Chapter 70

Teachers’ Experiences Implementing the Continuous Assessment Component of the Secondary Entrance Assessment at a Primary School Facing Challenging Circumstances

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ABSTRACT

There is a lack of research within the Trinidad and Tobago context about teaching practices within schools facing challenging circumstances. Furthermore, proponents of the current assessment reform have not considered whether the CAC initiative may compound the challenges teachers in these contexts experience. This study utilized a qualitative case study design that aimed at exploring teachers’ experiences implementing the CAC under the difficult conditions they confront at their school. The findings revealed seven major themes: slow teacher buy-in; inadequate front end training; dysfunctional support systems; parental apathy; contextual barriers and ad hoc implementation. These findings suggest that teachers did not buy into the CAC because of deficiencies in training, parental support, and external support systems.
INTRODUCTION

Background

In today’s culturally and intellectually diverse classrooms, teachers must effectively service all students in the classrooms, regardless of the challenges they face. This premise has necessitated the call for educators to rethink crucial aspects of instruction and assessment such as a move from traditional forms of assessment such as sit down, pen and pencil tests to authentic, alternative and continuous forms of assessment. This move was an effort to “even the playing field” for all students. The World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand, formally established this need for assessment reform when it stated that the focus of basic education should be on actual learning outcomes. Additionally, UNESCO (2000), commonly known as The Dakar Framework for Action, stressed the importance of having a clear definition and accurate assessment of learning outcomes.

Regionally, the Caribbean Examinations Council has introduced a new regional Grade 6 assessment called the Caribbean Primary Exit Assessment. The remodel was premised on the view that assessment comprises of two main facets. There is a formative element that is assessment for learning and a summative one that refers to assessment of learning. (Caribbean Examinations Council, 2011).

To date, both Grenada and St. Vincent and the Grenadines have adopted this assessment. Likewise, The Barbados Secondary Schools Entrance Examination (BSSEE) has incorporated a formative element. Trinidad and Tobago followed suit in 2011 when the Ministry of Education (MOE) embarked on a revision of the primary school curriculum to ensure that it met the needs of development in a modern society.

This proposed reform in the assessment came with the introduction of the Continuous Assessment Component (CAC) of the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) for standard four and five students in the 2012-2013 academic year. It was the formative assessment element of the selective Secondary Entrance Assessment. This form of assessment has been proven to be responsible for significant learning gains among low-achieving and students with learning disabilities (Black & William, 1998). The relationship between curriculum, assessment and instruction is the key position in understanding the operational framework for CAC. (The Ministry of Education, 2013)

Educational reform to reverse underachievement is high on the political agenda in developed countries such as the USA, Canada and England, (Harris, James, Gunraj, Clarke, & Harris, 2006). More recently, the drive to raise standards in difficult or challenging contexts has become a central and urgent issue in the education policy in countries (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). However, in Trinidad and Tobago, adequate attention has not been paid to the issue of context (De Lisle, 2011) as some schools contend with a variety of external contexts more challenging than others (Harris, James, Gunraj, Clarke, & Harris, 2006).

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has seemingly taken the ill-fated route of the United States. NCLB (2002) was characterized by a mandate for accountability. However, the act was myopic towards the social and economic problems that plagued the majority of underperforming schools (Harris et al., 2006). The MOE has forged ahead with the implementation of the CAC despite resistance from major stakeholders. There was little concerted effort to examine how different schools will be affected by this initiative.

The predominant message of the current policy drive is that the problems of low achievement are placed on the schools (Harris et al., 2006). Thus, the technocrats have assumed that the solution is for teachers to improve their practice, without looking too deeply or seriously at the contextual factors of the schools in which they work. This places many teachers and students at a disadvantage because many of the schools deemed “underperforming” will continue to be “vilified” and “rejected” (De Lisle,2011, p.2).