Research in Educational Policy and Management

https://repamjournal.org

E-ISSN: 2691-0667

Volume: 5 Issue: 2 2023

pp. 207-225

Unpacking Continuous Assessment: Teacher Knowledge and Attitudes in Zimbabwe Rural Secondary Schools

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Article Info
Received: July 06, 2023
Accepted: October 11, 2023
Published: November 14, 2023

10.46303/repam.2023.17

How to cite
Makuvire, C., Mufanechiya, A., & Dube, B. (2023). Unpacking continuous assessment: Teacher knowledge and attitudes in Zimbabwe rural secondary schools. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, *5*(2), 207-225. https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2023.17

ABSTRACT

The paper explores the implementation of continuous assessment in the context of teacher knowledge and attitudes in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools. Continuous assessment is a new curriculum assessment regime in the curriculum reform agenda in Zimbabwe introduced in the 2015 updated curriculum. The study defines continuous assessment as the mechanism where the learner performance over time constitutes the final grading of the learner. The researchers explain the teacher-related implementation challenges in continuous assessment in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Ten teachers and five secondary school heads from Goromonzi District of Mashonaland East Province in Zimbabwe participated in the study. The five participating heads were conveniently selected, while the ten teachers were randomly sampled to participate in the case study. Semi-structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews were used to collect qualitative data on rural teachers' conceptualization of continuous assessment and how this had shaped their attitudes toward the concept. The general finding from the study was that the new assessment regime had empowered the teachers to make critical decisions about the students they teach and allow learners to co-create knowledge relevant to their life contexts. However, their concerns were around the absence of knowledgeable professionals in the area who can cascade and message the correct and accurate information regarding the implementation of the assessment reform. The study further found that this weakness in the implementation chain had resulted in negative attitudes of teachers and school heads. The study recommends that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education revisit the current continuous assessment to take on board all educational stakeholders' concerns for effective implementation of the assessment reform.

KEYWORDS

Knowledge; attitudes; continuous assessment; secondary schools; implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe introduced a new updated curriculum, which was believed to address the socio-economic, cultural and political challenges be devilling the nation. The perception was that the curriculum inherited in 1980 after political independence was not Zimbabwean but Eurocentric (Chimbunde & Kgari–Masondo, 2021). The New Curriculum Framework being implemented by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Schools Education was meant to redress the curriculum imbalances and its deficiencies in producing a secondary school product capable of contributing to the economy. One suggested way was to introduce an assessment that engaged the learners in innovative hands-on activities linked to immediate problems in their context. The model embraces a combination of Continuous Assessment (CA) and high-stakes national public examinations. CA is simply the assessment of a pupil's progress throughout a course of study. The old assessment model exclusively used the public examinations at the end of each cycle. In the case of the Zimbabwe secondary school system, there is a four-year Ordinary level cycle. At the end of the cycle, learners sit for public examinations and a two-year Advanced level based on 'O' level performance.

However, continuous assessment is not a completely new phenomenon and development in the Zimbabwean education system. Historically, it has been practised in Vocational and Technical subjects like Food Technology, Clothing and Textile Technology, and Building Studies largely borrowed from the colonial F2 education system. The new Curriculum Framework 2015 – 2022 extended it to all the other subjects with modification which has raised many unanswered questions that still remain unanswered. The new assessment framework has become trending in Zimbabwe's education narrative, and the need to focus on what issues are emerging due to its implementation cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the rural context has been chosen given the challenges rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe face regarding curriculum implementation and evaluation.

The introduction of CA in the new curriculum has brought an interestingly new dimension to the teaching, learning and assessment processes. The form of assessment provides useful information about the progress of individual learners as they execute tasks in their different learning areas. Continuous assessment gives evidence of how each individual candidate is responding to the demands of the new curriculum. The assigned tasks are used for both formative and summative assessment purposes. In this regard, the tasks should be crafted with much thought so that the teacher ends up with credible, well-structured and developed materials which have positive consequences for learners, such as motivation, mastery of concepts, problem-solving, and application of what is learned.

The successful implementation of this curriculum reform is dependent upon an empowered teacher (Carl, 2017). Without a doubt, the teacher is the key person in the implementation of any curriculum reform. With their pedagogical content knowledge, teachers are central to the implementation of any curriculum reform. Hence, the study examines teachers' knowledge and attitude towards continuous assessment and what can be done to

ensure successful implementation of this curriculum reform in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools.

Statement of the problem

Many innovations introduced in Zimbabwe have failed at the hands of teachers due to craft literacy, competency and negative attitudes. The innovations that come to mind are Education with Production in the early 1980s and vocationalising the secondary school curriculum. Little has been done to assess the level of knowledge in the rural teachers and the reasons why they have negative attitudes towards the work they are employed and paid to do. Chances that this curriculum assessment innovation may also fail are real if rural teachers are not capacitated and prepared to deal with the reform. The paper was motivated by the need to contribute to the current discourses on CA utilising insights from rural teachers who are at the shop floor of school–based curriculum implementation and assessment.

Objectives

The following three objectives guide the research;

- To unpack the concept of continuous assessment
- To identify rural teachers' pedagogical content knowledge gaps in implementing continuous assessment
- To establish rural teachers' attitudes towards continuous assessment

REVIEW of RELATED LITERATURE

The review of related literature is divided into three sections to help unpack the continuous assessment processes: the concept of continuous assessment, teacher pedagogical content knowledge levels on continuous assessment and teacher attitude towards continuous assessment.

Concept clarification: Continuous Assessment

The anchor concept in the continuous assessment discourse is the term assessment. Assessment can be understood as day-to-day activities that show the abilities of the students to grapple with the central challenges of a discipline in real-life contexts (Dikli, 2003).The major purpose behind establishing schools is teaching and learning, and assessment is an integral ingredient of that process. Thus, evaluating and understanding the current knowledge that learners possess is commonly known as assessment (Alufohai & Akinlosotu, 2016; Dikli, 2003; García-Martínez et al., 2019; Mtshali & Singh-Pillay, 2023). Rana and Zubair (2019) understand continuous assessment as collecting information and observing students periodically to find out what they know, understand and can do. Another exhaustive definition is by Okonkwo (2002), who sees continuous assessment as a method of evaluation in which learners' achievement in the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains from the moment they become learners until the end of it are determined using their gradual performance throughout the course. It is, therefore, a mechanism whereby the final grading of the learners' cognitive, affective and psychomotor

domains of learning systematically takes account of all their performances during a given period of schooling.

Continuous assessment is a low-stakes assessment instead of a once-off assessment in the form of an examination at the end of a course (Bjaelde et al (2017). In the Zimbabwean context, continuous assessment constitutes five identified learning areas of the Continuous Assessment Learning Activities (CALA) given on a term basis. CALA is a student continuous assessment method initially part of the 2015 new curriculum framework but was only implemented during the November 2021 ZIMSEC examinations (Sunday News, 2022). The critical aspects of the approach are that it takes into account learning activities such as projects, portfolios, written work, presentations and many more that require students to perform and demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and proficiency (Mataka, et al., 2022; Sibanda & Marongwe, 2022; Sunday News, 2022). CALA contributes thirty (30%) percent to the students' final marks. It is regarded as a progressive teaching and learning approach which promotes holistic learning (Mataka et al., 2022).Continuous assessment has four characteristics such as being systematic, comprehensive, cumulative and guidance-oriented in nature.

Continuous assessment is systematic

Continuous assessment is cumulative because it is planned to suit the ages and experiences of the learners and is introduced at suitable intervals during the year or course of study (Alufohai & Akinlosotu, 2016). It is also systematic because the teacher specifies well in advance what should be assessed, the time of assessment and the types of assessment tools. The implication of all this takes away fear, anxiety, trepidation and intimidation associated with terminal examinations.

Continuous assessment is comprehensive

Continuous assessment is comprehensive in the sense that it assesses every aspect of the learner's activities. It is not focused on cognition or academic skills only. According to Akporokah (2011), it embraces the affective and psychomotor activities of the learner and uses a variety of instruments like tests and non-test techniques, assignments, examinations, interviews, socio-gram, rating scales and even student notes.

Continuous assessment is cumulative

Alufohai and Akinlosotu (2016) describe CA as cumulative in the sense that there is continuity in data collection and assessment. Each score adds to the previous ones, hence becoming holistic in nature. The student's scores during the course of learning can be used to determine his/her career path well before the terminal examination. That is to say, the assessment mode of a student's performance at the end of the year or course of study is based on cumulative scores from a series of assessment instruments. This aspect of feedback enables key stakeholders to make career decisions for the learner well on time; where assistance is needed, the learner gets it before it is too late.

Continuous assessment is guidance-oriented

Continuous assessment is guidance-oriented because it provides information that can guide the learners to grow and develop in the right direction. Diagnostic and formative tests are carried out from time to time during the course of study. Such tests provide the information needed to guide the learner. To this end, Alufohai and Akinlosotu (2016) suggest that continuous assessment provides opportunities to diagnose strengths and weaknesses on the part of the learner and the teacher on time.

Instruments used in continuous assessment

Continuous assessment is a curriculum reform agenda emphasizing the centrality of learners having a hands-on approach to learning (Gouedard et al., 2020). This curriculum assessment regime is about change in the teachers and learners' objectives, competencies, knowledge, values and attitudes. Dikli (2003) states that the tools used in continuous assessment processes can be divided into two: traditional and alternative. This paper classifies the tools into two;

Traditional tools for continuous assessment

These are single-occasion, one-dimensional and standardized and timed- exercised work (Dikli, 2003) primarily designed to understand and test the student's current knowledge base. Generally, the traditional instruments demand a simple recall of previously learnt knowledge with very little analysis and synthesizing skills. The traditional tools are concerned with assigning grades that judge the quality of the students' achievement and support students teaching (Bjaelde et al., 2017). They become part of the formative evaluation process, providing insights to discover what students have learnt and help them on the path to academic success (Rana & Zubair, 2019). According to Dikli (2003), the tools in this approach include but are not limited to true/false tests, multiple choice, short answer tests and essays.

Alternative tools for continuous assessment

According to Mataka et al. (2022) and Dikli (2003), the alternative tools constitute a more progressive way of continuous assessment, which eliminates the focus on grades and the examination. Dikli (2003) further asserts that the alternative approaches to continuous assessment include assignments that allow students to participate actively and identify tools that can be used: portfolios and projects. These approaches require students, under the teacher's guidance, to display mastery of skills, efforts, progress and achievement of a specific task. According to Alharthi (2022), the alternative tools make education more relevant by directing educational activities towards developing students socially, culturally, mentally, physically and psychologically for future functions.

Merits of continuous assessment

Continuous assessment has its own merits, especially for the learner's school product. It is part of the decolonial agenda that infuses strategies that make secondary school products more productive in life. Its main focus is not only the end result but the student's learning process and progress (Bjaelde et al., 2017). It takes into account learner abilities, including knowledge bases, skills, abilities, values and other relevant achievements in real-life contexts. It has a liberating

effect as learners take ownership of knowledge creation. Teachers play an important role as key agents in this curriculum reform. They can only do so when they are empowered with appropriate skills and knowledge (Berhe & Embiza, 2015; Carl, 2017). Oli and Olkaba (2020) add that when teachers are involved in the final assessment of their students, they develop a positive attitude as it gives them a greater chance to make decisions on the overall assessment of students. It places the teacher at the centre of all performances. Oli and Olkaba (2020) hold that with continuous assessment teachers include the assessments in their instruction and discuss the expected standards with learners, parents and other colleagues. Thus, Dikli (2003) suggests that for successful continuous assessment, there is a need to take heed of the following:

- Selecting assessment tasks that are clearly aligned or connected to what has been taught,
- Sharing scoring criteria for the assessment task with students prior to working on the task,
- Providing students with clear statements of standards, and
- Interpreting students' performance by comparing them to the set standards that are developmentally appropriate.

Through continuous assessment, learners are groomed to know and practise life skills through set standards, thus generating new relevant knowledge (Israel, 2005).Moreover, this ensures that the learner invests considerable time in studying, preparing and building academic and real-life skills under real-life conditions (Bjaelde et al. 2017).

In Rana and Zubair's (2019) reflections, continuous assessment gives teachers ample time to make necessary observations and gather information about their students' potential and learning abilities. Feedback in continuous assessment enables the system to maximise the outcome of the teaching and learning process (Abera et al., 2017). Sintayehu (2016) also agrees that continuous assessment feedback contributes to better student learning outcomes and quality education. In Chu et al.'s (2016) belief, continuous assessment reduces malpractices consistent with high stakes time-constrained examinations.

Challenges of continuous assessment

While continuous assessment is widely celebrated, unlike the single-sitting public examinations at the end of a cycle when students miss out on real-life experiences, it has its own challenges. Bjaelde et al. (2017, p. 11) identify three challenges associated with continuous assessment as follows:

- *It requires a time investment from teachers, which time they may not have, especially when juxtaposed with examination requirements*
- *Students feel that they are constantly assessed and do not give them breathing space*
- *A lot of plagiarism and cheating may occur as the assessment is not under strict controlled examination conditions.*

The other challenge is teacher knowledge levels to administer continuous assessment. Many teachers are not trained in continuous assessment practices and do not have the skills to carry out continuous assessment effectively. According to Carl (2017), teachers need appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. In most countries, workshops and seminars to train teachers in continuous assessment are scarcely organised by the schools and the government. These workshops would help in identifying the appropriate instruments for continuous assessment and how to mark them qualitatively.

Failing to implement a continuous assessment framework result in teachers relying on testing the cognitive domain to the detriment of the other critical domains consistent with continuous assessment. Ahukanna et al. (2017) found out that for the continuous assessment approach to be successfully implemented, teachers need to give a lot of tasks related to real-life contexts, which means more marking. Continuous assessment demands the teacher's time, initiative, patience, objectivity, diligence, resourcefulness and many other skills. All may justify why teachers have a negative attitude towards continuous assessment.

Tebeje and Abiyu (2015) raise the issue of record keeping as one big challenge. For continuous assessment to succeed, record-keeping has to be done adequately and meticulously. The profile of each student should be monitored throughout the whole year, and keeping records of the progress or lack of it becomes very important (Israel, 2005).The security and credibility of the continuous assessment marks should not be compromised.

The other notable challenge is related to plagiarism. When learning tasks such as projects and portfolios are not given adequate time, students may find people to do the work on their behalf (Sunday News, 2022). There is no control over what is produced by the learners.

Teacher knowledge levels on continuous assessment

If properly and holistically implemented, continuous assessment brings hope of better prospects for students (Israel, 2005). This requires that teachers possess the proper knowledge and skills to handle continuous assessment practices and processes. Berhe & Embiza (2015) in their research found that most teachers had good knowledge of continuous assessment. Yet, they were quick to mention that they were aware of the negative attitude which surrounds continuous assessment in educational institutions.

However, based on the research by Tebeje & Abiyu (2015) as cited in Ahukukanna et al. (2017), teachers have limited information on how to administer and implement continuous assessment. The teachers are aware of the advantages of CA but have developed a negative attitude due to poor preparation on how to administer it effectively. Teachers thus have limited skills in constructing assessment tasks, implementing CA protocols and effectively evaluating them during the teaching and learning process.

Teacher attitude towards continuous assessment

Research by Sithole et al. (2021) on teacher perception of the implementation of continuous assessment in Zimbabwean schools revealed that teachers have a negative attitude towards continuous assessment. This attitude emanated from poor preparation before the introduction

of the curriculum reform. Yet another research by Berhe & Embiza (2015) in Nigeria revealed the same results as teachers had a negative attitude towards continuous assessment as a result of overpopulation in public schools. It gave them a lot of work, which at times went unpaid. Tebeje & Abiye (2015) also carried out similar research at a college of Agriculture in Ethiopia and got the same results. The literature results showed mixed feelings towards continuous assessment, although generally, they saw it as a progressive and holistic form of assessment.

Theoretical framework: Pragmatism

Pragmatism is accredited to the work of Charles Sanders Pierce, William James and John Dewey (Carlsen & Mantere, 2007). According to Sharma et al. (2018), pragmatism is based on the theory that considers experiencing as constituting an integral part of knowing. It further works on the notion that reality changes, and therefore, it follows that what works also changes. Thus, according to Carlsen and Mantere (2007) and Sharma et al. (2018), pragmatism can be summarised by the phrase that whatever works are likely to be accurate and premised on two principles:

- Education should have a social function.
- Education should provide real-life experiences to the child.

The best education aims to direct educational activities to develop a citizen socially, culturally, mentally, physically and psychologically (Alharthi, 2022). The new assessment framework being implemented in the Zimbabwean school system is founded on John Dewey's pragmatism principle that education is constantly reorganizing or reconstructing experiences to provide these real-life experiences to the student. Consistent with the demands of continuous assessment, activities are at the core of all educative processes (Sharma et al., 2018). Education institutions like rural secondary schools, as prepared learning environments within the larger social environments, should create space for learners to experiment and solve problems bedeviling society. Thus the aim of secondary school education does not only include teaching knowledge and knowledge accumulation but also how students learn specific content, apply various skills, adapt to new changes and challenges and solve problems (Havenga, 2015, Sharma et al., 2018). The teaching methods are learner–centred and engage the learners in their needs and interests. They include but are not limited to; creating contexts where students think critically, be innovative, solve real-life problems, experiment with new ideas, projects and field tours (Alharthi, 2022). The continuous assessment model is, thus, designed to make education curricula more meaningful and useful to the Zimbabwean context and help solve a myriad of economic and social problems.

METHODOLOGY

The research design of this study is an exploratory case study. An exploratory case study design is useful when the research aim is to develop new insights about a phenomenon that has not been sufficiently researched (Ferreira & Lind, 2023). This design was chosen as it allowed in-

depth subjective reasoning in an unrestricted manner of the teachers' knowledge levels, attitudes and experiences towards continuous assessment at the secondary school level (Lekunze & Strom, 2017). In addition, the exploratory case study was appropriate as it allowed an examination of specific individual teachers and heads in their contexts to raise issues that affected them regarding continuous assessment at rural secondary schools.

Participants

A total of fifteen (15) participants, ten (10) secondary school teachers and five (5) school heads, one from each of the sampled rural secondary schools, took part in the study. This allowed the research to generate data from different educational rural contexts in Zimbabwe. Using random sampling, two (2) certified teachers were picked from each school. Random sampling was used in this qualitative study given that all secondary school teachers implemented continuous assessment. Convenience sampling was used for the selection of school heads. By virtue of being head of a selected school, the head automatically became a participant. This was done to allow easy access to the schools and teachers. Consistent with ethical practice, the study did not use the real names of participants in order to protect their identities so that information was not traced back to them.

Table 1 summarises the demographic data of the participants.

Table 1

Demographic Data of Teacher Participants

Age	30-40years	41-50years	Above 50years
	6	3	1
Gender	Male	Female	
	4	6	
Experience	Below ten years	10-20years	Above 20years
	3	5	2
Qualification	Masters' degree	First degree	Diploma
	1	6	3

Data collection

Semi-structured questionnaires were used to generate data from the ten (10) teacher respondents then the five (5) school heads were interviewed. The data collection instruments were designed to allow the participants to express their experiences in implementing the continuous assessment as well as the challenges encountered. The questionnaire and interview protocol were validated through pilot studying the instruments with five teachers and one school head from a context similar to the research study. The researchers did the administration and retrieval of questionnaires within a period of one week. The interviews were then carried out a week after the questionnaires were completed. Consistent with qualitative data collection strategies, we created a research journal, writing notes and connecting ideas, thus recording

the participants' reflections (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). Data from the in-depth interviews were captured using a digital recorder and notes with the observed ethical principle of informed consent.

Data analysis

After collecting the qualitative data through field notes and diaries, we engaged a specialist with qualitative data analysis software NVivo 10 version experience to assist in marking, tagging and sorting data and the generation of themes. Verbatim comments from participants were also included to support each theme raised during the data analysis process. To ensure trustworthiness in this research, two data generation strategies, in-depth interviews and semi-structured questionnaires, were used for data triangulation.

FINDINGS and DISCUSSION

The research aimed at finding the attitudes and preparedness of Zimbabwean teachers to administer continuous assessment in line with the demands of the 2015 to 2022 updated curriculum. The findings from the semi-structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews were categorised into themes based on the three main research questions. The presented data were a summary of the participants' responses as they gave their lived experiences of implementing the assessment reform in rural secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

Research question 1: What is your understanding of continuous assessment?

The findings confirmed Carl's (2017) assertion that teachers need appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to prepare and mark appropriate instruments for continuous assessment. In as much as rural school teachers revealed an understanding of the concept of continuous assessment, their knowledge was too sketchy to implement the curriculum reform. To most teachers, continuous assessment is a term that is trending in education, but most of them had come across it during their tertiary education. They referred to it as course work, the same as the performance marks recorded during the learning course. The teachers' knowledge as students is not enough for them to administer the continuous assessment effectively. This is supported by some of the responses in the semi-structured questionnaires by the teachers. One senior graduate teacher had this to say;

Anyone who went to college is aware of continuous assessment because we used it. In many courses, our final marks were greatly improved by these coursework marks as they allowed us to research and thoroughly prepare the lecturer-generated tasks for presentation.

The teacher's response not only showed knowledge of what continuous assessment is but also indicated some of its advantages: it boosts the student's finale grading as it is carried out in an open environment. The repeated use of the synonym of continuous assessment, 'coursework' also revealed that the teachers are aware of the fact that continuous assessment tasks have to be spread throughout the course of study. This showed that teachers over-exaggerate their ignorance of continuous assessment. The main problem is probably the issue of attitude.

The researchers were more concerned about the teachers' negative attitude towards continuous assessment. As indicated by Berhe & Embiza (2015), the major challenge facing the implementation of continuous assessment is the negative attitude which surrounds it in educational institutions. One degreed teacher in his early 60s showed a lack of interest in the curriculum reform as he said,

Yes, I know what continuous assessment is because l experienced it at the university level, but it needs thorough supervision as it gives students room to copy each other or even plagiarise from textbooks and the internet.

One school head with a Master of Education degree in Curriculum Studies showed an in-depth understanding of continuous assessment as he defined it appropriately as;

. . . a form of assessment which allows the classroom teacher and the school to have a say in the final grading of their learners. It is also comprehensive because it measures the student's performance of the learner over a period of time rather than just one sitting which can be affected by a mishap or illness in the life of the learner.

The responses above showed that rural schools have a mixed bag of teacher qualifications, attitudes and understanding of curriculum issues. The responses revealed that some school heads have vast knowledge of curriculum studies whilst other school heads and teachers did not have sufficient in-depth knowledge of continuous assessment. This shows a narrow appreciation of the concept and its application. What was worrisome was the fact that the rural teachers who took part in the research study were reluctant to take up the task with the required zeal and energy. This would mean that the heads and teachers were not empowered with requisite theoretical knowledge regarding the new assessment model, which was likely to negatively impact on how they would administer this type of assessment. The finding is consistent with Amori and Youran's (2014) observation that when a teacher is not empowered with the knowledge and skills to implement an innovation, the innovation is less likely to succeed. Because of this weakness, there is a need for the teachers to be craft literate about what continuous assessment means in order to effectively implement it in the school. In addition, member buy-in was needed to convince the teachers to accept the curriculum reform in earnest.

Research question 2: What are the teacher knowledge gaps in implementing continuous assessment?

Research carried out in Nigeria by Berhe & Embiza (2015) confirms the finding that one of the main challenges is teacher knowledge levels to administer continuous assessment. Many teachers are not trained in continuous assessment practices. Many of the teachers do not have the skills to carry out continuous assessments effectively. To Carl (2017), teachers need appropriate continuous assessment knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. In most countries, workshops and seminars to train teachers in continuous assessment are scarcely organised by the schools and the government. These workshops would help in identifying the appropriate instruments for continuous assessment and how to mark them qualitatively. The findings

confirmed that rural secondary school teachers in Zimbabwe were not prepared to administer continuous assessment. They had many knowledge gaps that needed to be filled in before implementing the curriculum reform in the schools. This is evidenced by the responses from both the teachers and heads. One teacher indicated that;

At first, continuous assessment came in the form of 'tasks' designed by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and passed down to schools. Teachers did not have adequate knowledge of how to set the tasks.

Another teacher responded,

Most teachers did not know how to supervise and assess the tasks. As teachers, we needed to undergo in-service training on how to administer the tasks. Without this re-training, there were bound to be problems of standardisation. Different teachers would mark the same task differently.

To support the knowledge gap that exists among the teachers, one school head focused on the second phase of continuous assessment implementation in Zimbabwe. In the second phase, individual teachers were requested to set their own CALAs. According to the rural school heads, this was even worse than the first phase, which had standardised tasks. Another head argued that;

In the second phase, teachers were asked to formulate their own CALAs, and administer and mark them. The same teachers who failed to mark already designed tasks were given an extra duty to set the assessment tasks. Most teachers had a tough time setting the CALAs. Most of them ended up sharing the CALAs guides on social media, killing the essence of their relevance to the school environment.

It was noted that even external assessment was poorly conducted. The school head at the farm school said,

Even those who came to moderate the CALAs on behalf of ZIMSEC did not know what to do since there was no standard guide through which to measure the CALAs and learner performance.

Lack of knowledge on how to develop standardised and meaningful tasks for the learners also led to poor implementation of continuous assessment in Zimbabwean rural schools. As revealed in the pragmatic theoretical framework, education has a social function; it has to provide real-life experiences. If teachers are not well prepared, there is a danger that the assessment tasks administered to children might not best represent the students' daily experiences. In support of the theoretical framework, teachers and school heads further mentioned that a three-day workshop was held to prepare teachers for the second phase of continuous assessment. The participants bemoaned the lack of seriousness by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in rolling out this important assessment innovation by having a once-off training workshop in preparation for second phase implementation. The training was inadequate to prepare the teachers for the formulation of standard and relevant assessment tasks. Two teachers concurred that the workshop was;

. . . a waste of time since the facilitators had no answers to most of the questions. The major weakness is that there were too many hands exchanging the information before it reached the classroom teachers, who are the actual implementers.

. . . most of the facilitators were just reading notes from manuals from head office. We felt coerced to implement the continuous assessment as the facilitators reminded us that decisions had already been made. Ours was to implement rather than ask questions.

The data showed that there was an assumption that teachers are aware of what needs to be done, and the training was far less than the expected training. Implementation of continuous assessment was therefore made a policy before the teachers acquired adequate knowledge, thereby compromising the quality of the implementation of the assessment framework. Instead of using varied activities that appeal to all learning domains, the practice has become less of a continuous assessment as the practice has remained tied to formal test settings. It has remained on the simple recall lower-level domain.

The other knowledge gap raised was concerned with computational skills on the part of the teachers. Two rural school heads raised the issue of inadequate skills;

. . . most teachers in rural schools show low-level skills in the use of statistical models. This is because of our unfortunate situation of deprivation of educational essentials in the current technological age. We do not have computers, and we cannot afford them given the low fee structure our learners pay.

. . . most of our schools do not have electricity and access to internet connectivity; hence, they are left out of the digital world, which is critical in the current assessment regime where research is its hallmark. These skills are necessary in presenting learner performance in a neat and logical manner. Because of this weakness, most teachers end up using scores which are easy to round off into a percentage without really weighing the depth and breadth of work given.

The above responses reveal that rural teachers and students work under very difficult resource-constrained conditions. The rural schools have been left out of the computer age. This places the teachers and the learners at a decided disadvantage. Given their situation, they have to resort to traditional data collection and presentation methods, making their work cumbersome. The knowledge gaps experienced by the teachers are man-made and point to an ailing education system where information dissemination has not been accurate and adequate. This finding is consistent with Carl's (2017) observation that teachers need appropriate resources, knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to effectively implement reform. Without these prerequisites, the implementation and the creation of new knowledge that is the spirit of the new assessment regime may not be possible. This also confirms Mataka et al.'s (2022) finding that CALAs in Zimbabwe have multiple insufficiencies regarding attending to learners' cognitive, affective and psychomotor abilities because teachers are constrained in several ways. Furthermore, the data points to a top-down coercive approach in which the Ministry of Education, through its various arms, dictated the assessment implementation without engaging the teachers. In as much as continuous assessment has a lot of advantages on paper, there is a

need for thorough preparation on the part of the implementers for the reform to make a noticeable mark in the lives of the learners.

Question 3: What is the teacher's attitude towards continuous assessment?

Most participants expressed that continuous assessment has a lot of positive effects on the students' final grade. However, because of the way it was introduced in the schools, especially the rural ones, the teachers have developed a negative attitude towards its continuation. For successful implementation of the continuous assessment approach, teachers need to give formative tests and supervise and mark tasks which mean more work on the part of the teacher. One degree teacher said;

Continuous assessment makes heavy demands on the already overloaded teacher's time, initiative, patience, objectivity, resourcefulness and carefulness.

In addition another teacher lamented the issue of heavy workloads, saying,

The teacher has to initiate of the setting of goals and clarifying them in assessing students. The teacher also has to be careful in record keeping and continuity of records and making a follow-up on students to meet due dates.

The issue of making a follow-up on learners was also emphasized on by one of the school heads during the in-depth interviews. She noted that,

. . . because of the rushed introduction of continuous assessment in schools, both parents and students are not making it easy for the teachers, hence the negative attitude. Most students do not adhere to stipulated dates of submissions. Teachers have to follow up on the students up to the time of submission of marks. Some students end up doing the five CALAs at one go, defeating the whole concept of continuous assessment.

The response above shows that the negative attitude towards continuous assessment has grown out of frustration given the push by the Education Ministry without laying a firm ground for the implementation of the model of assessment. The negative attitude has also found expression in learners and parents as well. If teachers had been well prepared for this curriculum reform,, they would also have prepared the other stakeholders since they have direct contact with the students and community in which they teach.

During the in-depth interviews, one of the heads of the school visibly showed his disgust over the introduction of continuous assessment. His reason was a lack of resources. The activities are supposed to have an element of research and also show computer literacy. According to her, most rural schools do not have enough computers and internet connectivity to allow the learners to conduct their research. In some cases, students would need to print their work: rural schools do not have enough printers and bond paper for such exercises. This was supported by the rural boarding school head, who observed that,

Research is difficult to administer with borders, they have limited access to the outside world from which they are supposed to gather information. For security reasons, we cannot allow them to go out of the school premises. We have to compromise and ask them to interview and collect data from their teachers and ancillary staff. In the end, the students end up with the

same responses, which might not be generalisable and reliable. Further, the costs are beyond us given the hyper-inflationary situation in the country.

Teachers also lamented that continuous assessment is difficult to implement in rural Zimbabwean schools because of the large class size. One male teacher had this to say;

Zimbabwean classes are oversized; in the case of my school, two Form Four classes have as many as seventy-four students each. In many cases, one teacher is assigned to teach the whole stream (four classes), and in such circumstances, it is difficult for the teacher to effectively undertake a thorough assessment of each student in the stream.

The responses by teachers revealed that they disliked continuous assessment because they saw it as impractical in public schools, and this reflects the same findings by Tebeje & Abiye (2015) in Ethiopia. Teachers at the college felt that continuous assessment leads to additional workload on the teacher. In support of the sentiments from Ethiopia, Zimbabwean rural teachers added that so many issues need attention to enable the smooth implementation of the innovative assessment model. The rural teachers were not really against the whole concept of continuous assessment but were concerned about the operating environment, which militated against the smooth implementation of the reform. The problem was with the way it was introduced and administered, which has in the implementation not attended to the philosophy of pragmatism to engage learners in situational analysis and solving real-life problems (Sharma et al., 2018). The data showed that the implementation had not taken root given that the assessment model has existed for the past two years. Like any other curriculum reforms, there is a need for thorough preparation on the part of the policy makers, adequate funding and provision of both human and material resources as well as member buy-in from all stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

The study raised pertinent issues regarding the challenges related to implementing the new assessment reform, continuous assessment. At the centre of the implementation of the assessment regime should be an empowered teacher who possesses a strong repertoire of skills such as a sound knowledge base, high teaching skills and participation in decision-making to meet important educational goals. A teacher in this mould can implement the continuous assessment with ease and confidence, with the net result being the production of students who realise their different capacities and competencies, which is what CA seeks to achieve. The notion of CA is to reduce the over-dependence on assessing one domain, the cognitive that has dominated the assessment discourse, to holistic and eclectic approaches that grow students to be able to solve their own situational problems. The fact that the rural secondary school teachers in Zimbabwe have not been equipped with the right knowledge, skills and attitudes towards CA has resulted in cosmetic reform implementation. It has been observed that on paper, continuous assessment was being practiced in the Zimbabwean rural secondary schools. In reality, teachers do continuous testing of students, which is inconsistent with the dictates of

continuous assessment. In a worse situation, these tests are written at the end of the course for marks to be forwarded to the examination board for input, defeating the spirit of continuous assessment. There is a need to learn from past experiences in education that top-down approaches to the implementation of any curriculum reform where teachers are not involved may not yield the desired educational results.

Recommendations

In view of the problems facing continuous assessment implementation in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools, the following recommendations are made:

- The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should adequately prepare teachers, especially rural teachers, on how to construct, administer and assess different types of continuous assessment tasks that cater for all the domains. Workshops of this nature should be conducted by knowledgeable personnel and given adequate time to allow teachers to clear uncertainties as well as to avoid the current conflicting messaging associated with the implementation of continuous assessment in Zimbabwean rural secondary schools.
- Rural teachers teach in resource-constrained environments, and there is a need for affirmative action to assist them with the much-needed resources to effectively implement continuous assessment. Without these needed resources, the assessment reform may not be implemented with the spirit and purpose it was conceived and meant to achieve.
- There is a need to develop manageable teaching loads for teachers to effectively supervise the continuous assessment tasks to completion. Having too many learners to manage may lead to teacher burnout thus compromising the quality of the learner task outputs.
- Continuous assessment is multi-stakeholder in nature, and there is a need to sensitise important stakeholders in education like communities, parents and students for their active contribution and participation. With support from these stakeholders, the much-needed results from the implementation of the assessment reform may be realized.

Area for further research

The study was conducted with rural schools in one district; the results might not apply to other school environments in Zimbabwe. Therefore, the study recommends further study on the topic with a wider sample to achieve generalisability.

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by National Research Fund Grant 129837

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