

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Carrying out Classroom Assessment in Upper Primary Social Science

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ABSTRACT

The study explored teachers' practices of classroom assessment in Social Science and their current practices. Explicitly, the study aimed at gaining an understanding as to how teachers assess in their classrooms and the challenges they face while carrying out assessment. A qualitative study was carried out using questionnaires and interviews. A total of sixty participants were selected purposefully to gain data for this study. The study revealed that that upper primary Social Science teacher faces a lot of challenges while carrying out classroom assessment.

Keywords: Classroom Assessment, Social Science, Syllabus, In-service, Content Load, Remedial, Policy Directives, Content, Knowledge

Introduction

As early as the 19th Century, academics have argued on the nature and purpose of Social Studies (Butts, 1989; Evans, 2004; Saxe, 1991; Thornton, 2005). The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS; 1994) defined *social studies* and its purpose as follows:

“Social studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an inter-dependent world”.

(NCSS Task Force on Standards for Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies, 1993, p. 213)

Social Studies is taught from pre-school to Year 12 in schools (NCSS; 1994) and Fiji is no exception. In the early part of the 20th Century, it was expected that students memorize information from the textbooks and recite in class. The curriculum was organized around the topics and questions which needed to be answered by students. Later, Progressive Education came into place which stipulated that students needed to learn to think critically, experiment or try new ideas and look for solutions. It further stated that Social Studies needed to be more activity based so that better types of assessments could be used.

The NCSS (2010) further stipulated that students should be asking more questions, doing more research and need to be engaged in more authentic work and the classroom assessment would need to correspond to these authentic activities. Thus, when it came to learning, teaching and assessment, schools seem to be confused and, therefore, not supporting learning to its optimum.

Assessment in Social Science Classrooms

When looking specifically at assessment in Social Studies, Toretz & Claunch-Lebsack (2014) have highlighted that there is an enormous amount of studies on testing, assessment and evaluation but hardly studies have been done in regards to assessment in Social Studies classrooms.

For teaching to be effective, the teaching content, teaching strategies, relevant teaching tools and resources and assessment should be interlinked with each other. Bryant and Driscoll, (1998); McMillan, Myran and Workman, (2002) and Stiggins, (2002) have all reiterated that classroom assessment has become a vital component of effective learning and teaching. Unfortunately, the purpose of assessment in most classrooms has not been serving the purpose. The assessment framework highlighted by Shepard (2011) described that “assessment plays an integral role in teaching and learning while Wolf, Bixby, Glenn and Gardner (1991) recommended that “apart from standardized assessment, alternative forms of assessment would allow students to think rather than merely possessing information”. Meuwissen (2013) and Stiggins (2002) have further stated that a lot of teachers are still under the misconception that assessment is all about tests and its consequences are acknowledged “while some teachers are simultaneously designing and sustaining classroom assessment methods that embody the social-participatory nature of learning and reflect research on effective practice”

Assessment in Social Science classrooms needs to embrace the goals of the national Social Science curriculum which includes “developing knowledge of national and global identities, the diversity of its land and people, their cultural and environmental heritage, and their political, legal and economic systems” Fiji National Curriculum Framework, (2013). Hence, the whole idea of assessment in Social Science is to allow students to become active learners, critical thinkers, active investigators, wise decision-makers, putting their learning into practice and the modern day students should easily be able to adapt and adopt to changes. In addition, assessment in Social Science should also “inform teachers and students” (Levstik & Barton, 2011), promote the learning and teaching process, should be of various types and needs to be on-going and are linked to the national goals of Social Science.

Methodology

This research used the qualitative paradigm and was phenomenological in nature as questionnaires and in-depth interviews were conducted to collect the data. A total of sixty participants were purposefully selected as the requirements of the study needed teachers who were teaching upper primary Social Science. Out of the sixty participants selected for the study, forty were given the questionnaire and twenty went through in-depth semi-structured interview. All the participants were in-service teachers who were teaching in the various primary schools in the Western Division. The data was analysed using a low tech method.

Interview

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to gain the narrative data. All interviews were audio recorded and the transcribed. Prior permission was taken from the teachers before the interviews were conducted. Out of the twenty teachers who were interviewed, 13 were females and 7 were males. The sample included 6 teachers who had a Teaching Certificate, 9 teachers who had a Diploma in Education and the remaining 5 teachers held a Bachelors of Education. All the respondents had more than 10 years of teaching experience.

Questionnaires

Apart from the in-depth interviews, questionnaires were given out to forty in-service teachers to collect data. Out of the forty teachers who were given the questionnaires, 36 responded. Hence, the response rate was 90 %. Prior consent was also sought from the participants before the questionnaires were administered.

Research Findings

All data collected was carefully analysed. The analysis revealed common challenges teachers faced while carrying out assessment in their Social Science classrooms. These are presented as themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Policy Implications

A major challenge highlighted by the in-service teachers is the amount of time given to teachers to complete the syllabus. The Ministry of Education has advised all schools through the C6/15 circular that all syllabus needs to be completed in two terms. This implies that the content that was to be taught and assessed in three school terms needs to be covered in two school terms as the third term is allocated for revision and remedial teaching. Hence, in order to cover the Social Science syllabus in two terms, teachers did not take all assessment in Social Science. One of the teachers (T8) in his interview stated that he often had to forego some of the research tasks in his Social Science class as they were time consuming and if he had carried out all the assessment tasks, then he would not be able to complete his syllabus on time.

Similarly, other teachers (T12, T17, T21, T36, and T45) highlighted that at times they wrote ‘model’ answers on the boards in their classroom so that the students would simply copy them in their exercise books. They also said that they did this practice would allow them to complete the Social Science syllabus rather than ‘wasting’ time on carrying out assessment.

Content Load

It was also highlighted that after the revision of the curriculum in 2015, the Social Science curriculum has become overloaded; especially in the upper primary. New concepts such as World Organisations, Origins and Characteristics of Major Groups of People in the World, Famous People, Significant World Events such as World Wars, Climate Change, Spending Basics, and Globalisation have been included in the revised curriculum. The teachers (T4, T6, T11, T13, T18, T38, T41, T43, T47, and T49) have said that a lot of preparation and research is needed to teach the new concepts that have been included in the new Social Science curriculum. The inclusion of the new concepts prevents the teachers from taking all forms of assessment as they devote more time in researching and teaching these 'new and complex' concepts. Also, there tends to be a mismatch between the current curriculum and teachers' content knowledge. As highlighted by Chand, Chand and Prasad (2016), content overload has created a teacher-centered rather than a student-centered atmosphere in the classrooms.

In-Service Training Needs

One of the targeted areas to fill the gap created in the teaching fraternity is providing relevant and timely professional teacher development to equip teachers with necessary guidelines to adapt to changes. There has not been any consultation taking place on a large scale before the implementation of the revised curriculum content. Also, teachers are not provided opportunities for regular in-service course to upgrade their knowledge on the specifics of their studies. The data collected also revealed that there has not been any significant training carried out for in-service teachers on assessment methods in Social Science. As Jere(2000) acclaims that training of classroom teachers on how to assess would enrich the quality of primary education. this would only be effective if we know what the teachers are already doing and what they are not doing.As a result, it puts teachers in a critical and challenging situation to trial out new initiatives and assessment methods to suit the needs of diverse learners in a particular learning environment.

Conclusion

Classroom assessment plays a major role in the learning and teaching process. It informs teachers about the amount of learning that has taken place, which concepts need to be re-taught, the remedial that has to be carried out and which students need extra attention.

For classroom learning to be successful, proper assessment needs to be taken. However, factors such as policy implications on teachers, the content load, and lack of training impede the successful implementation of proper assessment in Social Science classrooms. Hence, it is important to see that educated and rational decisions are made on the part of teachers and policy makers so that proper assessment procedures are used to enhance the learning and teaching process.

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