

Guidance and Counselling and the Quest for Effective Continuous Assessment as A Tool for Functional Universal Basic Education (Ube) in Nigeria

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Abstract

Continuous assessment is an aspect of educational assessment and at UBE level it is regarded as the key form of assessment. The concept, features and implementation strategies/operational modalities point to its efficacy in guaranteeing effective schooling if implemented with a good measure of professionalism. It was acknowledged that an appraisal of teacher education curriculum in Nigeria provides for appreciable understanding of the implementation of continuous assessment but that this has not been reflected in the quality of educational practice and that is partly why we have the problem of stay-ins. The role of Guidance and Counselling with emphasis on the counselling oriented attribute was examined and it was made clear that testing and non-testing techniques should be used with a view to promoting learning at all times. And that any tendency of use of test either at the level of item generation, test administration, measurement and interpretation to achieve any objective other than the development of the learner is antithetical to school practice.

Introduction

The UBE Act 2004 provides that progression through the phases of the nine years of primary school and Junior Secondary school levels of education shall be automatic (FRN, 2004), implying that no child shall repeat a class on account of measurement of academic underachievement possibly on the strength of assumed instructional effectiveness of the programme coupled with responsible implementation of continuous assessment. The UBE Act stipulates that assessment shall be through continuous assessment. This means that learners will progress cohorts through the nine years of basic education. The rationale behind this policy of educational assessment for UBE is well documented but the reality suggests that the assumptions are not being actualized. This is evident in the growing concern about the integrity of teacher-made tests and measurement in Nigeria. However it is important to state that continuous assessment if scrupulously implemented possess enough guarantee for the desired functional education that UBE has been designed to achieve. This paper is an attempt to explain how school counselling programme especially as it relates to the role of Guidance and counseling in the implementation of continuous assessment can be achieved and invariably add to the quality of curriculum delivery at the UBE level. It is important to state that credible educational assessment is an essential requirement for effective schooling, not only in the sense of selection but in terms of knowing the learner and his context for purposes of designing appropriate instructional activities that is responsive and sensitive to individual differences.

Concept of continuous assessment

The concept of continuous assessment has been substantially documented but the operationisation in terms of reflecting the understanding in the implementation is still a challenge and that partly accounts for the poor implementation.

The National Steering Committee on Continuous Assessment in Nigeria schools regard continuous assessment as a method of ascertaining what pupils gain from schooling in terms of knowledge, industry and character development, taking into account all their performances in test, assignments, projects and other educational activities during a given period of the students' course (Obe, 1980 & Olayinka, 1993)

Yoloye (1984) defined continuous assessment as a method of evaluating the progress and the achievement of students in educational institutions. It aims to get the truest possible picture of each student's ability to the fullest. It is a method whereby the final grading of students takes into account in a systematic way of their whole performance during a given period of schooling.

Ezewu and Okoye (1982) defined continuous assessment as a systematic and objective process of determining the extent of student's performance in all expected changes in his or her behavior from the day he embarks upon a course of study in a continuous and progressive manner to the end of such study and a judicious accumulation of all pieces of information derived from this purpose with a view to using them to guide and shape the student in his learning from time to time and to serve as bases for important decisions about the learner.

Continuous assessment is one of the innovations that came with the introduction of the 6-3-3-4 education system. It is meant to correct some of the inadequacies of the once- for-all examinations. Such weaknesses according to Okunrotifa in Obiako (1989), Yoloye (1984) and Oladunni (2000) included:

- i. Lack of diagnostic and guidance/counselling propensity

- ii. Creation of emotional problems
- iii. High failure rate
- iv. High level of examination malpractice
- v. Heavy dependence on rote learning

The advantage of continuous assessment over the “one-shot” terminal or sessional examinations is well documented. Hassan and Adeyanju (1998) observed that a system which to some extent involves the classroom teacher in the assessment of students is better than a system which excludes him. Jatto (1996) discussed the following advantages of continuous assessment:

- Provide a more valid and reliable assessment of the student’s overall ability and performance
- Enable teachers to be more flexible and innovative in their teaching
- Provide basis for the teacher to improve his instructional methodology
- Reduce or minimize examination malpractice

Operationally the concept and bases of continuous assessment provides adequate guarantee for meaningful evaluation of learning at UBE level. But the question that we are trying to answer is that why is it that many products of UBE especially the ones graduating from the public schools in rural areas and from the urban poor collectivities are barely able to show evidence of learning that commensurate the academic developmental tasks or expectations of the various stages of schooling in spite of the theoretical credibility of continuous assessment as illustrated in the features of the mode of assessment. The thesis of this paper is that if the features of continuous are simply reflected in the implementation, it is capable of guaranteeing good evaluation that will promote learning and eradicate waste in our educational system. It is important to state here that if a child passes through the nine years of UBE and cannot perform task meant for children of their age who have gone to school, then it is a waste in educational investment and Fafunwa (1983) called it “drop in”. He described the drop-in phenomenon as a situation where children who enter the school system, stay in throughout but gain little from the course and pass out as “failed” or “unsuccessful” as will be evident in his attempt to face challenges appropriate for his post-UBE stage.

Features of Continuous Assessment

Ezewu and Okoye in Uwakwe (1991) reported that continuous assessments are usually characterized as being:

- Systematic
- Comprehensive
- Cumulative
- Guidance oriented

Olayinka (1993) examined some conceptualizations of continuous assessment such as Hoste and Bloomfield (1975), Obe (1980) Ipaye (1982) and Yoloye (1984) and came up with items that are similar to that of Uwakwe but added elements like:

- ✓ Diagnostic in place of guidance oriented
- ✓ Formative
- ✓ Prognostic and
- ✓ Summative

In Olayinka’s discourse of the diagnostic attribute, he said that it is formative and guidance oriented. He explained that the areas of strength are communicated with a view to helping the child strengthen them further, and where he is weak, he will be helped to analyze these with the help of the guidance counsellor so that some remedial programmes can be mapped out for him (Olayinka 1993).

Umoh (2004) in an attempt to explain the diagnostic attribute of continuous assessment said that weaknesses of students can be diagnosed and monitored so that intervention strategies might be brought to remediate the weaknesses. Umoh added that the strong points of students can be strengthened using appropriate reinforcement principles.

Apart from the direct statement of the Guidance oriented attribute of continuous assessment and its near or close conceptual equivalent, that is, diagnoses; it should be appreciated that other features such as the prognostic and the formative are closely related to school counseling functions which cumulatively promote adjustment within the context of challenges associated to school life.

Role of Guidance and Counselling in the implementation of effective continuous assessment

Guidance and Counselling as an educational service and a component of school practice emphasizes individual differences in handling learners. Educational assessment is critical in determining the uniqueness of learners. Also the concept of learner-centered curriculum delivery will amount to nothing if educational assessment is not properly implemented by ensuring that challenges of all learners are reasonably provided for. Schools have a responsibility to ensure that all children learn. It should provide all children optimum development that is compatible with their genetic and environmental data. Counselling possesses the capacity to enable learners have

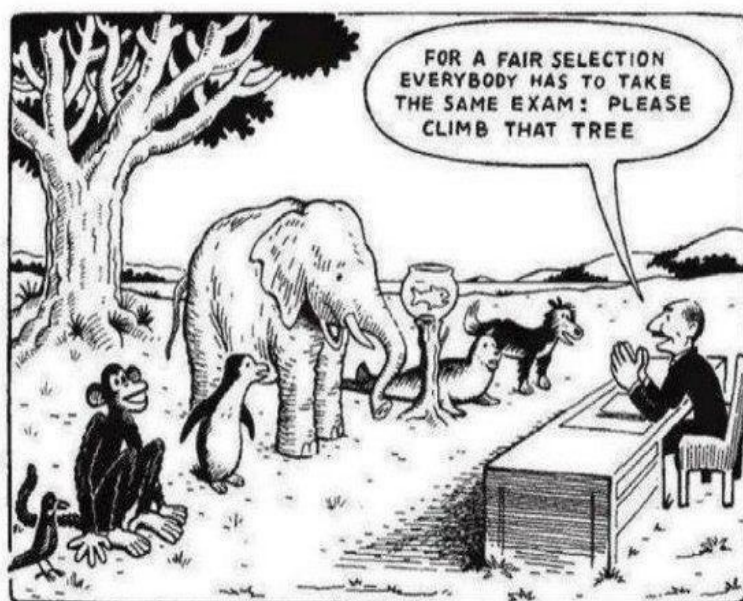
knowledge of personal characteristics (which have implication for learning styles, aptitude, achievement level etc) and to situate learners within appropriate learning contexts. It is important to know that if learning context is appropriate, learners are most likely to succeed. This agrees with the position of the behaviourists who believe in the overwhelming influence of environment on human development. The exaggerated optimism of J. B. Watson about the influence of environment should inspire teachers and counsellors about the need for appropriateness of learning context. He said:

Give me a dozen healthy infants, well formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I will guarantee to take any at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select – doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant, chief, and yes even beggar man – and thief regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations and race of his ancestor (Watson in Shaffer, 1999: 39)

Some Counselling inspired practices that relate to effective continuous assessment include:

Generation of appropriate test items. Continuous assessment items are largely teacher- made tests. And the quality of test lies in ensuring that such tests possess the psychometric properties of validity, reliability and usability. Also management of individual differences in instructional procedure should necessarily extend to continuous assessment to avoid test bias against well-known legitimate differences in learning styles, aptitude, socio-economic background etc. Einstein's illustration of implications of individual differences on tests and measurement is instructive:

TEST ITEM-SENSITIVITY



everybody is a genius. but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.

{Albert Einstein}

Figure 1: Appropriateness of test item-sensitivity in the context of legitimate individual differences. An adaptation from Professor Onwuka's "child online protection"

In generating test items, it is important that teachers know age-appropriate academic tasks that aggregates to the terminal educational competences of the educational level. Proper understanding of this age-appropriate academic task, a derivation from Robert Havighurst developmental task enables teachers to determine cognitive wellness in terms of deficits or richness which makes for proper designs of instructional procedure for individual adjustment.

Administration of continuous assessment. Testing in Nigerian schools is often characterized by anxiety, a culture of supervision that distances learners from the teachers/supervisors as if tests are designed to sort out

students who are able from those who are not. This is antithetical to a policy of education for all. Continuous assessment test have the capacity to identify areas of difficulties of learners to enable teachers provide timely and appropriate remedial exercises. In other words, continuous assessment should promote learning and this should be clearly conveyed to the learner in deed. This requires good understanding of robust instructional strategies and adaptability on the part of all agents of curriculum implementation. Continuous assessment contexts i.e. the testing environment should be ideal in terms of sitting arrangement, supervision devoid of threats and more importantly the context should be therapeutic. The essence is to provide opportunity for learners/test-takers to reveal themselves for purposes like placement, analysis of learning deficits/challenges as basis for instructional strategy etc. The process and objective of the administration of continuous assessment should be developmental and not humiliation. And this should be conveyed in the art of testing.

It is also important that we put in place a testing culture that is nationally comparable in sophistication; otherwise we shall be introducing an element of discrimination across socio-economic divide. Test sophistication is a term applied to an individual's level of knowledge in test-taking skills (Whiston, 2005). Test sophistication is not related to content but rather to the format of the tests and the skills required to understand test format. For example, the introduction of computer based test for all testees in the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB) has the tendency to widen the gap in the performance of children across socio-economic divide. We also need to understand the difference between coaching and education. Coaching according to Whiston (2005) involves training or practice on questions that are the same as or similar to the items on the test. The purpose is to help the test taker to do well on the test, not necessarily to learn the content. Education in the opinion of Whiston occurs when the domain is covered more broadly; with the intent of helping the test takers learn the content. It is observable in Nigeria that learners from model and private schools are generally more test-wise than the conventional public schools. This is because testing culture of the private/model schools bear great correlation to terminal national examinations and this might be one of the reasons why these schools tend to perform better in national examinations such as the National Common Entrance Examinations.

Measurement of non-cognitive learner attributes

Human attributes that impact on growth and development vary and are of significance requiring proper appraisal. The dominant type of continuous assessment test in many Nigerian schools is understandably achievement test, but it is instructive to reflect in our school practice other forms of measurement tools suitable for ascertaining human constructs such as motivation, interest, self-concept, self-efficacy, social skills valence, career awareness/preference etc. All these are critical to school adjustment and should be factored into the cumulative profile of learners for proper placement in instructional contexts. There are standardized test inventories for use for this purpose, but the expertise requires choosing the appropriate one, administering and interpreting the tests. Counselors remain the most visible personnel in our school implementation guideline that can facilitate the process.

The guidance orientedness of continuous assessment.

Anikweze (2010) said that the Guidance-oriented attribute of continuous assessment suggests all collected evidence should be used for guiding the learner and counselling him/her on strategies to overcome identified deficiencies and learning problems. This means that error analysis in learner's work is part of the teacher's responsibility in the implementation of continuous assessment. Simple operationalisation of the guidance-oriented attribute of continuous assessment will guarantee learning for virtually every person that attends school. But this will require ideal learner/teacher ratio, a well trained and motivated teaching force and a counseling inspired school setting. In Nigeria we have for a long time taken for granted per unit school effectiveness and the implications are all around us. We have many citizens with written evidence of going to school in the form of certificates without commensurate developmental or age-appropriate competencies/capacities - A scenario of schooling without the substance/evidence of learning. The Guidance-oriented continuous assessment attribute will remarkably ameliorate this anomaly in school practice.

Use of statistics for decision making

The importance of statistics in taking decisions on the basis of test scores cannot be overstressed. Analysis of test scores is critical to effective implementation of continuous assessment. This is evident in the fact that teachers during pre-service training at various levels of our educational system beginning with the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) are usually exposed to statistical analysis of test scores. But the implementation of continuous assessment in many schools shows that teachers merely fill-in test scores in the continuous assessment column to fulfill statutory requirement. But imagine the clarity and revelations that will come with simple statistics such as frequencies, tabulation, graphical representations, central tendencies such as the mean, standard deviation and measures of dispersions etc. Also the quality of test can be enhanced through statistics if we can ascertain test elements such as item-analysis, item difficult, item discrimination and the like. The importance of question bank to develop tests for specific purposes based on teacher's experience of test development is virtually taken for granted and the attendant benefits roundly compromised. It is time for schools to have an agency that constantly and consistently advocates and monitors these simple practices that add value to school effectiveness via implementation of continuous assessment.

Conclusion

The implementation of continuous assessment has shown the recurring decimal of a circle of good planning without conscientious approach to implementation. Even when the assumptions, the principles/attributes and the operational modalities are clear and measurable, we keep doing what is not giving us the desired result. Continuous assessment should be implemented bearing in mind the counselling implications in terms of:

- A concept of continuous assessment that emphasizes immediate appropriate instructional placement rather than suspended remediation usually occasioned by pass/fail phenomena at the end of the programme.
- using assessment tools for the good of learners on all occasions,
- ensuring testing environment is therapeutic and standardized,
- the tasks imputed in test items are appropriate in the context of the expected competencies of the educational programme. Emphasis on criterion-referenced test.
- measurement made objective through use of marking guide/scheme for all tests
- analysis of test scores via appropriate statistics used as basis for counseling (i.e. remediation, enrichment and overall instructional planning to guarantee education for all)

The policy of education for all as contained in the UBE is strategic, appropriate and roundly achievable on the premise that we pay attention to the operationalisation of concepts, principles and practices that goes with school practice. Counselling has been acknowledged in the National policy on Education as a school service, it is also a compulsory component of teacher education programme in Nigeria, yet the impact of education delivery is far below expectation of any educational setting that has minimum counseling input. It is important to acknowledge that in Nigeria, there are other professionals who have the expertise in testing related challenges, but their role has not been formally acknowledged in the National Policy on Education and their absence in Nigeria school practice unfortunately obvious. While we await their recognition, it is important that counselors are provided the professional latitude to impact on our educational practice.

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