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Hem Chand Dayal
The University of the South Pacific

Govinda Ishwar Lingam
The University of the South Pacific

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Fijian Teachers' Conceptions of Assessment

Hem Chand Dayal
Govinda Ishwar Lingam
The University of the South Pacific
Fiji Islands

Abstract: Teacher's conceptions are important as they could have a strong influence on their professional practices. This study set out to explore Fijian teacher's conceptions of assessment. Seventy teachers enrolled in an assessment course at a university in Fiji were involved in this study. Data was collected by asking teachers to write a reflection on assessment. The reflective exercise contained four open-ended items. Data was analyzed qualitatively. The results indicate that Fijian pre-service teachers generally held an assessment of learning view, while majority of in-service teachers see assessment as formative.

Introduction

Thompson (1992) defined conceptions as a more “general mental structure, encompassing beliefs, meanings, concepts, propositions, rules, mental images, preferences, and the like.” (p. 130). In other words, Thompson’s definition includes beliefs as a subset of conceptions. Philipp (2007) explains that beliefs can be seen as “lenses that affect one’s view of some aspect of the world” (p. 259). Brown (2003) uses the term conceptions to offer a similar understanding. He defines conceptions as an “organizing framework by which an individual understands, responds to, and interacts with a phenomenon” (p. 3). Brown’s understanding of the term conceptions seems similar to Philipp’s understanding of the term beliefs, although Philipp (2007) argues that the two terms have not been used in a uniform way in the education literature. This study adopts Brown’s understanding of the term conceptions and sees beliefs and conceptions in a rather harmonious and non-conflicting manner. Such an understanding is in line with the suggestions offered by Barnes, Fives & Dacey, who claim that although the term beliefs has been widely used in previous studies involving epistemology and beliefs about teaching content such as science (for example, Chen, Morris & Mansour, 2015) or mathematics (for example, Philipp, 2007; Raymond, 1997), researchers of teachers assessment beliefs use varied subsuming terminology such as ‘conceptions’ and ‘values’ to describe variables of interest” (Barnes et al., 2015, p. 285).

Teachers’ conceptions about curriculum, teaching and learning have received a lot of attention in educationists’ writing in the last two decades (Thompson, 1992; Burton, 1992; Ernest, 2004; Beswick, 2006; Speer, 2005; Boz, 2008). In the opening years of the new century the study of teachers’ conceptions about curriculum and teaching has made attempts to accommodate a third dimension – teachers’ conceptions of assessment (Brown, 2003; Vandeyser

& Killen, 2007; Barnes, Fives & Dacey, 2015). With newer insights into teaching and learning, teachers are often challenged to change their classroom practice. Changes in instruction require changes in assessment practices as well (Scott, 2015). In such a changing landscape, it is important that teachers' understandings of assessment be taken into consideration. According to Brown (2003), the structure of teachers' conceptions is not uniform and simple, but "multifaceted and interconnected" (p.3). This means that teachers can hold multiple conceptions of assessment. Teachers' conceptions can be influenced by many factors, including the context and the culture in which they work (Brown, 2003; Scott, 2015; Rubie-Davies, 2015).

The purpose of the small study reported here was to explore Fijian teachers' conceptions of assessment. The seventy teachers who participated were asked to record their written reflections about assessment and their responses were used to provide deeper understanding of teachers' initial conceptions about assessment processes and purpose. Of the seventy, forty-three were practising teachers while twenty-seven were pre-service teachers. Because pre-service teachers have had limited experiences of teaching compared to the practising ones, the study seeks to identify a range of perspectives from those of novice undergraduates through to the differently informed ones of experienced practitioners. It must be borne in mind that pre-service teachers could provide only emergent insights into assessment. Viewed through a socio-cultural lens, learning is seen as a reflective exercise. This paper reports on findings from such reflective practice involving teachers as learners undergoing a course in educational assessment. This study is of value because it ascertains current conceptions across a range of practising and pre-service teachers. This will help to further inform teacher education. In light of the limited local literature available on teacher conceptions, such an understanding is especially important.

Theoretical Framework

The traditional, absolutist paradigm argues that knowledge be awarded objective and non-negotiable status (Burton, 1992), a view of learning that Shepard (2000) referred to as the traditional paradigm. Under this paradigm, behaviourist perspectives of learning are prevalent with a scientific, measurement view of assessment. Viewed from this perspective, teaching becomes transmission of knowledge from the head of the teacher to the books of the learner. This view of teaching-learning as a transmissive operation often leads to a narrower view of assessment in which testing and examinations become the end in themselves and the focus is on reproducing some previously learnt skill on a piece of paper (Burton, 1992; Filsecker & Kerres, 2012). Such deficit views of learning, argue Frade, Acioly-Regnier & Jun (2013), have often used older forms of assessment, which assume that students' cognitive development can in fact be measured accurately using well-designed tests.

According to Cizek (2010), any test or other system of information gathering is a summative assessment if it meets the two criteria: (1) it is administered at the end of some unit of instruction (e.g., unit, semester, school year); and (2) its purpose is primarily to categorize the performance of a student or system. In other words, its main purpose is to obtain a measurement of achievement to be used in decision making for purposes such as certification, selection, and control of individuals and institutions. This measurement is most often taken using a test at the end of a teaching segment. Judging students' performance using such tests has increasingly come to be considered a narrow and insufficient measure of learning (Grouws & Meier, 1992; Clarke,

1992; Broadfoot, 2007). Summative assessment usually promotes an environment of learning where competence and competition are highly valued by teachers, students and other stakeholders (Broadfoot, 2007). In summary, views associated with the absolutist (Burton, 1992) or traditional (Shepard, 2000) paradigms outline assessment as an event that is mutually exclusive from instruction. Such a view of assessment has been referred to as reflecting summative assessment functions in the current study.

The other paradigm, generally referred to as the socio-constructivist paradigm, views learning as a social process in which learners' interactions with their environment and the role of communication are seen as important (Burton, 1992). Shepard (2000) distinguishes such a view as an emergent paradigm. This view of learning sees assessment as a socio-cultural exercise (Burton, 1992), in which the learner is a "constructive participant" building his or her own meaning (Wilson, 1992, p. 77). Giving a justification of this view of learning and assessment, Frade and her colleagues (2013) cite a Brazilian case where young street vendors who could not solve arithmetical problems using school methods were able to do the same problems when they were based on their actual selling transactions. This example helps us understand the value of developing a broader perspective of assessment, taking the social and cultural ideas of learners into account. Such a view of assessment is closely linked to the formative functions of assessment. Formative assessment is any activity that provides information that can be used as feedback to modify instruction with the intention of catering to the learning needs of the students (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Actions that support formative assessment include, but are not limited to, effective questioning, providing quality feedback, and involving pupils in peer- and self-assessments (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Koshy, 2002). This way of understanding assessment implies an image in which instruction and assessment are indissolubly linked or connected in a common process or cause.

Willis & Cowie (2014), opposing the deficit views of assessment, propose assessment as a form of "generative dancing" (p.23). They conceptualize learning, teaching and assessment as represented in the cultural practices situated within social contexts, from which and within which learners draw upon explicit and tacit forms of knowing in order to participate successfully. According to the socio-cultural perspective (Klenowski, 2002; Willis & Cowie, 2014), learning is seen as participation rather than as a purely cognitive activity, and our understandings of what counts as evidence of learning must also change. Rather than trying to see 'inside' a student's head to find out what that student is thinking, Willis & Cowie (2014) say teachers must try to understand what students do and do not do with opportunities and resources to which they have access, suggesting, further, that assessment for learning is a situated practice: they see classroom interaction as important. Teachers must see themselves as choreographers who use the socio-cultural lens to help themselves understand better what the student is doing.

From a similar theoretical perspective, Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski & Colbert (2014) value the social and cultural capital that young people bring to the classroom and argue that the teachers' role requires them to "harness such capital" (p.4). The authors present the conception of *assessment as enabling*, arguing that in order for assessment to play an enabling role, school leaders and teachers will need continued and sustained support and resources. Assessment, these authors perceive, is about teachers and students, and not only about grades and certification. It is time to challenge the traditional mindset of teachers seeing themselves and being seen as the controlling authority. They also argue that teachers are important if we want assessment to be enacted as enabling.

This study inclines to the socio-cultural view of assessment as more complete, a view of assessment towards which all teachers must strive to work. The paper will return to this emergent socio-cultural idea of assessment later, when it is used in the results and discussion section to classify formative assessment ideas. As the first step towards achieving a degree of assessment literacy, the study is predicated on the assumption that letting teachers state their personal beliefs about assessment and what its major purpose ought to be would be a good place to begin. Unfortunately, the limited scope of the study meant it was not possible to follow up on how teachers' beliefs would or could have changed as they went through a course in educational assessment they were undertaking.

Teachers' Conceptions of Assessment

While there has been a lot of research on teachers' conceptions of different subjects and their teaching, comparatively little exists in the area of teacher conceptions of assessment (Harris, 2008). Research in this area has come up with the following four conceptions of assessment:

- It improves teaching and learning.
- It makes students accountable for learning.
- It makes schools and teachers accountable for student learning.
- It should be rejected because it is invalid, irrelevant, and negatively affects teachers, students, curriculum, and teaching. (Brown 2003, 2004; Brown & Hirschfeld 2007)

Teachers may simultaneously hold multiple conceptions of assessment. For example, Brown (2004) reports that teachers in New Zealand held a conception of assessment for improving teaching and learning as well as a school accountability conception. The first conception derives from the idea of formative assessments or 'assessment for learning'. In this, the main purpose of assessment is to improve student learning, by providing useful feedback, and by engaging students in the assessment process via actions such as self-assessments or peer-assessments. According to Harris (2008), the other three conceptions are closely associated with assessment practices referred to as summative. The second conception calls for students to take responsibility for their learning by gaining the qualifications that are required to progress to different levels in education. Parents and employers are the major recipients of such assessment information.

The third conception of assessment holds teachers and schools accountable for student learning. As assessment information is gained from similar methods to those used for student accountability, but it is now used to judge the work of the teachers and schools, holding the two accountable for any deficiency in student performance. The fourth conception rejects the concept of assessment and argues that it holds no legitimate place in the education system. This claim is made based on the view that assessment is unreliable and doing more harm to the work of teachers and students (Brown, 2003, 2004; Harris, 2008).

Hui & Brown (2010) studied primary school teachers' conceptions in Hong Kong. The study revealed that primary school teachers (curriculum leaders) could develop assessment for learning tasks. The teachers themselves, very well aware of the purposes of assessment as primarily for "improvement", developed ten tasks. However, data also revealed that the four teachers also thought that these assessment tasks were useful for "accountability" as well as "examination" purposes. The paper concludes that the prevalence of accountability as well as

examinations conceptions of assessment among Chinese teachers hinders the successful implementation of assessment for learning policy into practice.

A recent study by Smith, Hill, Cowie & Gilmore (2014) involving a large sample of pre-service teachers in four universities across New Zealand found that teachers enter universities with an assessment *of* learning view of assessment. The teachers were able to show an awareness of formative purposes of assessment when answering on the Likert-style scale. However, when asked to respond to open-ended items, these teachers showed a view that represented the summative role of assessment. The authors argue that teachers' personal experiences with summative assessments could have dominated their thinking and emotions.

In another study, Vandeyar & Killen (2007) demonstrated that different conceptions could lead to different assessment practices. Assessment will be utilized as an integral part of teaching and learning if educators view assessment as a useful means of gathering information on which important learning decisions will be based. Educators who see assessment as something that could be used to hold learners accountable for their own learning will favour formal, summative and high stakes assessment. Educators who view assessment as necessary but not important will favour summative and quasi-formative assessment practices that help in generating grades for reporting purposes. Educators who view assessment as largely irrelevant will probably avoid formative assessment (Vandeyar & Killen, 2007).

Brown (2004) found that the roles teachers play are not powerful in shaping teachers' conceptions of assessment. Thus, teacher characteristics such as "teacher gender, years of training, years of experience, and the role in school were irrelevant to mean scale scores on the teachers' conceptions of assessment inventory" (Brown, 2004, p.311). Similarly, school characteristics such as schools' socio-economic status and school locality (urban or rural) were also found to be irrelevant to the teachers' conceptions of assessment. Nisbet & Warren's (2000) study focused on assessment in relation to mathematics education involving 398 primary teachers in Queensland. Their findings suggest that teachers' beliefs about assessment fall into three major categories – assessment is used by teachers to evaluate their own teaching, to inform the learners, and for accountability purposes. Overall, teachers' use of assessment to inform their teaching had a higher average mean response than the other two purposes of assessment. Nisbet & Warren conclude that higher rating on teachers using assessment to inform their teaching is of some concern as this indicates that data teachers gather using assessment are important for them "in evaluating their personal performance" (p.43). Investigating on teacher characteristics versus beliefs about assessment, the study found that female teachers placed more emphasis on using assessment to inform the teacher and the learner than did the male teachers.

Although it is not clear how teacher conceptions of assessment are formed and which factors are significant in this formation, Vandeyar & Killen (2007) state that educators' conceptions of assessment are influenced by many factors, one of which is the understanding of the subject he or she teaches. Contrary to Brown's (2004) findings in New Zealand, Vandeyar & Killen (2007) observed that the system within which educators operate also influences their conceptions of assessment; for example, if the system emphasizes content, conformity, and high stakes testing, it is not surprising for teachers to believe that assessment is primarily about learner and school accountability. According to Bright & Joyner (1998), many factors influence what information teachers might decide it is important to gather for assessment. One of the important factors is the teachers' content knowledge. Furthermore, they suggest that other factors might include teachers' views about the nature of the subject, teachers' beliefs about the

capabilities of their students, the nature of the curriculum being used, and teachers' perceptions of community expectations.

In summary, studies utilizing quantitative approaches (such as Brown, 2003, 2004) inform us that teacher and school characteristics may not be important in shaping teachers' conceptions. A majority of these studies have had full-time practising teachers as their sample. There is a dearth of research on how pre-service teachers view assessment (Smith et al., 2014). This study hopes to shed some light on pre-service teachers' views of assessment.

Context of the Study

The Republic of the Fiji Islands, a former British colony, is a small island nation in the South Pacific: a population of fewer than one million people calls these small islands home. The country's education system is well established from pre-school up to tertiary levels. Approximately 735 primary schools and 178 secondary schools constitute the bulk of the system, the primary schools usually catering for years 1–8, the secondary schools for years 9–13. The central authority is the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts (MOEHA; formerly the Ministry of Education) which employs roughly ten thousand teachers on a full-time basis. After successful completion of secondary school, students wanting to become teachers can enter one of the five tertiary institutions that provide teacher training.

The education sector in Fiji has in the present century undergone many changes in the areas of curriculum and assessment. A decade ago, Fiji abolished national examinations at years 6, 8, and 10. At the primary school level, the national Literacy and Numeracy programme (LANA) was introduced for years 4, 6 and 8, while the abolition of these national examinations led to the introduction of so-called formative assessments in the form of class-based assessments (CBAs) from Year 1 up to Year 10. Two national examinations – *Fiji School Leaving Certificate* at Year 12 and *Fiji Seventh Form Examination* at Year 13 – were retained. Following the resumption of national elections after a lapse of almost eight years in September of 2014, the newly appointed MOEHA Minister has re-introduced national examinations at Years 6 and 10, while retaining the national examinations at Years 12 and 13. In addition, the education ministry has announced that all school based end-of-year examinations (usually called the annual examinations) will be set centrally. These include Years 7, 8, 9 and 11 annual examinations. These will be marked at the school level by respective subject teachers. The introduction of externally set annual examinations is intended to provide students with more practice at taking examinations. The eventual translation into better pass rates for the national examinations is assumed. The Examinations and Assessment Unit of the Ministry of Education is responsible for developing and administering national examinations. It can be said that once again, the national examinations at both primary and secondary levels are receiving heavy emphasis.

Method

Participants

The 70 participants in this study were a group of pre-service and in-service teachers enrolled in an educational assessment course at a Fijian university. These included both 32 primary and 38 secondary school teachers. All of the primary teachers, nineteen (19) of them female and thirteen (13) male, were in-service teachers working towards their Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree. They shared an average of 9.5 years of teaching experience, the most experienced having had 25 years' while the one tyro had only two years' experience. The 38 secondary school component was either in-service (11) or pre-service (27) teachers. The pre-service teachers, fresh high school graduates training to become full-time teachers, had no previous teaching experience; the in-service group had an average of 8.5 years' experience. The pre-service secondary teachers were in either their third or their final year of teacher training. The educational assessment course was offered during the December–January summer. These out-of-semester offerings, commonly known as summer Flexi Schools, are completed during a four-week period. The principal author was the course coordinator. A breakdown of the sample is displayed in table 1.

| Primary Teachers (n = 32) | Secondary Teachers (n = 38) | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>In-service (32)</i> | <i>In-service (11)</i> | <i>Pre-service (27)</i> |
| Male = 13 | Male = 2 | |
| Female = 19 | Female = 9 | Male = 13 |
| Average years of teaching = 9.5 | Average years of teaching = 8.5 | Female = 14 |

Table 1 – Participants

Instrument

As part of the first class activity, participants were asked to write a reflective piece on the topic: *My understanding of Assessment*, following a series of prompts. Teacher reflections are increasingly used as an important medium for teachers to look back and reflect on their own experiences (Westwell, 2005; Ditchburn, 2015). Teachers were reminded to relate to their personal experiences while writing their reflections. They were asked not to give their names, just to state their biographical data: number of years of teaching experience; gender; pre-service or in-service status; and primary or secondary background. They were allowed up to one hour to write the considered reflections.

The following questions guided the reflective exercise.

1. What do you understand by the term 'assessment'?
2. In your view, what is the major purpose of assessment?
3. Do you believe that assessment is important?
4. Choose one of the views and defend it:
View A – We should assess what is important.
View B – What gets assessed should be given importance.

The written reflections were approximately two pages in length. These were analyzed inductively to look for themes within the data as described in Smith et al., (2014). The individual reflections were read question-by-question by both the authors and grouped as pre-service and in-service, though occasionally, grouped responses were combined. Both the authors had to reach a consensus while reading each reflection. The results from the analysis are presented next.

Results and Discussion

Findings of the study are presented on the basis of each of the reflection questions in the reflective exercise. Reflections were first classified by teachers' backgrounds – primary, secondary (in-service), and secondary (pre-service). As each reflection was read, it was given a number, starting from one up to number 70. This ID is reflected beside the student quotations that are used in the next section.

Teacher's Understanding of Assessment

All the teachers in this study were able to give their own definition of assessment. As the reflective exercise was carried out during the class, it became clear that teachers did not use anyone else's definition. The analysis of the definitions the teachers gave revealed that the majority of them defined assessment as synonymous with testing, measuring or examinations. As expected, these definitions related closely to the perceived purpose of assessment – so some of the typical definitions include teachers saying that assessment is a tool for measuring students' performance; assessment is a method of knowing how much someone knows; or, a way of gauging how a student performs. Some of the typical responses included: *Assessment is a method of testing what students know* (Reflection 9) and *Assessment means to test pupils' IQ level, knowledge and understanding* (Reflection 4). Such a narrow view of assessment is typically related to the work teachers and students do during a normal school day. Similar findings were reported by teachers in the recent study carried out with pre-service teachers in New Zealand (Smith et al., 2014). The Smith and others study noted that 94 per cent of first-year prospective teachers felt that assessment was to do with pencil and paper testing, giving marks or assigning grades. All the in-service teachers in the present study gave definitions of assessment that could be classified as deficit or narrow definitions.

The majority of the in-service teachers who comprised about 60 per cent of the teachers in the current study aligned with this narrow view of assessment. This meant that

around 58 per cent of the in-service teachers regarded assessment as something to do with measuring or testing. Forty-two per cent of the in-service teachers gave definitions that were classified as reflecting a broader view of assessment. Although some of these definitions did contain the measurement or testing flavour, teachers in this category did appreciate that assessment was more than testing or examining students. Teachers recognized the formative functions of assessment. For example, this is how two of the in-service teachers responded:

Assessment is a process of gathering information and then using that information. One has to teach, assess, and re-teach if the results show that students have performed poorly. Assessment means to 'sit with'; therefore, we must assess learners with an aim of helping them and not only ranking them. (Reflection 35)

The term assessment refers to the method where we are trying to find out whether learning has taken place or not. This can be done in two ways: formative and summative. Summative is done at the end of the academic year or program whereas formative is carried out within the program. Formative assessment includes group work and presentations, summary writings etc. Summative assessments are usually the end of the year exams. (Reflection 39)

One of the reasons some of the teachers in the in-service group were able to give a broader understanding of assessment could be related to their classroom practice and teaching experience. As teachers in this group have approximately 10 years of teaching experience, it is likely that they have come to appreciate the value of formative assessment during their years of teaching. Apart from the strong focus on summative assessment in Fijian schools, there has been a great deal of emphasis on trying to push the value of formative assessments as well.

In summary, approximately 75 per cent of the participants defined assessment narrowly, in a way that inclined towards the summative functions. An important question to note at this stage is why a majority of the practising teachers still showed a measurement view of assessment. A second question that comes to mind is whether teachers' personal understanding of the term assessment has any bearing on their perception of the purpose of assessment. This is explored next, in the analysis of teachers' responses on the major purpose of assessment.

Major purpose of assessment

Teachers were asked to give one major purpose of assessment – some purpose that they perceived as the primary role of assessment. One of the reasons for asking teachers to do this was to see what they valued the most. The results indicate that a higher percentage of the total group of participants gave the formative function as the major purpose of assessment, in contradistinction to how, as respondents, they defined assessment in the first question. The analysis revealed that 50 per cent of the total participant group considered assessment's major purpose to be formative in nature. However, the majority of the group of participants thinking this way was in-service teachers, with only three (3) pre-service teachers listing a formative function as the major function of assessment. Seventy-six per cent of the in-service teachers opted to nominate a formative function as the major purpose of assessment, whereas only 11 per cent of the pre-service teachers listed formative functions in the lead. These pro-formative responses had to do with reflecting on teaching strategies, noting the strengths and weaknesses of

teaching and learning strategies, improving teaching and learning strategies, getting feedback on what was learned and what was not learned, allowing learners and teachers to assess themselves, and generally, improving teaching and learning with helping students who are in need. Some of the typical responses included:

Assessment tells us whether learning outcomes have been achieved or not. This helps learners know where they are, and teachers can evaluate their ways of teaching as well. (Reflection 42)

When one walks into the classroom, he/she can obviously see that teaching is taking place, but whether learning is taking place simultaneously cannot be seen by just one look. This is why assessment has to be done. (Reflection 41)

In summary, analysis of the data illustrate that pre-service teachers are far less likely to perceive formative functions as the major purpose of assessment. The majority of the pre-service teachers carried on from their personal definitions of assessment and identified the summative functions of assessment such as measuring students' performance, knowing how much a student knows or gauging students' performance as the major purpose of assessment. Some of the pre-service teachers who had shown limited understanding of assessment in their first response, however, did show an appreciation that the major purpose of assessment was to improve teaching and learning. The next section presents students' responses to item three – Is assessment important?

Is Assessment Important?

Almost the entire sample of teachers (98 per cent) responded 'yes' to this question. While this answer would seem, on the basis of the discussions above, predictable for in-service teachers, it is interesting to note that pre-service teachers also appreciated the importance of assessment. A majority (74 per cent) of the pre-service teachers believed so because of the summative functions it served. Their focus remained on answering the question of "how much"?

Yes, it's important because you can never know how much a person has learnt unless you assess them.

Teaching is useless without assessment. (Reflection 21)

Yes, assessment is very important. It tells how much a person knows. (Reflection 16)

Only a few (6 out of 27) pre-service teachers gave reasons that related to the formative function of assessment or a combination of the formative and summative functions. Two reasons are given below:

Yes assessment is important because it helps the students understand where they stand.

Assessment is also important because it is helpful for the teachers as well, as they can evaluate where they need to put more focus on for the betterment of the students.

(Reflection 3)

Assessment is very important because it provides the teacher the relevant idea about where his/her children's performance stands and what further steps should be taken. (Reflection 11)

One of the pre-service teachers believed that assessment was not important. The reasons given were related to the extent of work required, especially in terms of preparation and the lack of validity of assessment information. The response was as follows:

Not really as most assessment requires a lot of paper work and the results do not prove the level of understanding of students. (Reflection 18)

The analysis of the in-service teachers' responses revealed that most had formative reasons about why assessment is important. Seventy per cent of the in-service teachers fell into this category. Typical arguments in favour of assessment were related to the major formative functions of assessment as already discussed above. Approximately 30 per cent of the in-service teachers gave reasons related to the summative functions of assessment. No in-service teacher said that assessment was unimportant. Again, the reasons provided were similar to the major purposes of assessment that they had earlier identified.

Assessment as a Servant? Or Assessment as the Master?

The final question in the reflection was aimed at exploring teachers' beliefs about the overall role of assessment in the teaching and learning process. View A – *We should assess what is important* reflects a view of assessment as a servant to the teaching and learning process. Under this view, teachers as experts decide what is important and assessment serves in establishing whether the important has been learned or not. Under this view, assessment is not seen as the dominating factor, a feature that is always prevalent with View B - *What gets assessed should be given importance*. Seeing assessment as the master means teaching only those things that would appear in an assessment. View A is aligned closely to the formative function of assessment and view B is usually thought to be a side-effect of the summative function of assessment. In this study, a majority of the teachers believed that view A was more relevant. Approximately 70 per cent of the total participants listed view A as their choice. A higher percentage (84 per cent) of in-service teachers chose view A whereas 62 per cent of the pre-service teachers chose View A.

Teachers in favour of view A gave reasons that could be linked to the content-related evidence of validity. This group of teachers believed that teaching significant areas of curriculum was important, followed by assessing what has been taught. Some thought that teaching what is to be tested would narrow the curriculum and teachers will only teach the examination papers. The following responses, for example, clearly reflect this:

I think that there are certain topics and concepts that are important. For example, addition is taught from year one but is used throughout the years of schooling, as well as in their daily lives. Thus, when a teacher is assessing students on certain things, he/she should keep in mind the need for the students to learn what is important for the students. Therefore, we should assess concepts which are important. (Reflection 34)

Some schools only give importance to what is tested. For example, subjects like PE (Physical Education) are not given any importance simply because these subjects are not tested. Subjects like PE need to be assessed as well because that is important. Some students may not be good in academic subjects but may be better in other subjects. Hence whatever is on the curriculum should be given importance. (Reflection 37)

If we only give importance to what is to be assessed then we will narrow the curriculum and only surface learning will take place. (Reflection 10)

Teachers who gave view B (14 per cent) had seen passing examinations as the most important aspect of the teaching and learning process. For example, they saw the learning of concepts that would not come in the exam as a waste of time.

Whatever is assessed should be given importance so that students can concentrate on those things which will be tested rather than focusing on the whole context from which some of the things are not going to come in the test. It may be a waste of time learning things which will not come in the exam. (Reflection 8)

A similar number of teachers faced difficulty in answering this last question. Approximately 20 per cent of the teachers chose either both options or, when they did choose one of the options, they were unable to defend their choice logically. The reasons they gave did not reflect an understanding of either the summative or the formative functions of assessment. A good number in this group (10) were pre-service teachers.

| Reflection question | In-service teachers | Pre-service teachers |
|--|---|---|
| What is assessment? | <p>25 out of 43 responses had a summative focus</p> <p>Key terms used included: measuring, testing, knowing how much, gauging, etc.</p> <p>18 out of 43 responses had a formative focus. Key terms used included: providing feedback, facilitating learning, evaluating teaching strategies, evaluating learning strategies, helping slow learners, helping diagnose learning problems etc.</p> | <p>All responses had a summative focus</p> <p>Key terms used included: measuring, testing, knowing how much, gauging, etc</p> |
| In your view, what is the major purpose of assessment? | <p>10 out of 43 gave a summative purpose</p> <p>33 out of 43 gave a formative purpose or a combination of summative and formative purposes</p> | <p>24 out of 27 gave summative purpose</p> <p>3 out of 27 gave a formative purpose</p> |
| Do you believe that assessment is important? | <p>All 43 teachers said 'Yes' 13 out of 43 gave summative reasons</p> <p>30 out of 43 gave formative reasons</p> | <p>All 27 teachers said 'Yes' 21 out of 27 gave summative reasons</p> <p>6 out of 27 gave formative reasons.</p> |
| Choose one of the views and defend: View A – We should | 32 out of 43 chose view A 7 out of | 8 out of 27 chose View A |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| assess what is important. View B – What gets assessed should be given importance. | 43 chose View B 4 undecided, unable to defend a view | 9 out of 27 chose View B 10 undecided, unable to defend a view |
|---|---|---|

Table 2: Summary of Responses

Summary and conclusion

The findings presented in Table 2 suggest that the majority of the teachers initially provided a narrow understanding of assessment. However, many teachers from this group were able to identify formative functions of assessment when asked to identify the major purpose of assessment. It would be interesting to include a follow-up question asking teachers to list a few more purposes of assessment. This would provide a clearer picture of teachers’ conceptions of assessment. As the reflection progressed, teachers continued to give views that were either related to the summative function of assessment or the formative function of assessment. A good majority of in-service teachers had responses that matched the formative view of assessment.

Despite having many years of teaching, a majority of the in-service teachers still carry a limited view of assessment. It is unclear at this stage if teaching experience enhances teachers’ views of assessment or narrows their views. It must be noted that teachers’ conceptions are dynamic and it is not easy to point out a clear cause-and-effect relationship between conceptions and practice. Although Brown (2004) argues that teacher roles such as gender or number of years of teaching experience have no effect on teacher conceptions, the findings of this study suggest that teacher roles may be an area worth investigating further using varied and multiple methodological tools. Overall, the current study confirms Brown’s (2004) finding that teachers may simultaneously hold multiple conceptions of assessment.

In so far as pre-service teachers are concerned, they provided views more aligned to the summative role of assessments. These included a narrower measurement view of assessment. The findings from this small sample of pre-service teachers are consistent with the findings from a larger study of pre-service teachers conducted in New Zealand (Smith et al., 2014). This study found that 94 per cent of the first-year teachers had summative views of assessment. However, the study also noted that this percentage scored significantly lower with a sample of third-year pre-service teachers. Many pre-service teachers have a limited understanding of the overall role of assessment in the teaching and learning process. This has been reflected in their responses to item four in the reflective exercise. A good number of pre-service teachers felt that whatever is coming in the assessment was important. It is likely that such a view of the role of assessment would translate into teaching the test and not teaching the required curriculum. A good number of pre-service teachers were unable to choose a role of assessment and defend it by providing a logical argument. Hence, many pre-service teachers would require some level of support in realizing a complete picture of assessment.

This research was small in nature and utilized teachers’ personal reflections in exploring their conceptions of assessment. Teacher reflections have been widely accepted as a tool for learning in many teacher education institutions and engaging teachers in meaningful reflections has many benefits (Westwell, 2005; Ditchburn, 2015). The authors are also of the view that

teacher reflections are useful in studying teachers' views and beliefs about important educational themes. A follow-up study would be useful to see how these pre-service teachers view assessment when they have completed their studies and joined the teaching profession. Such data would be one useful way to measure the impact of teacher training on teachers.

Finally, the authors are of the view that it is acceptable for young prospective teachers to have a view of assessment that may not necessarily be similar to ours as teacher educators. Popham (2003) writes that the term assessment embraces both traditional forms of testing and also the contemporary views of gathering information with student generated work such as portfolios. It is likely that these prospective teachers have experienced a narrow form of assessment in schools and are currently experiencing such views in their early years of study in universities as well. What is important is that we as teacher educators try to intervene in meaningful ways to challenge those initial conceptions.

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