

The reforms to improve the internal assessment system: Teachers' perceptions.

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Abstract The Ministry of Education, Fiji has embarked upon the internal assessment system with the aim to improve the teaching and learning and provide a 12 year basic education to all. This may be a good initiative from the Ministry of Education, Fiji however, there need to be some improvement in the implementation process. The study focuses on the challenges faced by the students and teachers and the reforms needed to improve the internal assessment system. The participants included 59 teachers from four primary and four secondary schools in an educational district. The participants were requested to complete an open ended questionnaire. The teachers indicated that students as well as the teachers are facing major challenges. Also, teachers indicated that there needs to be reforms to improve the internal assessment process.

Keywords Internal assessment, continuous assessment, outcome-based assessment, assessment for learning

1.0 Introduction

Based on the recommendations of the Fijian Education Commission Report 2000, there has been a major change in the assessment sector, which now endorses outcome-based education (OBE) (Ministry of Education Fiji, 2011). OBE has previously been advocated as a means towards achieving quality education outcome in the USA, Australia, and the UK. The decision to adopt this new assessment approach is a major policy change in Fiji was directly linked to the Fiji Education Sector Programme (FESP). This innovation brought the Western Australian pedagogical style onto Fijian shores. As a part of this approach, assessment for learning (AfL) has been incorporated as the assessment strategy by the Ministry of Education. Under the roof of assessment for learning, an internal assessment initiative was piloted in 2003 and operationalized in January 2007. Adopting the Australian style and contextualizing it to the Fijian classroom has not been without major challenges for Fijian teachers. Now that internal assessment has been introduced into the Fiji educational system for around a decade, it is time to investigate the opinion of stakeholders on appropriateness and reforms needed for this new Ministry of Education initiative. Therefore, this study focuses on teachers' perceptions of the challenges faced by the students as well as the teachers and the reforms needed to enhance the internal assessment system.

1.2 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are some of the challenges students and teachers' are facing due to the implementation of internal assessment?
2. What are some of the reforms needed to improve the implementation process of internal assessment?

2.0 Literature Review

The literature highlights the challenges faced by the stakeholders while implementing continuous assessment in the school system. Also, it highlights the reforms needed to improve the continuous assessment system.

2.1 Challenges faced while implementing continuous assessment

Currently, most teachers in school system are facing challenges in the implementation of continuous assessment. Teachers often lack the training to design quality assessment tasks and even if they are well trained, they often lack the time due to heavy work load (Mayotte, 2011; Reyneke, Meyer & Nel, 2010). Large class sizes in most primary schools and the increase in the workload are challenges for the teachers (Uiseb, 2009; Kapambwe, 2010; Hayford, 2007; Mchazime, 2003). In addition, student absenteeism was one of the obstacles in the smooth management of pupil performance in continuous assessment and the majority of the teachers complained that they had inadequate resources for teaching and learning (Kapambwe, 2010).

The Ministry of Education needs to play a major role in assisting teachers in the implementation process. Teachers indicated that there is a lack of ongoing training, support services from the Ministry of Education, lack of proper control of assessment marks, and the difficulty with the continuous assessment mark allocation, weighting and calculation (Uiseb, 2009). Nxumalo (2007) indicated that the teachers did not attend any training to conduct and implement continuous assessment in their classroom. The policy and lack of training are barriers to implementing continuous assessment for supporting lower achievers to improve (Hayford, 2007). The Ministry of Education should provide training for teachers to construct their own assessment tasks since, without this training, teachers might resort to developing items that assess only low-level cognitive skills Mchazime (2003).

There seems to be laxity on the part of teachers as well. Continuous assessment has been subjected to a great deal of abuse and misinterpretations by teachers because most of them appear not to understand the rationale for continuous assessment in the school system. Furthermore, some teachers also inflate pupils' scores, which have a negative effect on the weighting and this makes it difficult to compare such continuous assessment scores and those from central examination bodies. Most teachers lack skills in test construction and administration, and their attitudes toward the continuous assessment approach and record keeping are negative (Alausa, 2000).

2.2 Enhancement needed in the continuous assessment system

There are many factors which are directly or indirectly affecting the implementation process and these factors need reforms. The teacher's literacy level and commitment towards continuous assessment is vital for effective implementation. The teachers' knowledge of continuous assessment has a direct effect, teachers' perception towards continuous assessment and teachers' attitude towards continuous assessment have an indirect effect on its implementation (Olufemi, Kassim, and Olufunbi, 2011). Continuous assessment calls for change of attitude of many teachers who were used to old traditional way of assessment (Uiseb, 2009). Also, teachers must attempt to pursue refresher courses and re-training on their own for their personal growth (Nxumalo, 2007).

The Fiji education assessment system needs some reforms for effective implementation of continuous assessment. Fiji curriculum needs to be revised to include the learning tools more evidently since pupils' receive a lot of theoretical knowledge but they get little chance to use it practically in school (Modh & Landstrom, 2006). Professional development and professional training for teachers could be the way forward for better implementation of internal assessment (Thimmappa & Sharma, 2003).

3.0 Method

This study utilized a qualitative research design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). This study collected data using an open ended questionnaire. The questionnaire enabled to achieve a high response rate. Nonrandom purposive sampling was used to select four primary and four secondary schools from an educational district. Easily accessible schools were preferred due to transportation costs for some primary schools were located in the interior. The participants voluntarily completed the questionnaire. The participants were professionally qualified teachers with Teacher's Certificate from the teaching institutes, Fiji National University and University of the South Pacific.

Permission was granted from the Head Teacher/ Principal of the selected school. The research questionnaire was hand delivered to the Head Teacher/ Principal of the survey school. The questionnaire was then distributed by the Head Teacher/ Principal to their teachers who voluntarily wished to take part in the survey. A cover letter was attached with each questionnaire which gave information about the research and stated that participants are not to write any personal information about them or about their school onto the given questionnaire. In addition, these facts were highlighted in the cover page. The completed questionnaires were collected from the Principal/Head Teacher in a week's time.

Upon receiving the completed questionnaires from the participants, the open ended responses for each question were read many times. While reading the responses, themes were noted and these themes became the categories. The categories were assigned abbreviated codes (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). The codes were analysed manually.

4.0 Findings & Discussion

The questionnaire was completed and returned by 59 teachers, giving a response rate of 85%. The sample included 35 female teachers (59%) and 24 male teachers (41%).

The first research question seeks to find the challenges faced by the students. The finding suggested that students are facing challenges due to internal assessment. Some of the challenges faced by students were lack of resources and financial constraints. As the teachers have commented that some of the students are not able to bring resources to their internal assessment task due to the poor financial status of the parents. Some parents are not able to fully support their children and according to the teachers the internal assessment task resources have become an extra burden onto parents. The finding depicted that most students are facing problems when the assessment task requires research work. Since most students do not have access to internet facilities at either home or in school they have to pay for internet facilities in the internet shop.

Some of the other problems faced by the students are extra workload and time constraints. Teachers viewed that students have to complete nine tasks for each subject, therefore, students are overloaded and do not have enough time. Some students are not able to cope with their academic work. Teachers have also viewed that some students have difficulty in understanding the assessment tasks. Finally, the students have problems with group task. Group members sometimes do not cooperate in bringing materials to complete the task and this delays the work and the quality of work is not so encouraging.

In addition, the first research question also seeks to find the challenges teachers faced during the implementation process. The findings suggested that the major challenge faced by the teachers was student absenteeism. This finding supports research by Kapambwe, (2010) stating student absenteeism is one of the obstacles in the smooth management of pupil performance in continuous assessment. The teachers stated that due to students' irregularity to school, the extra work has to be done by them. Also, the deadlines are not met, tasks are left pending and performance records not completed on time.

The findings illustrated that the second major challenge faced by the teachers is the lack of resources in schools. The teachers commented that there is a lack of stationeries especially papers for photocopying. Some primary schools do not have computer facilities therefore, teachers are finding difficulty in designing and printing the tasks. This finding supports a study in South Africa Reyneke, Meyer and Nel (2010) found that one of the challenges faced by teachers is a lack of resources and support material.

In addition, Kapambwe, (2010) found that the teacher workload became higher as they were required to mark and keep records of the progress of all learners. Similarly the findings also suggested that teachers face heavy workload (overloading). Teachers have commented that there are numerous assessment tasks to design and it is time consuming. Also, there are a lot of marking, paper work and recording. Secondary school teachers stated that there is less preparation time in school, therefore, teachers are overloaded and they take work (marking tasks) home. Findings suggested that some primary schools have composite classes and designing and marking tasks for two classes is time consuming and leads to heavy workload.

According to the findings large class size in schools is also a challenge for the teachers. Teachers highlighted that large number of students in a class hinders providing individual attention and thorough monitoring of students' performance. Teachers commented that it is difficult to control students in large classes. This finding supports Uiseb (2009), stated that the core challenge is mostly overcrowded classrooms that hinder proper assessment.

Finally, the findings illustrated that some teachers are stressed due to implementation of internal assessment. Teachers viewed that poor attendance and students not bringing task materials on time are frustrating. The heavy workload where teachers have to take work home is frustrating, since they now have less family time.

The second research question inquired about the reforms needed in the implementation process. Findings suggested that the major change needed is in the availability of resources. Teachers suggested that enough resources can be provided by the school or the Ministry of Education. This

will enable the students to produce better quality tasks, tasks completed on time and this will enhance learning. In return, this will reduce the financial burdens on the parents.

Secondly, the findings depicted that change is needed in the syllabus. This finding is similar to Modh and Landstrom (2006), suggested that the Fiji curriculum needs to be revised to include the learning tools more evidently. Findings revealed that teachers viewed that the syllabus needs to be reduced to cater for the assessment tasks and the number of tasks done per subject also to be reduced. The irrelevant topics may be removed and syllabus can be localized. The class size needs to be reduced for better monitoring of student progress and more student individual attention.

Another reforms needed is that teachers must be trained for better implementation process. Olufemi, Kassim, and Olufunbi (2011) research illustrated that teacher's literacy level and knowledge on the continuous assessment has a direct effect on its successful implementation. This study suggested that the teachers must be trained to adapt to changes in curriculum and this training will upgrade their knowledge on effective implementation of internal assessment. This finding supports Thimmappa and Sharma (2003), research which indicated that for successful implementation of internal assessment in Fiji the teachers must be provided with professional training and professional development.

In addition, findings depicted that teachers need training for teacher fairness (professionalism). The teachers commented that the requirement of the Ministry of Education is that all students must pass. Thus, some teachers tend to be unfair in awarding marks by making a student pass, although he/she may have failed.

The findings also illustrate that teacher network can be developed amongst schools to share ideas, experiences and maybe share workload. The subject association can be formed and teachers can cooperate and design tasks which can be utilized in their schools. Finally, teachers viewed that parental awareness is very significant. Parents can be informed regarding the internal assessment and its significance through parental meetings. This may help in improving students' attendance.

5.0 Conclusion

This study seeks to investigate the challenges faced by the students as well as teachers and the reforms needed to improve the internal assessment implementation process. Findings suggested that students are facing challenges and the major challenges were lack of resources and financial constraints.

The teachers are also facing difficulties while implementing internal assessment. The major difficulties were student absenteeism, lack of resources and heavy workload. Finally, this study depicted that there needs some reforms to improve the internal assessment process. The reforms needed were availability of resources, reducing syllabus, building teacher network and training teachers. Literature review indicated that the major reform needed is the professional training of teachers.

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