

Full Length Research Paper

Traditional assessment as a subjectification tool in schools in Lesotho

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Received 8 April, 2014; Accepted 25 July, 2014

The concept of assessment is one of the most important practices in any education system across the globe. Tracing the concept probably to the time immemorial through the Chinese Imperial Examination System in the fifteenth century, the notion of assessment seems to have proved to be one of the indispensable markers of selection, placement and certification in modern education. In order to understand the concept, it is crucial to focus, among others, on the education system within which the notion itself is situated. As a crucial aspect of any education system, assessment is such that learners, at almost all levels of education, are subjected to a certain conventional practice with a view to categorising them according to certain pre-determined achievements. Perhaps, to examine the concept, we shall address ourselves to some of the specific questions as in who assesses whom? What form of assessment? How and why is such an assessment? On what premise is such educational assessment of learners in a particular education system? The paper intended to critically trace assessment in the context of Lesotho. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of subjectification, the paper intends to demonstrate the instrumentality of assessment as used in schools in the Kingdom. The paper concludes by suggesting alternative models of assessment so as to keep abreast with the twenty first century challenges facing modern education system.

Key words: Traditional assessment, subjectification tool, schools, Lesotho.

INTRODUCTION

Viewed across the globe or worldwide, traditional assessment has since the Enlightenment period/Modern Era/Age of Reason of the 18th century always been seen as an indispensable tool without which learning and the practice of teaching can happen in education. The

Enlightenment period is one of the historic events which came after the Middle Ages/Barbarism and which ushered in modernization in Western Europe, with its characteristic features of an unassailable faith in science, progress and rationality (Giroux, 1997; Ray, 2001), as well as the

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values of predictability, certainty, control, absolute truths and order. It is notable that during this period, traditional assessment was seen not only as an indispensable tool, but, it was also seen by its proponents as a modern project that had to be pursued for the advancement of society within the modernist Enlightenment perspective and the education system which came to be associated with emancipation and progress (Crossourd, 2012, Smith and Cumming, 2009; Torres and Mitchell, 1998). Rust (2009) underscores this notion by opining that assessment plays a crucial role in the education process. Broadfoot (1979) takes up the view by observing the pervasiveness of traditional assessment and associating its role with that of or far more than religion as the opiate of the people.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Lesotho is no exception to the belief that traditional assessment is an important and integral part of learning and teaching, because with the advent of Missionary Western education system the first three of whom arrived in Lesotho in 1833, traditional assessment has been used till the present. Traditional assessment in all its forms – formative/summative, formal/informal, final/continuous and process/product (McAlpine, 2002) has been so routinized and institutionalized that it is taken for granted as a normal way and a perfect tool for measuring skills learners have acquired in order to face the world of work (see Broadfoot, 2000). In addition, it seems to have been seen as a perfect tool to use for assessing teachers' performance when going about their practice. Little attention in professional discourse of educational assessment, if any has been given to the effects of assessment on those whom it is exercised. The impact of assessment on the learners has for a long time been a 'black box' (Black et al., 2004) which has not been opened and interrogated by scholars.

Therefore, using Foucault's notion of subjectification, the paper intends to open this 'black box' and deal with the consequences that arise due to assessment of learners in particular. Also implicit within the notion of subjectification is the notion of power which will be unpacked in relation to the consequences of assessment on the learners (Hargreaves et al., 2002). In order to achieve the central argument/thesis of the paper, it would be prudent to spell out from the onset how this will be achieved. First, the paper will give a snapshot of assessment and its importance in education. Second, the paper will look into who assesses whom and what. Third, the consequences of assessment on the learners will be looked into. Fourthly, alternative ways of assessing learners will be suggested, and finally, the conclusion of the paper will follow.

What assessment is and its importance

More often than not assessment means many things to

many people and it is often conflated with evaluation. Earl (2003) observes assessment as a complex undertaking that means something different to different audiences and in different situations. Assessment is one of the concepts which have many interrelated and conflicting purposes because of its role in an educational setting. Therefore, it is important to attempt at defining the concept from different perspectives. Assessment refers to the judgement of the students' work (Taras, 2005), while evaluation refers to judgements made in regard to a course or course delivery. In the same vein, Rust (2002) defines assessment as about making a judgement, identifying the strengths and weaknesses, the good and the bad, and the right and the wrong in some cases of something. It refers to all *processes* employed by teachers to *make judgements* about the achievement of students in units of study and over a course of study. These processes include making decisions about what is relevant *evidence* for a particular purpose, how to collect and interpret the evidence and how to communicate it to intended users (students, parents, administrators and so on) (Harlen, 2005, emphasis original). On the other hand, Baehr (2007) differentiates assessment from evaluation, stating that assessment is mainly concerned with how to improve the level of quality within the learners, while evaluation is concerned with the actual level of quality of the learners. Meighan (1986) sees assessment as collection of information, on which to base judgements about learning experiences, in schools.

Despite this cacophony of definitions of the term, suffice to say, this paper will use assessment to mean judgement made about students' school work by the assessors, because judgement is implicit in all the definitions. In addition, traditional assessment which is predominantly summative is perceived as an inherently subjective process (Crossourd, 2012; Taras, 2005) as it will be shown in the third section of this paper when the notion of subjectification is articulated.

As alluded to in the previous section, educational assessment is an integral part of learning and the practice of teaching and helps improve learners' achievement/attainment (Assessment Reform Group, 2009). It is, therefore, important to articulate its importance. Briefly, traditional assessment and any other forms of assessment are important in education, for example, learning and teaching in various ways:

First, in measuring the effectiveness of instruction and learning, second, in sharing information with external stakeholders (parents, boards and state), third, to help make promotion and retention decisions, fourth, help the teacher determine the pace of classroom instruction, and last, to diagnose what individual pupils know (Rudner and Schafer, 2002, Newton, 2007; Wyatt-Smith and Cumming 2009).

Research shows that it is indisputable that assessment raises standards and achievement of learners if it is

properly executed and done by those who understand it, while it is counterproductive if not properly used (Assessment Reform Group, 2009). Amongst the issues which lead to this improvement are the following factors:

1. Providing effective feedback to pupils;
2. Actively involving pupils in their own learning;
3. Adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment;
4. Recognizing the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils, both of which are crucial influences on learning;
5. Making pupils able to assess themselves and understand how to improve.

Who assesses whom and what is assessed?

In traditional assessment especially in Lesotho, the common practice of assessment process which is accorded high recognition by all stakeholders is where teachers assess learners. The written reports, recorded cards and marked work by teachers where they make judgements about the learners are accorded high recognition. The skewed relations of power between the teacher and the learner are in most cases overlooked in the process. Also important is that the assessed is left out of the traditional assessment process. In the case of national and international examinations the assessed does not participate in the decision on what is to be assessed. The overall authority lies with the assessor, who may be the teacher or someone else whom both the teacher and the learners do not know. This in itself reifies the whole process of assessment as something done by an invisible hand that has power over both the teacher and the learner. At this level, assessment is also accorded high significance; grades and certificates are stressed with a lot of money being invested in this process, among others, by national and international examining bodies or syndicates.

What is assessed depends on who the assessor is, that is, if the assessment is school-based or done by the teachers themselves, it tends to be process-oriented, though at times like national and international examinations, it is product-oriented. A host of activities is assessed including, amongst others, reading, writing, answering questions, drawing and reasoning. In this nexus of assessment, consumers of traditional assessment are usually parents, employers and administrators.

Consequences of traditional assessment on the learners – subjectification

Human actions both overt and covert have intended and unintended consequences, so is the case with traditional assessment -summative. Traditional assessment with its

well-intended purposes as outlined in the second section of this paper has drastic unintended consequences for the learners on which it is administered/ exercised/ executed. The consequences may be either overt or covert, but when analysed from the Foucauldian point of view of subjectification or objectification they have far reaching repercussions.

Subjectification refers to a state whereby a person is turned into a subject and stripped off all human traits and treated as an object. For Foucault, for one to become subjectified, there is a nexus of power relations that exist in the whole setup, be it between two speakers, teachers and students, teachers and an institution and so on. Power in terms of Foucault is ubiquitous in that it does not rest within an individual and it is dynamic instead of being static. For power to be exercised, it has to be done on docile bodies/subject – subjectification/objectification. A docile subject does not resist power and control of the influencer who wants to modify one's behaviour - discipline (Bowdridge and Blenkinsop, 2011).

According to Foucault (1977), strict discipline separates, analyses, differentiates and carries its procedures of decomposition to the point necessary and sufficient single units. It makes individuals; it is the specific technique of power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise – objectification. There are subtle ways in which disciplinary power is exercised which, according to Foucault, are hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and examination. The three categories pervade all social institutions including schools (Foucault, 1977).

Hierarchical observation

Hierarchical observation coerces by means of observation, an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied visible (Foucault, 1977). The main objective of hierarchical observation is that the subject must be seen all the time without its realizing that it is being observed – eyes that must see without being seen. This induces self-discipline or monitoring because an individual believes that s/he is always observed.

Normalising judgement

In normalising judgement an individual has to abide by institutional norms which when broken punishment is effected until an individual realises what is acceptable. In schools learners are subjected to micro-penalty of time (punctuality/lateness), activity (inattention/lack of zeal), behaviour (disobedience/impoliteness) and speech (insolence/vulgarity). These penalty measures are meant to differentiate, hierarchize, homogenize the subjects and

exclude those who do not conform to the institutional norms – gratification and punishment.

Examination

Examination combines both hierarchical observation and normalising judgement in that individuals subjected to examination are usually under strict surveillance by the invigilator. On the other hand, the gaze of the invigilator is a normalising one in that an individual has to abide by the norms of the examination. In addition, an individual is subjectified through documentation where they can be classified, judged, differentiated and compared with other individuals. The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalising judgement. It is a normalising gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish (Foucault, 1977).

Taking up the claim further Ritzer (2007), observes that officials or those in authority use examinations as a way of observing subordinates and judging what they are doing. It is a way of checking up on subordinates and assessing what they have done by those in authority, thus determining what is and is not an adequate score. In this regard examinations are associated with schools and other related institutions such as psychiatrist offices and psychiatric hospitals as well as other workplaces (Ritzer, 2007). In this view, pupils increasingly consider an assessment as something which labels them; for them, it is a source of anxiety, with low-achievers in particular often being demoralized. According to this view, assessment feedback often has a negative impact, particularly on low-achieving students who are led to believe that they lack “ability”, and so are not able to learn (Black et al., 2004).

Alternative assessment to traditional assessment

Traditional assessment has been criticised widely as an inefficient tool for accurately assessing learners’ competencies and skills. Some of the criticisms are aptly pointed out by Dikli (2003). For Dikli (2003), traditional assessments are indirect and inauthentic, standardized, which reason they are one-shot, speed-based, and norm-referenced, single-occasion tests since they measure what learners can do at a particular time. However, test scores cannot tell about the progression of a child. Nor can they tell what particular difficulties the students may have had during the test. There is no feedback provided to learners in this type of assessment. The projects are mainly individualized and the assessment procedure is decontextualized. Most standardized tests assess only the lower-order thinking skills of the learner. Assessment often focuses on learner’s ability of memorization and recall, which are lower level of cognition skills.

Additionally, traditional assessment tools require learners to display their knowledge in a predetermined way. Although the public has been largely supportive of grading in schools, skepticism is increasing about its fairness and even its accuracy. Educational researchers and theorists have been critical of traditional grading practices for quite some time. In terms of measurement theory, grades are highly suspect. Why? Because teachers consider many factors other than academic achievement when they assign grades; teachers weigh assessments differently, and they misinterpret single scores on assessments to represent performances on a wide range of skills and abilities. In brief traditional assessment sorts, classifies and rewards/punishes the learners and its authenticity is in doubt especially in the 21st century.

The turn of the 21st century necessitates a rethink of how the modernist project of traditional assessment in education is looked at for various reasons: the modernist premise that science will bring progress and alleviate social problems has since proved to be an unachievable utopia (Harrison, 2004). The time of universal truths or grand narratives has been questioned from almost all the quarters of our social world. The landscape of the 21st century is a fractured one whereby, universal laws of one social aspect ‘fits all’ no longer applies. Reality is no longer reified as being out there to be found because it is socially constructed. The particular and subjective are now more important than the general and objective. Therefore, there has to be a paradigm shift from the modernist project to something new. The polemic of our time and the need for paradigm shift is summed up by Wyatt-Smith and Cumming (2009: vii) thus: ‘Post-modernism’, instead, is recognising the increasingly fractured nature of society and the limitations of science to provide solutions to the great issues of our time, such as the sustainability of the planet, poverty and social cohesion. For many, the certainties of modernism have been replaced by post-modern doubts about the possibility of progress. Recognition of the fallibilities of science has brought with it an increased recognition of the importance of diversity and subjectivity. Changes in the nature of work, globalisation, the information revolution and the increasingly social nature of contemporary challenges also suggest different priorities for education systems. These will in turn require different priorities for assessment practices.

Therefore, assessment should shift from the modernist tradition/thought and its tendencies of concentrating on product (summative). Rather it should be process-oriented so as to address unique concerns, thereby providing unique solutions of the 21st century.

The values of orderliness, reliability, predictability and rationality which are rule-bound, mechanistic and instrumental need to be reconsidered, and/or be replaced with alternative forms of educational assessment in any modern learning.

What alternative forms of assessment of learning?

Debate on alternative assessment amongst scholars shows that there is no consensus on what alternative assessment is. For some scholars, alternative assessment is a generic concept for all assessment methods which are different from traditional assessment. Other scholars claim that there are three types of alternative assessment though with some variations: assessment for learning, authentic assessment and performance-based assessment which are alternatives to traditional assessment (Dikli, 2003). However, scholars advocating for alternative assessment are agreeable on what is not alternative assessment, its forms and strategies (Baker, 2010). Irrespective of their names, all forms of alternative assessment are informed by the constructivist view of knowledge and learning. Brooks and Brooks (1993) outline five overarching principles of constructivist pedagogy:

1. Posing problems of emerging relevance to learners;
2. Structuring learning around 'big ideas' or primary concepts;
3. Seeking and valuing students' points of view;
4. Adapting curriculum to address students' suppositions; and
5. Assessing students' learning in the context of teaching.

In constructivist classrooms, students learn from active participation and have opportunities to explore their own ideas through discourse, debate, and inquiry. Instructors assume a facilitator's role and students assume responsibility for their learning. Behaviours and skills are not the goals of instruction; rather, the focus is on concept development, deep understanding, and construction of active learner reorganization (Brooks, 1993). Unfortunately, traditional assessment does not evaluate this form of instruction (Anderson, 1998).

Assessment for Learning – AFL

The first alternative form of assessment different from traditional assessment is assessment for learning. This is a type of formative assessment which is process oriented rather than product oriented. "AFL is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there" (Assessment Reform Group 2002; Isaacs, 2013). AFL is focused on the learner and the feedback given by the assessor is meant to help the learner develop and grow. The metacognition of the learner is the target. It can therefore be summarized succinctly thus;

Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning. It thus differs

from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competence. An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information that teachers and their students can use as feedback in assessing themselves and one another and in modifying the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes "formative assessment" when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs (Black et al., 2004).

David Hargreaves described Assessment for Learning as 'a teaching strategy of very high leverage' (2004) because it assess high order cognitive skills of the learners instead of the low order cognitive skills. In addition, in assessment for learning, teachers use assessment as an investigative tool to find out as much as they can about what their students know and can do, and what confusions, preconceptions, or gaps they might have so as to scaffold the learners to a high level/ proximal level of development. The following characteristics of AFL point to this:

1. It is embedded in a view of teaching and learning of which it is an essential part. Assessment for learning is not something extra or 'bolted on' that a teacher has to do. Pupil learning is the principal aim of schools and assessment for learning aims to provide pupils with the skills and strategies for taking the next steps in their learning;

Involves sharing learning goals with pupils. If pupils understand the main purposes of their learning and what they are aiming for, they are more likely to grasp what they need to do to achieve it;

Aims to help pupils to know and recognise the standards that they are aiming for. Learners need to be clear about exactly what they have to achieve in order to progress. They should have access to the criteria that will be used to judge this, and be shown examples or models where other learners have been successful. Pupils need to understand what counts as 'good work';

Involves pupils in peer and self-assessment. Ultimately, learners must be responsible for their own learning; the teacher cannot do that for them. So pupils must be actively involved in the process and need to be encouraged to see for themselves how they have progressed in their learning and what it is they need to do to improve. Teachers need to encourage pupils to review their work critically and constructively;

Provides feedback, which leads to pupils recognising their next steps and how to take them. Feedback should be about the qualities of the work with specific advice on what needs to be done in order to improve. Pupils need to be given the time to act on advice and make decisions about their work, rather than being the passive recipients of teachers' judgements;

Involves both teacher and pupil in reviewing and

reflecting on assessment data (information). Pupils need to have opportunities to communicate their evolving understanding and to act on the feedback they are given. The interaction between teacher and pupil is an important element of developing understanding and promoting learning;

7. It is underpinned by confidence that every student can improve. Poor feedback can lead to pupils believing that they lack 'ability' and are not able to learn. Pupils will only invest effort in a task if they believe they can achieve something (Assessment Reform Group, 1999).

Assessment Reform Group (1999) further asserts that assessment for learning can be actualised in practice through the following ways:

1. Observing pupils – this includes listening to how they describe their work and their reasoning;
2. Questioning, using open questions, phrased to invite pupils to explore their ideas and reasoning;
3. Setting tasks in a way which requires pupils to use certain skills or apply ideas;
4. Asking pupils to communicate their thinking through drawings, artefacts, actions, role play, concept mapping, as well as writing;
5. Discussing words and how they are being used.

Therefore, AFL calls for a lot of planning on the part of the assessor so that the assessed could understand what is expected of them, how they are going to be assessed, how they will receive feedback, how they will take part in assessing their learning and be helped to make progress. AFL is a reflective and interactive process on the part of both the assessor and the assessed.

Authentic assessment

Authentic assessment is a form of assessment focused on the evaluation of knowledge and skills of learners in the real world. It does not encourage remote learning and passive test-taking. A variety of methods are used in order to make assessment as contextualized as possible. The decisions to assess is collaborative, that is, between the assessor and the assessed and it is a continuous process instead of a once-off as is the case with traditional assessment methods. Quigley (2012) defines authentic assessment as:

A concept that includes measurement of knowledge that is significant and meaningful; it tends to focus on complex or contextualized tasks, enabling students to demonstrate their competency in a more 'authentic' setting.

For an assessment to be authentic, the context, purpose, audience and constraints of the test should connect in some way to real world situations and problems. The

learners' have to construct responses instead of choosing or selecting a response. Direct observation of students' behaviour on the tasks has to be done. Learners input in the construction of the assessment tool must be considered. To understand better what authentic assessment entails (Quigley, 2012; Joyner and Elliot, 2002) contrasts it with traditional assessment thus:

Attributes of TA and AA

Traditional	Authentic
Selecting a Response	Performing a Task
Contrived Recall/Recognition	Real-life
Instructor-structured	Student-structured
Indirect Evidence	Direct Evidence

Winograd and Perkins (1996) say authentic assessment is an assessment that occurs continually in a context of a meaningful environment and reflects actual and worthwhile learning experiences that can be documented through observation, anecdotal records, journals, logs, work samples, conferences, portfolios, writing, discussions, experiments, presentations, exhibits, projects and other methods. While Darling-Hammond (1996) and Oakes (2003) believe that authentic assessments can more closely capture the richness of what students understand about how they can apply this knowledge than can testing for 'bits and pieces' with conventional assessment procedures.

Performance-based assessment

Performance-based assessment is an alternative assessment; it "requires students to construct a response, create a product, or demonstrate application of knowledge" in authentic context. Students are required to create a product or formulate a response that demonstrates proficiency in a skill or understanding of a process or a concept. Typically, performance assessments are "authentic" in that they are structured around real-life problems or situations. The role of the assessor is to observe the assessee and thereafter hold conference with the assessee. The assessee is given a chance to reflect on the activity and assess oneself on the criteria developed collaboratively with the assessor. The assessee's peers are also involved in the assessment process and use the criteria collaboratively designed with their assessor. Performance-based assessment is dialogic and interactive in nature (Bain, 2010) because the assessor listens to the voice of the assessed. They mediate and negotiate the outcome of the assessment process because they are not product-oriented and process-oriented.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to trace the origins of assessment in education from the enlightenment era characterised by the rise of reason. We, thus, have articulated the importance of assessment as an integral part of learning and teaching in any education. Drawing on the premise of assessment in education as one of the centres of diffuse power, we have further explored the main role players which include those at the delivery end and the receiving end of assessment. From the Foucaultian perspective on the concept of subjectification, we argue that education through assessment (like other social services centres) plays a significant role in the process of socialisation and societal control. On the face of it, we, therefore, suggest a review of the traditional assessment because of its significant effects on learners. In the final analysis, we, therefore, propose alternative forms of assessment so as to make up for and/or complement the longstanding traditional forms of assessment.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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