Continuous assessment in our schools: advantages and problems


Introduction

Educational assessment provides the necessary feedback we require in order to maximise the outcomes of educational efforts. The assessment of learners’ learning provides objective evidences necessary in the decision-making process in education. As correctly pointed out by Cone and Foster (1991), good measurement resulting in accurate data is the foundation of sound decision making. There is little doubt among educational practitioners about the special value of assessment as a basic condition for effective learning. The major problems of assessment of learners have been in the approaches or methods.

In 1996, near the end of the academic year, which is a time for revision and preparation for the end of year examination while I was revising with the learners and informing them on the number of papers they would be writing, one learner asked, “Sir, why are we taught for a whole year and then given a one-and-half hour paper to determine whether or not we know the subject?”

This is a question that has been bothering educational practitioners since time immemorial. Would a one short examination adequately assess what a learner has learnt over a long period of schooling? How would you grade a learner who happens to fall ill and could not write the final examination?

To answer these questions, educational measurement experts and educational policy makers have come up with the concept of continuous assessment. Many educational systems all over the world have adopted this approach in assessing learners’ achievement in many subject areas. Similarly, in Namibia, the Ministry of Basic Education and Culture has directed that continuous assessment be widely used in the educational system. Final assessment of learners in the primary and junior secondary schools involves to a large extent scores generated by the learners from continuous assessment. Only the final grading in the (H)IGCSE does not include continuous assessment scores. Such an assessment procedure which entails decision making on our learners and educational system in general is worthy of a close look. In this paper, I tried to evaluate at the meaning of continuous assessment, its advantages and the problems that could be encountered in its practical application.

What is continuous assessment?

Continuous assessment of learners’ progress could be defined as a mechanism whereby the final grading of learners in the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of learning systematically takes account of all their performances during a given period of schooling (Falayalo, 1986). Assessment in the cognitive domain is associated with the process of knowledge and understanding. The affective domain
applies to characteristics such as attitudes, motives, interests, and other personality traits. Assessment in the psychomotor domain involves assessing the learners’ ability to use his or her hands (e.g. in handwriting, construction and projects).

Another definition by Airasian (1991) describes continuous assessment as an assessment approach which should depict the full range of sources and methods teachers use to gather, interpret and synthesise information about learners; information that is used to help teachers understand their learners, plan and monitor instruction and establish a viable classroom culture. On their own part, Baker and Stites (1991) opined that continuous assessment should involve a formal assessment of learners’ affective characteristics and motivation, in which they will need to demonstrate their commitment to tasks over time, their work-force readiness and their competence in team or group performance contexts.

From these definitions, one could infer that continuous assessment is an assessment approach which involves the use of a variety of assessment instruments, assessing various components of learning, not only the thinking processes but including behaviours, personality traits and manual dexterity. Continuous assessment will also take place over a period of time. Such an approach would be more holistic, representing the learner in his/her entirety. It will begin with the decisions that the teachers perform on the first day of school and end with the decisions that the teachers and administrators make on the learners regarding end-of-year grading and promotion.

**Advantages of continuous assessment**

One of the expected advantages of continuous assessment lies in its being guidance oriented. Since it will involve data gathering over a long period of time, it will yield more accurate data reaching the teachers early enough to modify instruction. This could play a vital role in diagnosing and remediating areas of learners’ weaknesses if properly anchored in what occurs in classrooms. Continuous assessment is an approach that would capture the full range of learners’ performance. Teachers and administrators would thus be able to assess learners’ progress and would have time to correct the problems.

Another advantage of continuous assessment is that it places teachers at the centre of all performance-assessment activities. It encourages more teacher participation in the overall assessment or grading of his/her learners. As suggested by Paris et al. (1991), teachers must be given opportunities to select and review assessments so that they become involved and knowledgeable in the process. Through this approach, teachers would be able to integrate assessment and assessment results into instructional practice. Teachers will be expected to incorporate assessment into the larger learning framework and possibly to provide evidence regarding how assessment information is used to inform and guide instruction for individual learners. According to Lewis (1997), with continuous assessment teachers must embed the assessment in their instructions, score the assessments and discuss standards for good learners’ work with colleagues, parents and learners.
Problems of continuous assessment

I will not any attempt to cover all the problems that could be associated with continuous assessment practice in our schools. Rather, I will mainly concentrate on the problems of continuous assessment that could be associated with the teachers. This is because they are the main implementers of the programme. The problems of continuous assessment that could be associated with the teachers include: their skills in test construction and administration, and their attitudes toward the continuous assessment approach and record keeping.

One of the important aspects of continuous assessment is the availability of valid and reliable tests which could be used in all schools. There is a need to construct these tests following established procedures and practices. To make the results comparable across all the schools, teachers need to be equipped with skills of test construction and administration. This could be done through teacher training institutions so that teachers are equipped with such skills as part of their training and certification. The Ministry of Basic Education and Culture could also organise workshops on test construction and administration as in-service training for serving teachers.

Apart from the skills of test construction measuring cognitive aspects of learning, teachers should also be able to measure the learners’ affective attributes such as attitudes, motives, interests, values and other personality characteristics. Such characteristics could be as important as others associated with intelligence. They could assist the teachers and administrators in understanding the learners better, both in the process of education and in the practical affairs of everyday life. They could help us answer questions such as why learners perceived to have high academic abilities do not do well at school. They also provide clues about the interest patterns of learners which could be used in their placement into schools of higher learning and for employment purposes. According to Obemeata (1988) it is believed that anti-social behaviours such as truancy, lying, cheating, stealing and poor attitude to work could be corrected by providing affective education in schools.

For successful implementation of the continuous assessment approach, teachers need to give most tests, which means more marking. They need to observe the learners more keenly to assess their affective outcomes, and there will be more records to be kept on the learners. All these could mean more work to the teacher, more demand on his or her time and more responsibility on him or her. This means they must be professionally and attitudinally prepared for operating the system. If the teacher is not adequately prepared for operating the system, it may lead to a tendency to merely ‘cook up’ scores in the name of continuous assessment. Thus, teachers should be encouraged to form favourable attitudes toward the practice. They should be made aware of the requirements of the system, its importance and how to implement it.

Another problem with continuous assessment is the issue of record keeping. Learners’ records have to be adequately and meticulously kept over a long period of time. They should be properly stored and easily retrievable. A related issue is that of collation. Scores may have to be combined from different sources using various weights. Teachers will need basic arithmetical operations of addition and multiplication;
calculators may be handy here. So that scores are not misplaced, marks books or registers for learners could be used.

**Suggestions for further research**

The continuous assessment approach has many advantages over the short method of assessment. It will make assessment more meaningful and more representative of the learners’ overall abilities. However, problems will occur from time to time in the course of its application in our schools. Many of these problems will only be known when follow-up occurs. I will suggest that researchers should be conducted into the following areas:

- Teachers’ perception and understanding of continuous assessment.
- Teachers’ knowledge of skills of test construction and administration.
- Teachers’ attitudes toward the programme.
- The relationship between continuous assessment scores and the final scores in the Junior Secondary Certificate Examination.

**References**


Fuhrman and B. Malen (eds.) *The politics of curriculum and testing*. Pages 139-159.


