

IMPROVING PRIMAY SCHOOL LEVEL OF EDUCATION IN PLATEAU STATE THROUGH PROPER ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

That Nigerian education system is in comatose is a fact that can no longer be argued especially outside the shores of this country. This is the reason many well-to-do families send their children to study abroad including African countries like Ghana, South Africa, etc. Nigeria's position in the rating of universities both in Africa and the world also attest to this fact. Many authorities have blamed this dismal performance on various factors including lack of qualified teachers, paucity of learning materials, poor learning facilities and environment at primary school level as being responsible for this poor performance at the subsequent levels. However, this research through discussion method focuses on improper assessment of students during the course of learning at primary school level as being responsible for this poor performance. It takes an analytical view of assessment methods applied from primary level of education and discovers anomalies which unless corrected, re-engineering the Nigerian educational system might be a wild goose chase. To achieve holistic sustainable development goals, the paper concludes by proffering assessment strategies that would hoist Nigerian education system to international limelight. These include among others, on-the-spot one-on-one fields assessment between student and teacher for the entire duration of time instead of assessment by proxy.

Keywords: Assessment, evaluation, reengineering and sustainable

Introduction

Ostensibly, one of student's concerns is how well they can do in schools. Assessment is a crucial part of student's academic life and its development should be a primary goal in any school plan at all levels. Assessing student's performance rightly helps in directing their learning because the teacher corrects them progressively to avoid putting wrong information in their heads. To

achieve this goal the teacher, assesses the students one-on-one and step by step, corrects them and with this, proper learning takes place gradually. According to Alkharusi, Alfahfri, and Alrajhi (2016: 62), “justifiably good academic assessment yields good academic achievement which contributes to the way students form their self-concept”. Kagets (2013) views assessment as learning, and assessment as in separable. Hence the need for assessment that aids learning for improving the quality of education. In the same view, in National Teachers’ Institute defines Assessment as a fact finding activity that describes conceptions that exists at a particular time. Assessment often involves measurement to gather data. However, it is the domain of assessment to organize the measurement data into variables. Morison (2000) explains assessment as a process of collecting information about children’s health, behaviour, and academic progress and attainment in order to:

- ❖ Identify what children know.
- ❖ Identify children special needs.
- ❖ Determine appropriate placement.
- ❖ Select appropriate curricula to meet individual needs of children.
- ❖ Select materials.
- ❖ Make decisions about how to implement learning activities.
- ❖ Report to parents about children’s developmental status and achievement.
- ❖ Refer children and as appropriate their families for additional services to programs and agencies.
- ❖ Make policy decisions regarding what is and what is not appropriate for children.

Assessment occurs primarily through observation, administration of commercial and teacher-made tests, and examination of student’s products. The teacher will probably use all three of these assessment in his teaching. In the same view, California State University (2016) observes that assessment is what the teacher does in order to identify strengths and weaknesses of a learner within a program. This is conducted by using student’s assignments to tell if the promises to develop the knowledge and skills as promised the students the program would deliver are upheld. Also, according to Dynamic Measurement Group (2017), Assessment is the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a

deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as results are used to improve subsequent learning. Having seen other people's views the researchers see assessment as a systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programmes undertaken for the purpose of improving student's learning and development. In this study however lower levels of education comprises pre-primary aged 4-5, primary aged 6-11 plus, and secondary school aged 12-16-18, this set of individuals are young people whose reasoning are solely dependents on the teacher. However the focus of this discourse is the primary school level of education.

The secondary school learners, even though are called students in some countries are still young children. Nnachi, (2016) states that junior secondary are aged 12-15yrs, and upholds that the learners have now entered the Erikson's stage of identity versus role confusion. The pupils or students (as called in some countries) have started to show concern about their body, appearance and sex roles. The pupils have started to experience formal operations in their mode of thoughts and intellectual operations. They have started to engage in mental manipulations. They would like to know why certain answers are assigned to certain problems. They have the ability for logical reasoning and elementary test of hypotheses. These experiences also proceed with them to senior secondary aged 16-18yrs. These learners (students) are still within Erikson's stage of Identity vs Role confusion. They are in their later adolescence. They are at the advanced aspects of formal operations thought stage. There is full achievement of sexual maturity. Friends are now more permanent and are more carefully selected than before. At this stage teachers are expected to work extraneously in order to achieve desired academic goals. Based on that strong foundation higher education will not be void, and sustainable development through education can be assured in Nigeria.

Overview of student's assessments in primary schools

Primary school education according to National Policy on Education (2004:14), "is education given in an institutions for children aged 6-11 plus". Since the rest of the education system is built upon it, the primary level is the key to the success or failure of the whole system. This being the case, the goals of primary education are to:

- a. Inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively.

- b. Lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking.
- c. Give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that enable the child function effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capacity" etc.

To accomplish the above stated goals, proper assessment must be carried out; as assessment is a process of building a strong foundation for a child's progressive learning within the stipulated curricula. The teacher uses different ways to gather evidence about "how" and "what" the child learns on a basis such as:

- a. **Formative assessment:** This means having a very interactive class discussion; a warm-up, closure, an on-the-spot, performance, or a quiz.
- b. **Interim assessment:** Here the teacher assesses the child more formally in consideration to the three domains of learning which are: cognitive domain, (knowledge), psychomotor domain (skills) and affective domain (attitudes) in order to ascertain the level of the child's competence.
- c. **Summative assessment:** This is used to evaluate student learning at the conclusion of a specific instructional period typically at the end of a unit, course, semester, program, or school year. Assessments are summative typically scored and graded tests, assignments, or projects that are used to determine whether students have learned what they were expected to learn during the defined instructional period.

In order to give more insight to this discourse, there is need to have a look at the assessment in secondary school levels: In this level of education where the learners are aged eleven to eighteen (11-18) plus, students are prepared for tertiary education. According to National Policy on Education (2004:18), the broad goals of secondary education is to prepare the individual child for the following:

- a. Useful living within the society and higher education.
- b. Provide trained manpower in the applied science, technology and commerce at sub-professional grades.
- c. Raise a generation of people who can think for themselves, respect the views and feelings of others, respect the dignity of labour and appreciate other good citizens.

- d. Develop and promote Nigerian Languages and culture in the context of world's heritage among others.

For the fact that every educational achievement relies on assessment, the methods of the assessments needs to be highly considered in order to achieve the desired academic goals. Texas (2016) stated some lay down procedures to include:

1. **Formative (low-stakes) assessment:** This technique monitors student learning process. The feedback gathered is used to identify areas where students are struggling, so that instructors can adjust their teaching strategies, and students can adjust their studying methods.
2. **Informal Techniques:** This goes in written reflections. Sometimes referred to as “Minute papers” or “Muddiest points”. This popular assessment technique have students reflect immediately following a learning opportunity (e.g, at the end of a class or after completing an out-of-class activity) to answer one or two basic questions like:
 - a. What was the most important thing you learned today?
 - b. What was the most confusing topic today?
 - c. What important question remain unanswered?
3. **Polls/surveys:** Data on student attitudes, behaviours or confidence in understanding can be gathered during classes either with a classroom response system or outside of class. This can illustrate student engagement with materials as well as prior knowledge, misconceptions, and comprehension.
4. **Checks for understanding:** Pausing every few minutes to see whether students are following along with the lesson not only identifies gaps in comprehension but helps break up lectures or teachings. (E.g. with clicker questions the learners will readjust their mind into more digestible bites.
5. **Wrappers:** “Wrapping” activities, using a set of reflective questions can help students develop skills to monitor their own learning and adapt as necessary.

Formal Techniques of assessment

Assessment is a crucial process in measuring classroom learning. Through assessment learners and teachers are guided on what has been learnt and to what extent has learning taken place.

Therefore, the assessment that promotes learning can be referred as “Assessment for learning” meaning a process of findings and interpreting evidence to be used by learners, and their teacher to identify strengths and weaknesses in their learning/teaching, where they need to go and how best to get there. To achieve this, Texas (2016) outlines the following steps:

In class activates: Having students work in pairs or small groups to solve problems creates space for powerful peer-to-peer learning and rich class discussion. Instructors and Teachers can roam the classroom as students work; help those who get stuck and guiding those who are headed in the wrong direction.

Quizzes: This gauges students’ prior knowledge, also assesses progress midway through a unit, creates friendly in-class competition. Review before the text-quizzes can be great tools that do not have to count heavily toward students’ grades. But using quizzes to begin units is also a fun way to assess what your students already know, clear up misconceptions, and drive home the point of how much they will learn.

Class Deliverables: In-class activities are designed for students, usually in groups; they are required to submit a product of their work for a grade. Among the variety of techniques that can be used the most effective will balance individual and group accountability that required students to think about authentic complex issues.

Summative assessment: According to Nnachi (2017), summative assessment is a “process of systematically gathering information from the learner by the teacher”. In this case the school authority and the teacher make a schedule, which runs through the objectives of the subject matter, which must have been thoroughly taught and assessed at several informal patterns in a conducive environment. The teacher uses this timetable to set questions according to schedule which will be in two forms-test and quizzes.

Exams: This includes mind-term exams, final exams and test at the end of course units. The best tests include several types of questions such as short answers, multiple choices, true of false, and short essays to allow students to fully demonstrate what they know.

The effects of improper assessment of learners at the primary school level of education.

At the primary school level of education, the learner’s ages range from 4-5 for pre-primary; 6-12 for primary as observed above and which is based on National Policy on Education (2013).

At these levels, the learners are young children who are solely dependent on the teacher for their academic progression in life. The fact still remains that learning process and achievements with assessment are inseparable. One cannot talk about learning without assessment, and the way and manner in which the assessment is done is what brought about the achievement. The learning tasks are tasks expected to be carried out by the teacher and the learner in the course of knowledge transmission and acquisition. It includes the presentation and assimilation of the information. The teacher treats all the objectives that are supposed to be learnt by the learner and would expect the learner to work hard and assimilate the facts. The teacher also presents these points gradually and systematically using available techniques. He may use any of the teaching methods and techniques he thinks best to teach, explain, and illustrate.

Assessment

This is the time the teacher will justify all efforts, but it is very unfortunate that at this point everything is brought to disarray, without bearing in mind that these are young children who do not know the implications of their actions in life. The manner and environment in which assessments are conducted in the primary school level of education in Nigeria is very poor and also affected by so many factors such as:

Environmental factors: Environmental factors refer to factors within the school that influence the teaching and assessment processes. Nnachi (2008) opines that “the environment influences concept formation. The richer the environment the more the individual is exposed and the more concepts that are formed”. The following are environmental factors, the classroom, teacher, laboratory, technical workshop with materials and planning field.

The classroom: This is a very vital factor in learning and assessing the learner’s academic performances. But here in Nigeria, the sordid state of most classrooms and learning environment in the primary school level of education is quite alarming. In some schools there are usually about fifty to sixty children in one classroom with one teacher and few desks to sit on. During assessment or promotional examinations, these children are usually given mat to sit to write, or sit on the floor and write on their laps. According to Rivera and Marti (1995): The children in

crowded classroom will not be given the attention they need from the teacher, and they will fall behind. This will affect not only standardized testing scores, but also the child's own enjoyment of school and learning, setting them up for failure in the future. The noise level increases and the students' ability to learn or work decreases. A study of overcrowded classrooms in New York City found that in such classrooms, students scored significantly lower on both mathematics and reading exams than their counterparts who are in classroom of 35 to two teachers. In addition, when asked, students and teachers in overcrowded classroom agreed that overcrowding negatively affected both classroom activities and instructional techniques. In another circumstance, Rivera and Marti in Emenike (2016: 163) continued to observe that "Apart from the home, the classroom is another important place where children congregate, interact and communicate. Classroom physical environment avails ample opportunities for children's imaginative and creative activities. The classroom physical environment is everything in the classroom apart from the learner which influences learning".

Teacher factor: Learning and assessment is solely dependent on the teacher. Crowded classroom conditions not only make it difficult for students to concentrate on their lessons, but inevitably limit the amount of time teachers can spend on innovative teaching methods such as cooperative learning and group work or, indeed on teaching anything beyond the barest minimum of required materials. Also the teachers must constantly struggle simply to maintain order in an overcrowded classroom; the likelihood increases that they might suffer from being burnout earlier than might otherwise be the case. The teacher in overcrowded classrooms would be more stressed out and overwhelmed, feeling as though he/she lacked the time and resources to really make a difference. This would naturally affect any assessment the learner might have to undergo.

The teacher in the poor classroom environment would spend more time managing the classroom organization and students; therefore, assessing the learner using the stipulated condition of assessment such as: formative assessment, informal techniques and formal techniques would not be very feasible.

Teacher's attitudes: The manner and attitudes of the teacher are very crucial factors in learning and assessment of the learner. For the fact that teaching, learning, and assessment are tightly

linked, the teacher who is the instructor should be equal to the task in all aspects, including his attitudes, manner of approach and also highly competent. Maduiké and Mezieobi (2015) are of the view that a teacher spends a lot of time being a classroom manager. This requires the ability to think about and react to many things at once. The teacher must be friendly, empathic, tolerant, observant and listening to the children. He should also be communicating with parents with regards to the children's attitudes.

Laboratory and technical workshop with materials factors: There is this saying that 'practices makes perfect'. Also Igbo has an adage which says *Nke m huru n'anya ka mma karia nke m nuru na nti*; meaning that "seeing with my eyes is better for me than hearing". A learner in a school with equipped laboratories and technical works and also having the opportunity to be taught by his instructors (teachers) with those materials would surely stand the test of any kind of assessment in that given subject area, be it Home Economic, Creative Arts, Computer Education and Primary Science Education.

Shwamut, Dewan, and Ojo (2010) had observed that:

One of the ways in which one can help foster well-being and resilience in children is by providing them with the right environment. This can help them to develop strong and positive feelings about themselves. Children need not only to feel as well as learn about their capabilities, in addition, they should have opportunities to try skills and activities without worrying about failure.

In examination situation the child is filled with anxiety of failure or looking for a passing center and involving in examination malpractices, because he/she has not learnt well or because he/she has not been taught well.

Playing field

Play is an autonomous activity, which in most cases gives happiness to one who engages in it. It is said to have spontaneity and also attracts immediate attention. Mike and Warne (2011) have observed that: physical development helps to improve children's skills of coordination, control, manipulation and movement. Also, in the classroom through activities to hand-eye coordination, such as mark making, planning with puzzles, threading, sewing, and playing with clay and play

dough. Children have freedom to the outdoor area where they will have opportunities for climbing, scrambling, balancing and riding wheeled toys. With these, children are encouraged to recognize the importance of exercise and a healthy diet and how to keep healthy and safe. They manage their own personal hygiene and dress independently.

In this way any assessment carried out in subjects like Physical and Health Education and Basic Health Scheme will surely turnout successfully. In that line, Andrea (2007) outlined the benefits of play-way method of teaching-learning and assessment as follows:

- i. The learners develop their attention and resilience to concentrate on their own play or group tasks.
- ii. Be responsible for their own learning and build on their experiences to become reflective thinkers.
- iii. Develop the skills and empathy among themselves.
- iv. Active learning helps children to concentrate and keep trying if they encounter difficulties and they enjoy their achievements.

Conclusion

One of the most important factors to ascertain sustainable development in the country is through education. A country with educated, civilized and creative citizens would surely attend to any level, in all aspect of life both economically, politically, socially, technologically and manpower resources. This may not be achieved unless primary school level of education is set on a strong foundation. China is a good example of the counties that can attest to this. Every citizen of China may not have attended tertiary education, but the good teaching, learning and assessment at the basic educational level has put her at the top of the world in terms of technology. To re-engineer Nigerian educational system for sustainable development, we need to sanitize our school environment and improve on the way and manner in which assessment is carried out in the primary school level of education. There is this old Christian song which goes like this:

“Christ is my rock, My Refuge, my Stronghold, firm as the tree’s root that clutches the land. He who has faith builds without worry. Not like the man who builds upon sand. I set my house on a solid foundation. Christ is my rock, the root of my soul’s recreation”. For Nigeria to achieve a

sustainable development through education set on a solid foundation, the import of education at the primary school level or as the case may be, the basic education should not be played down.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of this study.

- All the agencies in charge for basic education in Nigeria including the Universal Basic Education (UBE), National Primary Education Commission (NPEC) etc. should ensure that schools are doing on-the-spot, one-on-one field assessment between student and teacher for the entire duration of time instead of assessment by proxy.
- All the heads of schools both public and private schools should be sensitized and monitored against the so called ‘special or magic centers’, and the use of ‘machineries’ during all examinations especially external examinations like the West African School Certificate Examination (WASCE), National Examination Council (NECO), and National Board for Business and Technical Education (NABTEB). It should be ensured that students write examinations by themselves. If the needful is done at the primary school level of education, the need for this student to pass examinations by hook and by crook should not arise.
- Government should reintroduce and strictly monitor aptitude tests in the tertiary institutions before admission. This is because proper training at the primary school level should have prepared them for that.
- The National Teachers’ Institute (NTI) and Colleges of Education should ensure that their products are worthy of the Nigerian Certificate in Education (N.C.E) issued to them, to guarantee production of competent teachers.
- Government in conjunction with other professional associations like WAEC, NECO and NABTEB should organize in-service training in form of workshops and seminars in every schools for serving teachers on a regular basis to update their knowledge and skills on the use of innovative and activity oriented strategies like one-on-one practical assessment for learners in the lower levels of education to ensure self-confidence and strong learning foundation.

- Government should ensure a more stringent assessment strategy at the lower level of education that would produce positive results at that level and beyond, and also ensure strict compliance by all relevant stakeholders for maximum output.

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