

Assessment in Open and Distance Learning Institutions: Issues and Challenges

Theme: access & success in Learning: Global Development perspectives

Sub-theme: Formal Education – Revamping Teacher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Lesotho is a country in Sub-Saharan Africa with a population of about 1.8million people. In response to the international call for Education for all by the year 2015, Lesotho introduced free primary education in the year 2000. The challenge facing this initiative was the large numbers of children in the primary school classrooms compared to a small number of qualified primary school teachers. The government of Lesotho entrusted the Lesotho College of Education (LCE) to design a distance teacher education programme (DTEP) that would upgrade and produce large amounts of teachers without removing them from their learners, workplace and families (Student Handbook, 2001). The programme was inaugurated in the year 2002 and is now on its 8th year. In the National University of Lesotho (NUL) on the other hand the Bachelor's Degree in Education (BEd) through the distance mode started in the academic year 2007/08. It was offered in full time courses only. The problem with this kind of programme was that it could not absorb all the qualifying Diploma candidates from LCE because there was not enough space in the main campus and the programme was not offered at the regional centres. The BEd programme offered at NUL is a four programme and the Diploma in Education offered in LCE- DTEP is also a four year programme.

There are problems facing both programmes. One such a challenge is the quality of assessments used in these institutions hence the quality of teachers produced by these institutions. According to Motlomelo (2004) our success as classroom teachers and students depends to a great extent on our understanding and practice of assessment at the classroom level. To this end students rely almost completely on the day-to-day and term-to-term assessments of that achievement as conducted by their teachers and this is the area where teachers are lacking in both the theory and practices.

This paper investigates why the ODL institutions for teacher training are still using the traditional pencil and paper testing instead of employing alternative methods of assessment where students are involved in the their own assessment. The next section discusses assessment in teacher training and the importance of integrating performance based assessment order to improve teaching and learning.

Assessment in Teacher Training

One of the inherited problems in the African education system is its assessment systems that emphasis on the regurgitation of facts i.e on rote learning divorced from application to the realities of life (IICBA Newsletter, 2002). Assessment does not only assist in improving teaching and learning but also ensures quality thereof. Motlomelo (2002) points out that assessment is one of the weakest areas of instruction in Lesotho. Makamane (2009) purports that assessment in Lesotho College of Education's Distance Teacher Education Programme which is an Open and Distance Learning institution is dominated by pencil and paper testing that does not only encourage regurgitation of content learned but is also limited in assessing other learning outcomes in various learning areas such as science. Alternative or performance based assessment is used very sparingly and at ad hoc manner.

Marso and Pigge (1993) carried out some studies that investigated teachers' knowledge on assessment and came to the conclusion that teachers need instruction in classroom assessment. Diez (2002) adds that teacher training institutions should emphasis more on instruction at both the preservice and in-service level, to build a repertoire of strategies for high-quality assessment, and less instruction in standardised testing than is currently the case in most measurement courses for teachers. They recommend content in assessment courses for teachers to include seven standards that teachers should be skilled in. These are:

- choosing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions;
- developing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions;
- administering, scoring, and interpreting the results of both externally produced and teacher produced assessment methods.
- using assessment results when making decisions about individual and students, planning teaching, developing curriculum, and schools improvement;
- developing valid pupil grading procedures which use pupil assessments; communicating assessment results to students, parents, other lay audiences, and other educators; and
- recognising unethical, illegal, and otherwise inappropriate assessment methods and uses of assessment information.

The standard I of National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, NCATE (2000) requires not only that student teachers demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and dispositions but also that they apply them so that students can learn. If teacher education programs reduce the curriculum to what's on the high stakes test, they are modelling a practice that their candidates will take into their teaching, exacerbating the current problems with high stakes testing. In contrast student teachers should take away a keen sense of the power for assessment for development, assessment as diagnostic and individualised and assessment as contributing to student learning. The other challenge in teacher education is that the teacher educators themselves have little background or expertise in assessment of any kind, and those with some background are likely to assume that characteristics of high stakes assessments are required for all forms of assessment. The lack of faculty knowledge and expertise in assessment may lead to predominant use of high stakes testing instead of balancing it with assessment for development. A balanced system of high stakes tests and assessment for development has the potential to support and nurture the learning of diverse candidates for teaching. Assessment for development is also necessary for bringing novices into the professional community by developing their conceptual understanding, ethical principles and patterns of judgement in practice.

There should be a link between the conceptual framework of the programme, assessment and the use of performance based assessment over time in the teacher education programme. These requirements call for a new understanding of the relationship among standards, learning experiences and assessment. There is need to re-examine the standards of the programme so that they guide what happens in the course work and field work in order that the demonstration of knowledge, skills and disposition implicit in the meaning of the standards are observable. Schafer (2002) adds that the potential of assessment in educational practices are not met and the school reform will not be met until assessment becomes the focus of the reform efforts.

A study that was conducted by Lefoka and Sebatane (2003) shows that assessment procedures used in the National Teachers Training College (NTTC) now known as Lesotho College of Education are problematic and reflect the main method of instruction, that is, the lecture method. Tests are predominantly used in relation to other forms of assessment. They suggested that the assessment procedures that the college use should be consistent with the theory that underpins the Diploma in Primary Programme. That is to balance assessment procedures between tests and performance based assessments.

According to the programme documents studied the BED programme stipulates that course work will be 30% and 70% examinations. It is stated that "To pass a course the student must write three assignments. Any two of the three assignments shall be written in the classroom and one will be written from home based on the agreed assessment approach for the course." (National University of Lesotho Calendar, 1997-2000) Here the courses are listed but the assessments procedures to be followed are not stipulated. In the Diploma programme is the course work is 40% while the examination is 60% (Lesotho College of Education Calendar, 2009-2010). Each content area decides the methods of assessments they are going to use. For example, in DTEP, three assignments are given in all the courses, but the type of assignment and the assessment methods that are required, are decided by individual departments. The students are exposed to the same types of assessments procedures even though they might have different learning styles and abilities, and are from regions with uneven distribution of resources.

Performance Based Assessment

The assessment of learning plays an important part in the measuring of the quality of education. The quality of assessment must be a concern at the stage when designing assessment systems, selecting or developing assessment procedures; administering the procedures; and scoring, reporting and using the results (www.gower.k121.us.staff/assess/4_ch2.htm, 2009). There are three main indicators of the quality of assessment. These are validity, reliability and fairness. Chiappetta, Koballa and Collette (1994) define validity as the extent to which an assessment measures what is needed for a particular purpose and to which the results, as they are interpreted and used, used meaningfully and thoroughly represent the specified knowledge and skills. According to Payne (2003), performance assessment must have two components, the task itself and a clear rubric for scoring. A performance task is an assessment activity that requires a student to demonstrate his/her achievement by producing an extended written or spoken answer, by engaging in group or individual activities or by creating a specific product. Payne explains that a scoring rubric is a coherent set of rules needed to assess the quality of a students' performance. The rules guide your judgements and ensure that you your judgements consistently. A rating scale consists of the numerals, such as 0 to 3, or 1 to 4, that reflect the quality levels of performance. Each numeral responds to a verbal description of the quality level it represents.

To ensure validity in performance assessments Payne (2003) suggests that teachers should be sure what they require students to do in their performance activity matches the learning targets and that the scoring rubric evaluate those same learning targets. They should also be sure the performance tasks they craft require students to use curriculum specified thinking processes; and use many different types of assessment procedures (short-answer items, objectives items, and a variety long and short-term performance tasks) to sample the breadth of the state's standards and the local curriculum's learning targets.

On the other hand reliability is the extent to which an assessment is free from errors of measurement. In performance based assessment evidence for reliability must include evidence that a scoring rubric or scale is used uniformly by all persons who rate the responses, thus ensuring that student's performance received roughly the same score regardless of which rater scored it. Fairness means that assessment procedures do not discriminate against a particular group of students (e.g. race, gender, and disabilities). In recent years publications in education have proposed abandonment of objective testing in favour of performance based assessment. Gronlund (2003) adds that performance assessments are viewed as providing more valid inferences concerning learning than the traditional pencil and paper tests, because they focus on the types of performance tasks that are being taught. But Nitko and Brookhart (2007) argue that performance based assessments can be burdensome and low in reliability. They propose that there be a balance between the traditional pencil and paper and performance based assessments. They insist that learning facts require pencil and paper testing while performance tasks should be used to assess learning targets that require students to apply their knowledge and skills as they perform something.

METHODOLOGY

Literature search was done to gain insight into the issues that are involved in assessment of teacher education programmes especially those in open and distance institutions. Documents were analysed in order to understand what the two ODL teacher education institutions ie National university of Lesotho and Lesotho College of Education stipulate about the assessment procedures to be used in these institutions. Lecturers in the two and only ODL teacher education institutions were interviewed in order to find out their own conceptual background and practices in assessment especially performance based assessment. Five tutors representing LCE and five tutors representing NUL were interviewed.

FINDINGS

It was found out that there is an imbalance in the assessment procedures that are used mainly because teacher educators themselves have limited conceptual background and expertise in assessment. They tend to use more of objective testing than PBA. It was also observed that as a result of the way teacher educators were assessed during teacher training, they are modelling the

same practice in their teaching. The study also revealed that the ODL teacher education institutions in Lesotho are using more part time tutors than full time staff. For example there are 6 full time educators and 10 part timers in the BEd programme while there are 20 full time teacher educators and 112 part timers. This poses a problem of balancing work between their full time jobs and the part time duties, so the tendency is to use mostly objective testing that are easy to mark. When asked why they are using mostly the objective testing assessment methods predominantly they showed that there are too many students in the programmes so they give test that are easy to mark and are not time consuming when it comes to designing the tests. On the question that required them to define performance based assessment, most of them said they could not define it but they know that student teacher assessed through portfolios and projects.

One teacher educator said “Ka nnete ‘m’e ha ke batle le ho u thetsa, ha ke tsebe na e bolellang” This translate to “I wouldn’t want to lie to you really. I don’t know what it means”

When asked how often they use performance based assessments they responded that they were using it very sparingly because first they do not know how to design tasks that require performance based assessments. One gave an example that he once asked student teachers to write about the strategic plans in their schools. He indicated that students took a very long time to complete the task because they, firstly did not know what a strategic plan is therefore would not know if it existed in their school. Secondly the task did not have enough and useful guidelines, so students had to refer back to the lecture time and again. The tutors showed that they are not satisfied with the frequency they are using PBA in their teaching because, if they had enough skills they think they could use it more. Those that have the knowledge and skills to implement PBA said the numbers of students are too high so it becomes difficult to assess the student teachers using PBA. Most of the tutors said they have training in assessment but not enough to assess the student teachers in other assessment methods such as PBA. They reiterated that they needed more training in assessment procedures for their classrooms and specifically in performance based assessment. When asked what they could improve as far as assessment in their institutions was concerned, they showed that there was not much they could improve for as long as the numbers of students are still high, it is likely that they will continue using objective testing.

CONCLUSIONS

From the findings above, it can be concluded that the ODL teacher education institutions in Lesotho are still employing the traditional pencil and paper testing predominantly. Performance based assessment is used very sparingly and in an ad hoc manner. First, the lecturers in these institutions have limited conceptual background and practice as far as assessment is concerned, particularly performance based assessment. Second the numbers of students in these institutions are too high hence it is difficult to implement performance based assessment even for teacher educators who have the knowledge and skills to use it. Uneven distribution of resources in different regions makes it difficult to implement performance based assessment. These institutions operate mostly by part time tutors/lecturers therefore they prefer to give work that takes a short time to assess. Teacher educators need training in assessment and in particular performance based assessment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the ODL institutions in Lesotho should revisit their assessment policies so that they clearly stipulate the methods of assessment that should be used and these should include the alternative methods of assessment such as performance based assessments. It is also recommended that the tutors should be trained in performance based assessment.

POSSIBILITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To strengthen assessment in ODL teacher education in Lesotho the following areas could be investigated:

- Maximum integration of performance based assessment in the assessment of teacher trainees in ODL institutions to improve the quality of Education in Lesotho.
- The effects of uneven distribution of resources on the implementation of alternative methods of assessment in ODL teacher education institutions in Lesotho.

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