

Accountability in Learning and Feedback: Implications for Educational Assessment

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Abstract

Assessment is regarded as the process of obtaining, sorting, arranging and analyzing data that is used for making decisions about students' curricular, programmes and educational policy. Classroom assessment therefore helps in providing useful information to optimize learning. This paper revealed the current practices of assessment in schools, pointing out the unintended outcomes towards accountability and feedback. It tried to re-engineer the current practices in assessment in order to catch up with the global trend in education through the provision of proper accountability in learning and feedback. It was recommended among other things, that training in test construction and designing of instruments for assessment of non- cognitive skills for teachers at all education level is necessary, to enable them foster the development of complex learning outcomes like self-confidence; team working; managing others; critical analysis; being able to work under pressure; and imagination/creativity that will make assessment relevant and students employable in this age of knowledge economy.

Keywords: Accountability, learning, feedback, implications, educational assessment

Introduction

Education is the development of human potential to enhance survival of the individual and his contribution to societal growth and fulfillment. It is regarded as the most important instrument of change in any society, especially in this fast changing world. The awareness and demand for education have made the society to plan for accelerated development as well as expansion of opportunities in recent times. Very often, it is expected that an increase in the quality of assessment would lead to the quality of certificates awarded to students.

Individual differences do exist among students; therefore, no single curriculum exposure or instructional method can be equally suitable for all of them. Similarly, no one assessment can be appropriate for all. In this context, one of the questions that come to mind among other things is: Are the teachers as well as various examination bodies assessing students accurately, at the various levels of educational system (primary, secondary and Tertiary)? The issue of discipline, integrity, hard work and moral standard concerning assessment procedure in recent years are nowhere to be found. The current practice is how much you can grab or steal from the system, not what you can contribute to make the system work and efficient. Shepard (1999) found that much of the learning that occurs in the classroom around the world is superficial learning. Facts, rules and formulae are memorized, but often, this information is not connected in a coherent framework that would allow students to make sense of it and to use it in new situations simply to acquire facts.

Accountability and Feedback

Accountability in school is the process of evaluating school performance on the basis of students' performance measures. Accountability results focus on how schools are improving in

their year-to-year academic growth. The standard of students' achievement, both in curriculum and co-curriculum activities focus on school based evaluation and accountability (Inyang, 2015). Therefore, accountability means gathering information so that schools will make good educational decision about programmes, policies and resources.

Assessment traditionally used by individual teachers to monitor student learning and to provide a basis for assigning grades, has always been a critical component of the education system (Glaser & Silver, 1994). Assessments generate information and, depending on the nature and use of the information obtained, can play multiple roles in education while accountability involves using some of this information to generate incentives to validate or change the behaviors of students and educators. Holistically, assessments and accountability policies constitute a third channel through which education reform may flow. Compared to other vehicles for change, such as long-term professional development, assessment is an attractive strategy to policy makers, since tests are relatively inexpensive to construct and administer. The pervasiveness, political importance, and potential influence of assessment on student learning make it a potent tool for change. Moreover, assessment can be externally mandated and implemented rapidly, yielding visible results (Linn, 2000).

Assessments provide a systematic way to inform students, teachers, parents, policy makers, and the public about students' performance. The reporting of test results represents the simplest form of accountability. Stronger incentives for educational change are provided by accountability mechanisms that use information from assessments to make consequential decisions about students, teachers, or schools. Assessment and accountability policies can provide clear direction for teachers and principals in terms of students' outcomes and can become a positive impetus for instructional and curricular changes (Popham, 2000). When assessments are aligned with learning goals, accountability systems can motivate classroom instruction to focus on those outcomes (Stecher et al, 1998). Thus, policy makers and educators view assessment linked with accountability as a powerful strategy for ensuring that all students are held to the same set of high standards (Olson, 2001).

Assessments can drive change at different levels of the system, for example, by informing the public about the overall state of achievement or by informing those who make decisions about teacher certification, allocation of resources, or rewards and sanctions for schools. Tests based on large, statistically selected national samples, such as the West African School Certificate Examination), are designed to provide a national overview of Nigerian students' achievement over time. (FGN, 2014), often spurring school and national efforts targeted at reform. Assessments are designed to serve particular purposes, and assessment experts warn that a test designed for one purpose is unlikely to be appropriate for an entirely different purpose.

The use of Accountability in assessments is to remove barriers and creates pathways for the Nigerian students to receive an excellent education and to get accurate feedback. Support is provided through the design and administration of the assessments. Its goal is to measure students' core knowledge, skills and abilities and to hold schools and teachers accountable for students' feedback.

Assessment and Accountability

In Nigeria, assessment is conducted both at school and national levels. At the school level, teachers perform different assessment functions such as developing instruments, administration and scoring of instruments, operating continuous assessment, utilizing assessment feedback for instructional improvement, reporting students' achievement to parents and other stakeholders,

keeping continuous assessment records, diagnosing students' learning difficulties, and initiating remedial activities (Ugodulunwa, 2003). For proper accountability and feedback to stakeholders, these functions should be done credibly. At the national level, assessment is in form of high-stake public examinations, where students are assessed for selection and certification by different examination bodies such as the National Examinations Council (NECO) etc. These bodies perform adequate assessment procedures as well as presentation of results to award committee before the release of results. Assessing students for certification and / or placement therefore, has to target towards the entire population of pupils at the particular level of interest. This fact is critical in the use of a particular assessment procedure.

Assessment that will lead to proper accountability and feedback should be made to strike a balance between formative and summative assessment in evaluation. Striggins (2002) argued that formative assessment or assessment for learning serves the purpose of helping students learn more, while summative assessment or assessment of learning can reflect only general increases or decreases in learning on terminal or annual basis. Summative assessment can be used for taking high-stake decisions on performance of students but cannot be used for taking daily or weekly instructional decisions by students and teachers as learning process continues. It can neither diagnose students' needs during learning nor provide parents with information on how to support their children. Therefore, for proper accountability and feedback, teachers should try to strike a balance between the two forms of assessment.

Furthermore, assessment should involve real-life problem-solving skills considering the situation of the present day Nigeria (Obioma, 2005). The new direction is assessment of higher-order thinking skills such as divergent thinking, application of knowledge and skills to solving real-life problems and complex abilities such as self-management skills, communication skills, team working, critical analysis and self-directed inquiry. Accountability implies that the traditional practices of enhancing students' scores should be replaced with assessment that is inquiry and activity-based, student-centered and open-ended in order to achieve laudable feedback.

In addition, the use of computer-based and online assessment procedure is needed in dealing with large classes. Computer-based testing (CBT) requires students to read-test items on the computer screen, select answers with the mouse or keyboard, send them out and log out on completion of the test. Online assessment has opened up new possibilities for providing interactive assessment tasks that are learning experiences, improving quality and rate of feedback, among others. It also provides opportunities for students to submit written assignments, do assessment anywhere and help teachers save time and effort in assessing large classes (Wosyanju, 2005). Even though, there are lots of challenges involved in the use of these technologies for assessment, there is still need for enhancement and to incorporate ideas of subject knowledge along with 21st century skills in assessment for proper accountability and feedback to stakeholders in education.

Another area to achieve effective accountability and feedback in assessment is in test development. The pendulum swing in test development techniques is from Classical Test Theory (CTT) to Item Response Theory (IRT). The CTT holds that, the observed score in any measurement of a trait is the sum of true score and error score. According to Nworgu(2010), in IRT, items are calibrated without reference to the sample but in terms of the trait level or ability level of an individual referred to as theta and item parameter estimates that is discrimination power, item difficulty and guessing parameter. The applicability of IRT in developing better test items, item bias, differential item functioning, item banking and tailored testing has been stressed(Nenty,2004; Umobong, 2004; Nworgu, 2010). In the light of the advantages of IRT over

CTT, it is evident that the use of IRT will help to resolve problems associated with test development, thereby making headway for proper accountability and feedback.

Challenges of accountability in assessment

There is no gain saying that there are numerous threats to full implementation of accountability in Nigerian school system. Assessment is an integral part of teaching, therefore without full accountability of instructional objectives, half-baked graduates who will fail to transfer learning outside the school environment would be produced; having failed to learn in school or are victims of failed assessment (Bassey, 2015).

Despite the fact that we have all these objectives to make assessment laudable in schools, the state of schools today is discouraging. Schools are characterized by inadequate staffing and dilapidated infrastructure, poor remuneration of staff, incessant strikes, corruption, hooliganism and unwillingness of the students to learn.

Regrettably, just as the effort of government has not attained acceptable levels for a corruption-free society, so has examination fraud persisted in schools today, in spite of the efforts of well-meaning purveyors of education (Bassey, 2015). Most worrisome is the observation that, attempts by the government to implement instructional accountability compelled teachers, especially at the lower school levels to resort to acts of deliberate inflation of continuous assessment scores. What is also irritating is when teachers serve as agents of examination malpractice by telling the learners the answers expected in the tests. An interaction with the teachers shows that they do this to escape the envisaged wrath of the employer to sanction teachers whose learners fail to pass prescribed examinations. These facts militate against proper accountability in Nigerian schools.

Conclusion

The paper highlighted assessment as the bedrock for school accountability and feedback. Avenues for credible assessment which would enable teachers to make adequate accountability were evaluated in the paper. It should be noted that these laudable suggestions will not be achieved if the challenges as enumerated were not tackled by the stakeholders.

Suggestions

In order to achieve proper accountability and feedback, using assessment as a tool in our school system. The following suggestions were made:

1. There is need for training in test construction and designing of instruments for assessment of non- cognitive skills for teachers at all levels to enable them foster the development of complex learning outcomes that will make assessment relevant and students employable in this age of knowledge economy.
2. Strict adherence to conditions and guidelines for administration of examinations, capacity building, adequate remuneration of teachers, and regular monitoring would improve accountability process and feedback mechanisms.
3. Training and retraining of teachers on the use of new technologies for instance, on how to use IRT, Blog and Multilog software for calibrating scales.
4. Modern techniques of assessment such as formative, authentic, computer-based and on-line assessment should be used in schools to enhance accountability and feedback.
5. Government should ensure regular training and re-training of teachers at all levels to be accountable in all aspects as far as assessment is concerned.

6. Teachers should devise a method of receiving feedback from the learners through improving the quality of classroom teaching and learning.

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