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CHANGING ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN PAKISTANI SCHOOLS: A CASE OF AKU-EB MIDDLE SCHOOL ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Assessment is inevitably linked with the processes of teaching and learning. Assessment for learning (AFL), the focus of this paper, is germane to students' learning in that the purpose of AFL is to help students improve their learning in light of the feedback they receive on the quality of their work. Educational research indicates that AFL is a viable alternative to traditional examination system at school level, and in case of high stake public examinations, it helps students perform better at summative examinations, especially when both formative and summative assessments are used in tandem (Assessment Reform Group, various papers; The State of Queensland, Department of Education, (n.d, online); Klenowski, 2002; Elwood and Klenowski (2000)).

The Aga Khan University Examination Board (AKU-EB) has introduced AFL in its Middle School Assessment Framework (MSAF, grades VI to VIII through two modes of assessment: Progress tests and project portfolio. Being formative, these are offered as diagnostic tools to support students in their educational processes so that they are better prepared for their current and future learning. The focus of this paper is on project portfolios and their assessment.

Adopting a multi-disciplinary inquiry approach, students are engaged in collaborative as well as independent learning and reflection. Assessment, therefore, is built in as a continuous process. The emphasis is on the process of learning leading to a final product and reported in the form of competencies achieved in a 'personal achievement record', based on a number of assessment processes.

The paper presents a critique of conventional school assessment based on marks and grades and suggests that portfolio assessment is a viable alternative to be used in schools in Pakistan at least up to Middle school level, based on descriptive remarks, feedback, and peer and self-assessment

⁷ The author works with Aga Khan University Examination Board. The author would like to thank Dr. Thomas Christie, the director of AKU-EB for his critical comments. The author acknowledges the contribution made by his colleague Ms. Raana Jillani in designing portfolio tasks.

in developing critical competencies in students. Since the framework has only been introduced last year, its results are not yet available to gauge its impact on learning.

Introduction

It is an established fact that assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning processes in not only judging student performance at the end but also to gauge how their learning improves as they go through various processes of learning actively in and outside the classrooms.

Assessment, therefore, is not only *of* learning but *for* learning (AFL) (See Black and Wiliam, 1998). The focus of this paper is to make an argument for AFL at Middle School level in schools in Pakistan mainly through introducing portfolio assessment of project work. It is to integrate assessment with teaching with a view to first diagnose where students stand in terms of their learning, what are their learning difficulties and then suggest ways to address and improve their learning through teachers' constructive feedback (Gardner et al., 2008). The paper discusses contextual realities with regard to assessment practices in schools at this level and argues for innovation and change in assessment practice that is geared towards AFL. It presents the case of AKU-EB's initiative of introducing change in assessment practice at Middle School level and possible challenges in its implementation.

Issues in Current Assessment Practices in Pakistan

Assessment in Pakistan has been a thorny issue that has been debated in educational circles over the last many decades (e.g. Bhatti, 1987; Warwick and Reimers, 1995; Greaney and Hasan 1998; Mirza, 1999; Naqvi, 2002; Rehmani, 2003 and 2011). A wide range of research suggests that assessment is a crucial determinant in driving teaching and learning in the classrooms (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Mirza, 1999; Kellaghan & Greaney, 2001; Rehmani, 2003; Lamprianou and Christie, 2009). Teaching to test is generally believed to be a norm in many schools in Pakistan. A sample of 16 students of grades 6 to 10 from four different schools of Karachi (Rehmani, 2011) in their focus group interviews suggested that teachers mostly encourage rote learning because they teach to test. Eight teachers and four head teachers from these schools also confirmed that assessment is mostly of learning rather than for learning and that the frequency of taking tests is quite high. The situation is worst at grades IX to XII where high stake examinations conducted by the public examination boards across Pakistan where

cheating is rampant (Geo Television, ‘*Kamran Khan ke sath*’, video clippings dated April 10, 2012 and April 9, 2013; Baloch, 2009; 2009b). The students in the above study (Rehmani, 2011) pointed out malpractices in the examination, particularly cheating. One of them said: ‘*60 percent children cheat, very few children are hardworking*’. Like teaching for teachers, learning seems to appear as a job for students too and they are doing what Loughran and Northfield (1996) called the ‘busy work’ of learning by heart without much understanding. Some of the reasons, the research participants in the above study pointed out were, rushing through the mandatory requirement of completing the syllabus on time; frontal teaching with little emphasis on students’ learning and their active participation in the process of learning. Learning through rote memorization and reproduction with little understanding and without much assimilation of ideas and concepts is generally prevalent in schools in Pakistan (Rehmani, 2011; see also Siddiqui, 2007, 2010). Siddiqui depicts a typical classroom situation as:

“A good student or learner in this paradigm is the one who sits in the class quietly, behaves nicely, never disagrees with the teacher, hardly asks any question and has a sharp memory to repeat what the teacher has taught” (2007 p.62).

With such a teaching and learning culture, assessment gets reduced to testing lower order thinking. Students hardly get any feedback on their learning. When I asked approximately 390 teachers across Pakistan in a number of workshops, organised by the Aga Khan University Examination Board in 2012, while discussing teacher feedback, most of them said that they hardly give any qualitative feedback to their students with a view to improving their learning. All they give are words and phrases such as ‘good’, needs improvement, check your spellings, improve hand writing, fair, or even negative words such as ‘bad’, without suggesting how they can improve their learning.

In this scenario, the Aga Khan University Examination Board planned to introduce an assessment framework at Middle School level with a view to providing a broad-based education with integrated and multi-disciplinary approaches to teaching and learning, focusing on active learning, both individual and collaborative, through social interaction. It aims to better prepare students for their secondary and higher secondary education.

Is Portfolio Assessment a Viable Alternative to School-Based Examinations?

In the last two decades, forms of assessment have been revisited from a more quantitative to a more qualitative approach as approaches to teaching are changing from transmission models to more constructivist and co-constructivist approaches (Klenowski, 2002, Klenowski et al, 2006), and from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Black and Wiliam, 1998; Gipps, 1996). Various terms came to the forefront in the 1990s such as “authentic assessment”, “alternate Assessment”, “performance assessment” and “direct assessment” (Goolsby ,1995). He opines that amongst them the alternative assessment is more generic and best describes those methods of assessment that greatly differ from the traditional standardized tests. He argues that through alternative assessment, students are examined through tasks that are related to real life issues outside the schools and are of more value than the standardized tests (see. p. 39).

Portfolio assessment is considered as an alternate model to paper and pencil time limited examinations and celebrates more the process rather than the product of learning as it involves projects that are linked to real life situations. It contains self-assessment and self-reflection; it motivates students to learn, increases their self-efficacy, enhances intrinsic motivation, addresses reading and writing difficulties and enhances computer skills (Gearhart and Osmundson, 2009; Alkharusi, 2008). Portfolio project assessment encourages students’ input in the process of learning, enhances cooperative learning; demonstrates mastery of skills and links theory to practice (Klenowski, 2002; Arter and Spandel, 1992; Dickinson and Mensinga, 2012). It has a set of rubrics which informs how to assess, and helps teachers enhance their knowledge and practice of assessment. It is based on teachers’ remarks and feedback rather than on marks and grades to suggest pedagogical intervention and help students improve their learning, (Ovando, 1994; Rowe, 2005; Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

Research in various countries especially in Australia has shown that portfolio assessment is a workable alternate assessment model called authentic assessment, compared to ‘outcome based education’ which is regarded as ‘a generally dreaded mastery learning interpretation’ (Brady, 2001:25); and paper-based assessment tool considered to be inadequate to evaluate student learning (Dickinson and Mensinga, 2012), including structured format tests (Arter and Spandel,

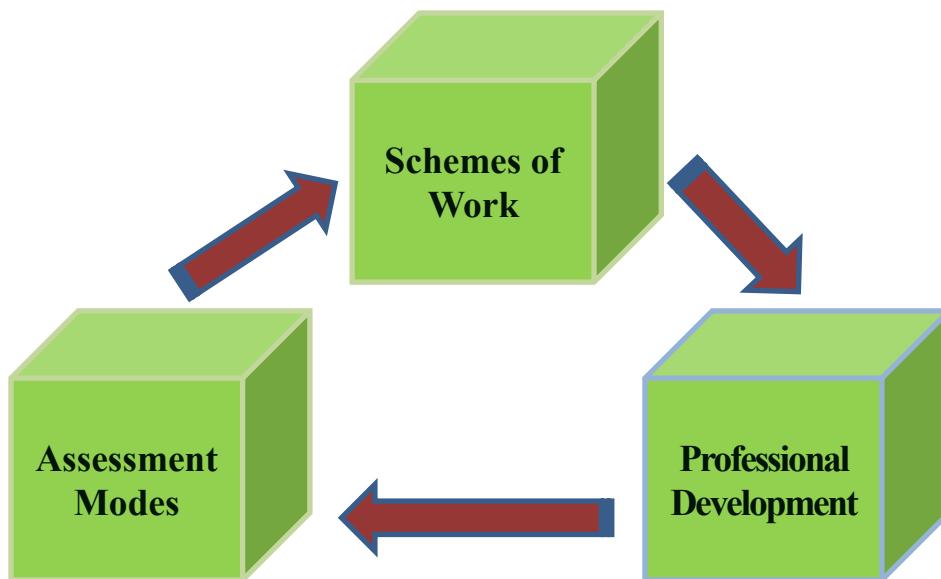
1992). Based on educational research and contextual realities, AKU-EB decided to introduce portfolio assessment keeping in view its merits as enumerated above as well as to initiate change in assessment practice prevailing in the country as discussed earlier.

AKU-EB's Middle School Assessment Framework

AKU-EB's Middle School Assessment Framework for Grades VI-VIII is aimed at providing coherent education to students aged 11-13. It encourages them to have a broad based subject study to think beyond the immediate confines of a subject, as it requires multidisciplinary approach. The emphasis in the framework is on developing certain basic competencies needed to succeed in life, enabling them to apply their knowledge in real world situations. The framework not only desires to enhance intellectual development of adolescents but also believes in harnessing the power of cooperative peer group learning, creativity and reflective thinking.

Major Components of the Framework

There are three major components of the *framework*



Schemes of Work

Beginning from 2010, AKU-EB laid down the groundwork for middle school by developing schemes of work from year VI to VIII in five core subjects, English, Urdu, Social Studies, General Science and Mathematics. These schemes are designed to prepare students for an

appropriate and gradual transition to secondary school level and beyond. Each scheme of work elaborates and enriches the core themes and topics of the National Curriculum of Pakistan focusing on providing knowledge, skills and understanding that each student should develop at each year of the middle school level. The schemes contain at a level broader than syllabus outcomes, the nature (key concepts and content) and scope (breadth, depth and rigour) of learning in Years 6-8. The schemes of work place emphasis on the fundamental skills needed to succeed at and beyond school level, including literacy, numeracy, scientific investigation and cultural diversity. These schemes will enable students to develop logical reasoning skills, meaning making and learning cooperatively as well as individually.

These schemes were developed with a strong input from school teachers both from the public & private sectors to determine key learning outcomes for teaching and assessment purposes in the middle years. In developing the middle school assessment framework teachers were given the opportunity to recognize not only the product of learning but also the importance of assessing the process of learning with an aim to integrate and support both. During the two years of the Project, 43 teacher professional development workshops were organized in Karachi and Lahore with the participation of 704 teachers from 87 public and 94 private sector schools.

Assessment Modes

As noted above, the framework offers two modes of assessment: one through tailor made progress tests as requested by the registered schools and the other through the project portfolio assessment. This paper is focusing only on the project portfolio assessment.

A Project portfolio assessment

Encouraging students to develop and demonstrate their latent potentials through skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, decision making and inquiry, the project portfolio assessment is aligned with the active learning approach that AKU-EB seeks to promote in schools. For this end, the Board designs tasks at each of the three grades. A driving or core question is central to each task supplemented with learning goals and content based objectives based on the schemes of work. The tasks are designed to elicit personal qualities and competencies of students to promote interdisciplinary learning and understanding. These competences include social and problem solving skills; critical and innovative skills; ethical awareness as well as self-confidence and independent learning amongst others, aimed at providing evidence of personal growth.

B Execution of tasks

The tasks are individual as well as group tasks. Schools select any six tasks out of the eight provided by the AKU-EB for each grade. The tasks provide details of their execution, inside as well as outside the classroom, highlight the role of teachers as facilitators, emphasise their constructive and effective feedback to be given to the students for improvement; and observing them in groups. Students are encouraged to work collaboratively and constructively and take responsibility for their tasks or projects. They are advised to collect their information from multiple sources, duly acknowledge them and save all the rough work they do and include that in their portfolios. The process of learning is emphasised (See Arter and Spandel, 1992; Klenowski, 2002; Klenowski et al, 2006; Dickinson and Mensinga, 2012).

C How would the portfolio assessment take place?

It is a classroom based assessment of students' work which they will showcase in form of a portfolio as Arter and Spandel (1992) suggest that portfolio is "a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of the student's efforts, progress, or achievement in (a) given area(s)" (p.36). Their progress is assessed through teacher assessment using a set of rubrics for each task provided by the Board. Students are asked to self-assess. Each student in the group is also assessed by his or her peers. The checklists for both self and peer assessment are also provided. There are no marks but remarks and feedback with a view to diagnose learning difficulties and supporting students to improve their learning. Students are asked to reflect what they learnt during the project work, how they contributed to the group work and the overall role each played in the group. Each student is required also to write a reflective note on the learning processes s/he went through. The rubrics and checklists have been revised in light of the feedback received during the pilot phase assessment meetings with the teachers. Having completed the tasks and school based assessment, schools' representatives were asked to come in a cluster of four to six schools for a midterm assessment called 'Agreement Trial Meetings' organized and moderated by AKU-EB. The idea here is to provide an opportunity for a trial assessment to elucidate standards appropriate to the Pakistani schools. This additional engagement with the school representatives provided insight into their needs and understanding of the process and procedures which will inform the final design, assessment and show casing of the portfolio (See Tracey and Mensinga, 2012). The final showcasing and assessment of the selected portfolios based on the

criteria provided by the Board at the end of an academic year will be brought in by the MSAF school coordinator or its nominated person/s in similar meetings. They will defend the school based assessment and reach an agreement with the representatives of other schools in that cluster. If their counter parts agree with the school's interpretation of EB's rubrics, it will issue a personal achievement record (PAR). In case of any disagreement, AKU-EB's decision will be final. EB will give the agreed upon assessment band to all the students of that group and class in their PARs. The agreement trials covertly provide continuing professional development for the participating teachers as they share ideas and develop communities of practice.

D Expected Outcomes

The AKU Examination Board envisages that through these learning processes students will have better opportunities to develop their potential, be able to understand and apply their subject content knowledge and even go beyond the boundaries of individual subject and be able to integrate their learning with other disciplines. Students have the ownership of their work that may boost their self-efficacy and motivational level for learning; they would develop confidence as individuals as well as group learners, be able to develop critical thinking and essential skills needed to succeed in life in knowledge society.

Taking Teachers into Partnership

AKU-EB builds a relationship of partnership with its registered schools. Implementation of MSAF would be a daunting task without teacher preparation. To address this issue, AKU-EB provides a one day orientation to all its newly registered schools. It also offers teacher professional development workshops in the following areas to further build their capacities: social and emotional development of children at this stage of schooling; the management and assessment of working in groups; assessment for formative purposes; Inquiry and problem based learning; Integrating information technology with research and reporting, designing, assessing and showcasing project portfolios.

Issues and Challenges

Since the framework was launched last year, it has been an evolving learning experience for both the Board as well as the schools with regard to its implementation. A series of meetings held

between schools' administration and EB as well as with the teachers as part of orientation helped in fine tuning processes and procedures. As mentioned above the midterm agreement trial meetings held in various clusters across the country reveal that teachers need to distinguish between accomplishments of individual task and showcasing tasks in a portfolio. Following rubrics and assessing students accordingly would require more internalization and hands on practice. Through this midterm trial meetings it was observed that the teachers or coordinators of the schools were still emphasizing on the product rather than on the process of learning. The proper understanding and implementation would take some time. Feedback was given to them with suggestions as to how to follow the processes and the procedures and how to further assist students to improve their work. The final agreement trial meetings will reveal how the final portfolios have been prepared with evidence of students' work and learning. An empirical study could shed more light on it.

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