judgment of the teacher is based on a popular misconception grounded on certain conventionally acquired bias. Thus, this instance reveals a typical case of academic assessment missing its point and becoming a dismissive judgment without any defined explicit and verifiable reference point. In its effect, the assessment turns out to be an act of cultural marginalisation rather than academic enablement.

4.2 Assessment- An Instrument of Learning

The selection of the instructional strategies for learners requires consideration of the role of cultural identities in learning [5]. "... all teachers should expect to teach children with special educational needs and all schools should play their part in educating children from their local community, whatever their background or

ability” [7]. However, the present studies about the existing state of assessment and its practices reveal that assessment is used as an instrument to grade students against their learning output.

Table 2 summarises the responses of DIET faculties and Research Scholars, taken in sample, on issues related to theory and practices of assessment. The interview with the experts and researchers – concerning the present state of assessment in schools in Kerala - brings out significant points on seven theme areas. Those theme areas are use of assessment as enabler, cultural bias in assessment, impact of infrastructural factors on assessment, learners’ involvement in assessment, learners’ awareness of learning objectives and assessment objectives, use of formative assessment for modification of teaching strategies and the place of formative assessment in teacher education programme.

A major number of participants, both research scholars and experts, viewed that the prime purpose of assessment is to support the learner in learning rather than valuing the output of learners’ work. One expert stated that curriculum is an enabling framework which ought to make learning a systematic and structured activity that can be carried out progressively. Assessment is a seminal part of the curriculum, as it renders learning SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time schemed). It is thus that assessment becomes an enabler in learning. However, these broad objectives of assessment can be achieved only subject to three conditions: assessment is not about the person, but about a performance, assessment is a positive act to find what the learner knows and not to find out what she does not know and thirdly the balance of power should be in favour of formative assessment against summative assessment. So, the interview with the experts and researchers explored where the present practices of assessment stand in terms of these parameters.

An overwhelming majority of the respondents view that the present state of assessment in schools fails to serve this purpose. Three out of five DIET faculties and thirteen out of fifteen of the Research Scholars view that there is a significant gap between theory and existing practices of assessment. They hold that assessment, as it is perceived and practiced at present, is an act of grading and value judgment of students. According to a researcher, what is happening in school is that assessment is ‘mispracticed’ as judgment, giving over emphasis on grading. This neglects the importance of assessment in the learning process. The only focus of assessment is to grade the students and eventually it leads to labeling the person (as good, average, poor etc.), rather than assessing a work. One DIET person said that practically, all assessments turn out to be summative. The responses clearly show that assessment, in present forms, does not meet its function as an enabler in

learning.

Four DIET experts, out of a total of five, responded that at present there are no defined principles, guidelines and operational procedures for formative assessment. This accounts for, to a great extent, the failure of the systems of assessment as enabler. In fact, assessment takes place in all human interactions. Academic assessments differ from these ‘automatic value judgments’ in that they are explicit and are grounded on defined and verifiable principles. In the absence of this essential verifiability, assessments lose their academic fineness and become crude verdicts based on acquired cultural prejudices. Even though this affects all students, those who are from culturally disadvantaged communities are the worst sufferers of this failure of the systems. Students from under-represented cultures tend to be negatively judged. In a society like India, with its incredible variety of cultural sub-sections, this lack of principles and the resulting lack of inclusiveness are actually and potentially disastrous. Slow learners and children with special needs are two other specific groups who fall victims to these systemic failures. These responses are also pointers to possible remedial interventions. Policy initiative is imperative to make systems of assessment accountable, more transparent, explicit and verifiable. The four DIET faculties out of five, who strongly believe that there is gap between the theoretical understanding of formative assessment and its practices in school, however, have also pointed out that there are certain difficulties which teachers face in practically implementing formative assessment. They viewed that these hazards are chiefly infrastructural in nature. Given the state of population and density, in many schools, the classrooms are crowded with an increased number of students, and this makes individualised assessment and feedback extremely difficult and ineffective. This points to the need for interventions to reconsider the upper number limit of students in a classroom and also to enhance infrastructure of schools.

Another important theme area is that of students’ involvement in learning activities and assessments. A school must support an enrolled student to identify the innate capacities and mould them according to the aptitude and needs of the learner. This can be done only in a system and an atmosphere that is inclusive in spirit and practice, of cultural diversities. Each and every learner should be treated separately since their learning needs and cultural aspirations are different. Two of the respondents maintained that the present practices of assessment are not sensitized to students’ individual and cultural identity. This often makes assessments dogmatic and unresponsive. One expert pointed out that a student is not an object on whom learning or assessment acts transitively. The child is a dynamic person who not only

acquires but also produces knowledge. The systems of assessment need to be inclusive of learners creativity and initiative. Ignoring the child's area of interest and potential would also be a social injustice in that respect. Whatever the reason and point argued, a child must be educated according to one's need.

This also necessitates the conscious participation of the child in the learning process. Such a participation requires that the child needs to be informed about the learning objective and the criteria against which one is about to be assessed. Eleven Research scholars out of fifteen viewed that the learner must be informed about the assessment criteria in advance. They hold that at present, this is not ensured. The learners should have the opportunity for self-assessment too. A positive peer assessment can also be promoted, they added.

One respondent observed that formative assessment is practiced as "one way traffic", with the student always assessed for his/her failures. In fact, formative assessment is reciprocal process in which the students' performances are assessed for learning and these assessments, in turn modify the teaching strategies. Thus, if properly practiced formative assessment is mutual, the system assesses the learners' performances, and that output assesses the system in its turn.

Some research scholars are not fully aware of the concept of assessment. They believed that assessment is merely conducting exams at the end of a unit or at the end of a year. This shows a gap in our teacher education programmes. A research scholar in the field of education viewed that most teachers fail to understand the concept of formative assessment. Three out of five DIET faculties and thirteen out of fifteen of the Research Scholars maintain that assessment is yet to be a major area of instruction in Teacher training programmes.

Finally, but importantly, what appears to be a problem of practice has bearing on the conceptual framework of assessment. The non-availability of accessible, verifiable documents of formative assessment, lack of defined operational procedures and institutional forms to ensure fair and unbiased formative assessment signifies a failure in recognising the value and nature of formative assessment and conceiving a workable system for its implementation.

5. Findings of the study

On the basis of the desk review, case analysis and interview with experts and scholars, the researchers formulate the following findings:

- ❖ Assessment, in the present practices in Kerala, does not serve its purpose as an enabler in learning.
- ❖ There is neither a full-fledged conceptual framework nor an operational system

for the implementation of formative assessment.

- ❖ Assessment practices are not judged by proper principles and strategies.
- ❖ There are no defined and verifiable parameters for conducting assessment in schools, resulting in biased practices.
- ❖ Biased and judgmental practices of assessment disable and marginalize students and students' groups.
- ❖ The problem of crowded classrooms and infrastructural hazards make individualized assessment difficult for teachers.
- ❖ The current practices of assessment undermine student as a creative person with competence to produce knowledge.
- ❖ Students are left unaware or under-informed about assessment criteria.
- ❖ The teacher training programme doesn't adequately include the nature and scope of assessment in its curriculum. This gap leads to misrepresentation of assessment on the part of educationalists and teachers.

6. Conclusion

The present study reveals the need for effective revision on the assessment practices prevailing in Kerala. The system should be readjusted. As McMillian says, assessment should function as an enabler of learning [10]. This requires strong policy initiatives [8] and executive measures to construct a conceptual framework and an effective operational system which ensures regular formative assessment in classroom. These policy interventions and executive steps should focus on two important points: Firstly, the balance of power between formative and summative assessments should be settled in favour of the former. Secondly, principles and procedures of formative assessments should be formed with orientation of inclusiveness and enablement.

Assessment is the most important concept inbuilt in education, but we often perceive its purpose and practices wrongly. Worksheets, classroom activities and learning tasks are the key elements that serve assessment for learning. Therefore, it is imperative that they should be inclusive and sensitized to possibilities of different skills and knowledge. These learning materials and activities need to ensure equality in opportunities to all students, not only in their individual peculiarities, but also as members of different cultural identities. Obviously, this requires the parameters of assessment to be dynamic, explicit and verifiable.

The inclusivity of schools primarily depends on how far the assessment system is inclusive towards the learner. Divergent thinking must be appreciated in the classroom and in assessment. The assessment process should acknowledge the

learner as a dynamic and creative person capable of producing knowledge. The learner also has a culture, which needs to be respected in the classroom. Assessment should aim to be free from cultural prejudices of the dominant sections of society. Learners' needs, as expressed by him/her should not be silenced. The process of assessment should be diversified [19] to include use of multiple worksheets, peer assessment and self-assessment.

It is also required that formative assessment should be practiced as a reciprocal system which enables both the learner and the teacher in their turn. The teacher training programme at B.Ed. and M.Ed. level must address the issue in detail and provide utmost importance to assessment in their curriculum. In-service courses and professional development programmes must incorporate assessment skills to them. The researchers recommend that the concept and strategies of assessment may be elaborated and published as a policy paper and effective operational procedures be stipulated.

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