

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT A MIRAGE IN THE ZIMBABWEAN SCHOOLS .A CASE OF GWERU DISTRICT

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Formative assessment is an essential and integral part of the teaching/ learning process that reflects the belief that all learners can improve. The study was an interpretive qualitative approach which sought to understand the participants' perspectives in their own settings. Purposive sampling was used to sample teachers for individual interviews and focus groups. The researcher also visited some purposefully selected classrooms to observe how formative assessment was carried out. Observations served to triangulate data from individual interviews and focus groups. Transcribed data from interviews, observations and document analysis was thematically analyzed in line with the research questions and findings. The study revealed that formative assessment was peripheral to the teaching and learning situation due to reasons that included lack of teacher competences, lack of resources, teacher work overload, teacher perceptions and hot sitting in the schools. The study recommended that the Ministry of Secondary and Primary Education construct more schools, staff develops teachers, provide schools with the necessary resources, come up with assessment policies that emphasize both formative and summative assessments, provide subject specialist teachers to reduce teachers' load and teacher /pupil ratio to 35-40.

Key words:-assessment, formative assessment, primary schools, teachers, teacher perceptions, teacher competences.

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Background of the study

Formative is an essential and integral part of the teaching/ learning process that reflects the belief that all learners can improve. Formative assessment has come to refer to ‘any assessment for which the first priority is to serve the purpose of promoting learners’ learning (Black et al., 2003: 2). It helps learners understand and recognise the standards they are aiming for. It also provides feedback that helps learners and teachers understand the next steps in learning and plan how to achieve the steps.

Formative assessment is concerned with applying the information gained from the different modes of assessment to the learning/ teaching process NCCA (2004:23). They continued to argue that, through assessment for learning, the teacher will gather extensive and continuous information about a child’s progress and attainment through observing his/her performance in, and engagement with the day-to-day learning activities in the classroom. Tasks and tests undertaken both in the classroom and at home will be directly related to learning objectives. Thus in using formative assessment the teacher keeps accounting for all the information about a child’s progress, attainment and possible areas of difficulty in providing regular and high quality feedback to the child and in planning for future learning experiences (NCCA 2004:24). Black and William (1998:61) drew from their review of more than 250 articles related to formative assessment; stated that formative assessment does improve teaching and that the gains in learner achievement were amongst the largest ever reported.

William and Thompson (2008:61) observe, “...an assessment is formative to the extent that information from the assessment is fed back within the system and actually used to improve performance of the system in some way”. According to Stiggins (2002:761)

When teachers assess for learning, teachers use the classroom assessment process and the continuous flow of information about learners that it provides in order to advance, not merely to check on the learner learning. They do this by,

- Understanding and articulating in advance of teaching, the achievement targets that their learners are to hit.
- Inform learners about those learning goals from the beginning of the learning process.
- Become assessment literate and be able to transform their expectations into assessment exercises and scoring procedure that accurately reflect learner achievement.

- Using classroom assessment to build learner confidence in them as learners and help them to take responsibility of their learning so as to lay a foundation for life learning.
- Translating classroom assessment results into frequent descriptive feedback (versus judgemental feedback) for learners, providing them with specific insights as to how to improve.
- Continuously adjusting instruction based on the results of classroom assessments.
- Engaging learners in regular self–assessment, with standards held constant so that learners can watch themselves grow over time and thus feel in charge of their own success.
- Actively involving learners in communicating with their teachers and their families about their achievement and success.

Assessment for learning has come to refer to ‘any assessment for which the first priority is to serve the purpose of promoting learners’ learning’ (Black *et al.*, 2003: 2). If assessment information about learning is used, say, for recording purposes or for long-term curriculum improvement without helping the learning of the learners currently involved, it might be formative for the teacher, but not for the learners (Black *et al.*, 2003: 2).

Teachers who assess for learning use day-to-day classroom assessment activities to involve learners directly and deeply in their own learning, increasing their confidence and motivation to learn, by emphasising progress rather than failure and defeat (Stiggins, 1992; 2001).

Questioning as formative assessment underpins all classroom assessment methods. There are many different types of oral questions. These range from closed questions in which the teacher anticipates a single, factual answer to open-questions which encourage a more critical, analytical response, and which facilitate multiple solution paths (NCCA, 2004:36). Open ended formative questions challenge common misconceptions to create some conflict that requires discussion which encourages learners to think of a response or an idea from different angles (Black *et. al.*, 2003:39). Teachers’ questions can assess children’s depth of learning by encouraging them to elaborate on an answer, whether it is their own or another child’s. Research on teacher questioning behaviours and patterns indicate that teachers today ask between 300-400 questions each day (Leven & Long, 1981). Teachers ask questions for several reasons (Morgan & Saxton, 1991):

- the act of asking questions helps teachers keep learners actively involved in lessons;
- while answering questions, learners have the opportunity to openly express their ideas and thoughts;
- questioning learners enables other learners to hear different explanations of the material by their peers;
- asking questions helps teachers to pace their lessons and moderate learner behaviour; and questioning learners helps teachers to evaluate learner learning and revise their lessons as necessary.

Questioning plays an important role in assessment; however studies conducted in African schools revealed that questioning was poorly done in the classroom situation. Greaney & Kellaghan (2004:62) cited the following observations; a study made in Kenya revealed that in many lessons pupils were asked no questions at all. When questions were asked they were closed –a form of questioning that does not facilitate the development of higher order thinking skills .A study in Swaziland described the vast majority of questions in higher secondary classes as either rhetoric or at a low cognitive level. Low level taxonomy questions were also noted in primary classes in Tanzania, the questions asked were described as merely requiring of pupils to recall facts, which they did individually or in a chorus.

Ellis (1993) claims that many teachers do rely on low-level cognitive questions in order to avoid a slow-paced lesson, keep the attention of the learners, and maintain control of the classroom.

Teachers need to be aware the different questioning techniques in order to effectively assess pupils. However if teachers' questioning concentrates on lower order cognitive questions then the other domains will be neglected. It is therefore pertinent for teachers to be aware of what should be assessed in order to come up with meaningful assessments.

Formative assessment occurs when teachers feed information back to learners in ways that enable the learner to learn better, or when learners can engage in similar self reflective processes (National Center for Open Testing [NCFOT], 2007). Formative tests are not graded and are used as an on-going diagnostic tool, hence, the teacher employs the results of formative assessment solely to modify and adjust practices, to reflect the needs and progress of learners (Swearing, 2002).

Sadler (1989) conceptualizes formative assessment as being concerned with how judgment about the quality of learner's response can be used to shape and improve the competence;

...continuous assessment cannot function formatively when it is cumulative, that is each attempt or piece of work submitted is scored and the scores are added together at the end of the course. This practice tends to produce in learners a mindset that if a piece of work does not contribute toward the total 'it is not worth doing' (1989; 141).

Harlen (2008:139) illustrates the key aspects of formative assessment as follows;

- Evidence is gathered about ongoing learning activities that can be used to make decisions about further learning.
- The evidence is judged in terms of progress toward the detailed lesson goals. These goals may vary for different individual pupils or for groups and so comparison between pupils are not sensible or justified.
- Pupils are aware of their lesson goals and can help in deciding their next steps toward the goals.
- The process is cyclical and ongoing; information gathered is used as an integral part of teaching and learning.
- No judgment of grade or level is involved, only the judgment of how to help a learner take the next steps in learning. Information gathered frequently by the teacher will be able to feed back to correct any mistake judgment.

Black *et al* (2003:2) also contends that classroom based formative assessment

...can occur many times in every lesson. It involves several different methods for encouraging learners to express what they are thinking and several ways of acting on such evidence. It has to be within the control of the individual teacher and for this reason; change in formative assessment is an integral and intimate part of the teacher's daily work.

However, formative assessment is seldom used (Brookhart, 1999), a fact that led the NCFOT (1999:4) to conclude that, "Most teachers do not know well how to engage such assessment". William & Black (1996) depicts the formative assessment scenario in many countries as generally one of weak practice. According to Black (1998), The main weaknesses are;

- classroom evaluation practices generally encourage superficial and rote learning, concentrating on recall of isolated details, usually items of knowledge which pupils soon forget.
- teachers do not generally review the assessment questions that they use and do not discuss them critically with peers, so there is little reflection on what is being assessed.

- the grading function is over-emphasised and the learning function underemphasised.
- there is a tendency to use a normative rather than a criterion approach, which emphasizes competition between pupils rather than personal improvement of each and the evidence is that with such practices the effect of feedback is to teach the weaker pupils that they lack ability, so that they are de-motivated and lose confidence in their own capacity to learn (Black, 1998:111).

Black and William (1998) contend there has recently been a proliferation of so called “benchmark” tests that are claimed to be formative but intended to predict how well the test taker will do in the end of year big test. According to Sadle (1989:120) formative assessment is initially connected with feedback and feed back to the teacher and pupil are separated;

Teachers use feedback to make programmatic decisions with respect to redness, diagnosis and remediation .Students use it to monitor the strengths and weaknesses of their performances ,so that aspects associated with success or high quality can be recognized and reinforced ,and unsatisfactory aspects modified or improved on.

Formative assessment has come to refer to ‘any assessment for which the first priority is to serve the purpose of promoting learners’ learning (Black *et al.*, 2003: 2). It helps learners understand and recognize the standards they are aiming for. It also provides feedback that helps learners and teachers understand the next steps in learning and plan how to achieve the steps. However my experience as a teacher has shown that teachers have a casual approach to formative assessment which is paramount to teaching and learning. Some teachers concentrate on summative assessment. It is for this reason that the researcher would want to unravel the factors leading to this casual approach to formative assessment in the primary schools.

Teacher competences in formative assessment.

Research suggests that teachers in general are not proficient in student assessment practices in the Western world (Black et al, 2003 and Popham, 2004).Many teachers believe that their training was inadequate (Wise et, al ,1991).Further research suggests that some teachers tend to ask low-level cognitive questions and students consequently learn that they do not to have a deep understanding to pass classroom tests (Stiggins,2002).Black and William,1998 concurred with this view and notes that teachers

tend to use poorly focused questions, a predominant of questions that require short answers involving factual knowledge ,and lack of procedures designed to develop higher order cognitive skills.

Most state certified systems and half of all teacher education programmes have no assessment course requirement nor do they have an explicit requirement than teachers have received education in assessment(Trice,2000).The formal training they receive often focuses on large scale test administration and standardized test score interpretation------(Stiggins & Bridgeford ,1985).Summative assessments measures are over emphasized within contemporary schools(Popham,2005).The national examinations tend to shift focus of classroom assessment away from authentic formative practice techniques closely aligned to national examinations(Stiggins,2008).Teachers feel compelled to spend time preparing students to master the content covered in the national examinations and to coach them on test taking strategies .The negative impact of high stakes assessments was also noted by Eisemen, Patel & Abage(1987) in Greaney (2004:4) who observed that, “Pupils were taught through drill and recitation, and exercises to fill-in the missing type, all of which procedures were designed to impart factual information and techniques that students would need in public examinations .

Teacher perceptions on formative assessment.

Teacher perceptions act as a framework through which a teacher views, interprets and interacts with the teaching environment (Marton ,1981).Teachers perceptions of assessment modify procedures teachers use for lesson planning ,delivery ,instruction and teacher interaction throughout the school term (Good & Brophy,`1995).Research suggests that teachers perceptions of teaching and learning strongly influence how they teach and what students have to achieve (Marshal and Drummond,2006).Studies have shown that ,to a certain degree, teachers are satisfied with their assessment practices(Yildrin,2004)Unfortunately ,some teachers perceptions included poor teaching assessment training and not enough to properly assess students(Mertler,2005).

The conception that reflect that evaluation has no legitimate place within teaching and learning will probably avoid formative assessment and take a haphazard approach to summative assessment (Vander &Killen,2003).The authors go further to say that teachers who view assessment as a necessary part of education and school accountability will favour summative and quasi –formative assessment to generate marks that can be reported to external agencies. This kind of assessment should be used to publicly demonstrate school effectiveness. Assessment practices in Zimbabwe tend to be summative high stakes and may impact on the manner teachers’ carryout assessment in the classroom. Teachers should be able to

design more than end of unit tests and examinations if they are to realize improvements in schools (Sherpard, 2000).

Research objectives

To explore the primary teachers' competences in view of formative assessment.

To establish how primary teachers perceptions influence formative assessment practice

To proffer solutions on how formative assessment can be effectively implemented in schools.

Research questions.

How do teacher competences impact on formative assessment?

How do primary teachers' perceptions influence formative assessment practices?

How can primary teachers' practices on formative assessment be improved on?

Research methodology.

A qualitative methodology was employed following a phenomenological approach that involved exploring challenges and perceptions of teachers in carrying out formative assessment in schools. The focus of this study was to explore experiences of primary teachers of formative assessment based rich descriptions of their attitudes, feelings and the essence of their feelings. This approach was selected to enable the researcher to explore the nature of the problem (Kumar ,2005:12) and to develop a complex and holistic view of social phenomena(Creswell,2007:38)The approach elicited the lived experiences the individual teachers had and behind them.

Purposive sampling was used to collect data and data was collected through individual interviews and focus group discussions in 4 schools in Gweru Urban. A total of 12 teachers were interviewed and 2 focus groups of 8 teachers were also conducted. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. According to Henning etal (2004) data analysis takes place throughout the data collection process, commencing with reading all the data and dividing it into smaller meaningful units. The researcher read and reread data transcribed from interviews and focus groups until themes emerge from the data.

Discussion and Findings.

The overall goal of the study was to establish the factors leading to a casual approach to formative assessment in the primary schools and make recommendations to improve the nature and quality of formative assessment. Generally observations from interviews and focus groups discussions indicated that formative assessment was peripheral to the teaching and learning situation due to reasons that included

lack of teacher competences, lack of resources, teacher work overload, teacher perceptions and hot sitting in the schools. The findings were organised using predetermined thematic categories and then re-analyzed it using the themes that emerged from the data.

Teacher competences.

The study revealed that the majority of teachers lacked formative assessment competences as evidenced by the ad-hoc approach to formative assessment. Research suggests that teachers in general are not proficient in student assessment practices (Black et al, 2003). Some teachers confirmed that they used tests, oral questions and daily exercises to do formative assessment. However the majority of teachers revealed that they used forty nightly tests to do formative assessment. These perceptions tend to suggest that teachers were not clear on what is involved in formative assessment.

Teachers attributed their lack of competences to the limited education they received in teachers colleges. Teachers in a focus group confirmed the above views and echoed,

“Assessment was not taught in colleges, but during the 3 weeks of micro-teaching we met some kind of assessment”.

“We were not taught how to do formative assessment, but we are just using trial and error.”

Observations made during some observed lessons revealed that some teachers asked oral questions and gave written work to ensure children understood the work. The oral questions however benefitted fast learners as slow learners were left behind and did not participate in answering questions. Furthermore most of the questions that were asked were simple recall which failed to challenge the higher cognitive domains of learning. This tended to suggest that teachers lacked the requisite competences to carry out formative assessment. The findings tend to confirm literature which states that teachers tend to ask poorly focused questions, a predominant of questions that require short answers involving factual knowledge and lack of procedures designed to develop higher order cognitive skills (Greaney and Kellaghan, 2004).

Teacher perceptions

All pedagogical acts are affected by conceptions teachers have about the act of teaching, the process, purpose of assessment practices and the nature of learning (Brown 2003, 1). It emerged from the study that teachers' assessment practices were influenced by the country's nature of education system which was examination driven. Teachers acknowledged that their assessments were biased to summative national

examinations. This was because teachers wanted their pupils to do well in national examinations where teacher and school effectiveness was based

on. The following sentiments were said by teachers,

“Our assessment practices are focused towards public examinations and effectiveness of teachers and schools is measured by grade seven results”.

“As long as the education system is based examinations, school assessment will always be directly linked to examinations”

“I am aware that formative assessment is important, but I will apply summative forms of assessments because it will enable pupils to do well at the end of Grade seven”.

Some lesson observations indicated that some teachers drilled pupils on test taking skills at the detriment of teaching for understanding. The public summative grade seven examinations seem to leave teachers with no option, but to focus on summative assessment and sideline formative assessment which is crucial in the teaching and learning situation. The national examinations tend to shift focus of classroom assessment away from authentic formative practice techniques closely aligned to national examinations (Stiggins, 2008)

Work overload.

The responses from participants indicated that workload was leading teachers to a casual approach to formative assessment. Teachers lamented that their class loads ranged from 40-52 pupils with the majority of the classes ranging from 49 – 52 pupils. The following comments emerged from focus group discussions and individual interviews,

“With huge classes it is difficult to provide individual help to each child”.

“There are too many records in the school .The records tend to reduce us to clerks.”

“Our curriculum is over loaded, leaving us with very little time for formative assessment”

All this pressure tended to limit teachers from implementing formative assessment.

It was further revealed that teachers tended to be unethical with regards to record keeping which is paramount in formative assessment. Due to work overload some teachers confirmed to have created marks in trying to meet the demands of policies that teachers’ are to record marks weekly. The teachers went further to reveal that the high demand of work tempted them to cheat.

Hot sitting in some primary schools exacerbated the neglect of formative assessment .It emerged from the study that teachers in hot sitting schools had limited time to thoroughly assess pupils. One teacher made the following comment,

“Hot sitting is really an obstacle and we are always on a crush programme and some pupils never finish written work making formative assessment difficult.”

The research findings also revealed that pupil absenteeism and lack of both financial, material and time resources resulted in the casual approach to formative assessment.

Conclusion

The study sought to investigate the casual approach to the implementation of formative assessment in the primary schools. Generally it was observed that teachers had an ad-hoc approach to formative assessment. The limitations to formative assessment were attributed to lack of teacher competences, lack of resources, teacher work overload, teacher perceptions and hot sitting in the schools. Lack of resources and absenteeism by pupils also hampered effective formative assessment practices in the primary schools.

Recommendations.

The following recommendations were made in light of responses to findings highlighted in the study. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education needs to;

- ❖ construct more schools in order to do away with hot sitting;
- ❖ staff develop teachers in order to equip them with relevant formative assessment competences;
- ❖ provide schools with the necessary resources to facilitate formative assessment;
- ❖ come up with assessment policies that emphasize both formative and summative assessment;
- ❖ provide subject specialist teachers to reduce teachers ‘work load and
- ❖ to reduce teacher /pupil ratio to 35-40.

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