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Continuous Assessment in Classroom: Prospects for Improvement

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BACKGROUND

The assessment and examination practices in school education have been the serious concern for several decades in our country. Several national level commissions and committees had pointed out to the need for improvement in the curricular, the pedagogical and the processes in school education. Regarding the assessment practices, the NPE (1986) recommended reduction of emphasis on external examination and introduction of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) in its place to improve quality of school education. In the context of non-detention policy in order to universalize the elementary education, CCE was highly recommended to ensure the learning attainments by children, thereby enhancing quality of education. The National Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Education (1988) based on the recommendations of NPE (1986) emphasized on defining minimum levels of learning at all

stages of primary school education followed by the recommendations for implementing CCE in schools. It also stressed on inclusion of the assessment of psychomotor skills; physical, social and emotional development and recording of evidences and using grades instead of marks. Pursuing this, the NCERT and the RIEs played a vital role in implementing CCE in the regions. The centrally-sponsored scheme "SOPT" was implemented to train the teachers on the pedagogical innovations such as minimum levels of learning and activity-based approaches along with the continuous and comprehensive evaluation. Though the scheme had an impact over the pedagogical and the assessment practices of teachers for some period in the States, it waned off gradually over a period of time, as there were no consistent follow-ups and monitoring of the programme in schools. In the year 2000, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE, 2000) had reiterated the

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recommendations made in the earlier Curriculum Framework (1988) with respect to continuous and comprehensive evaluation. It pointed to the learning and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) of the learners. The document expressed the need for comprehensive student portfolios based on observational and situational tests; need for a pedagogical shift by drawing readers' attention to social constructivist approach; continuity of evaluation through periodical assessment; diagnosis of learning difficulties and to providing remedial instruction; shift from 'content' to the 'processes' of learning and evaluation of personal and social qualities.

Based on the recommendations made in this curriculum framework, a scheme called 'School-based Evaluation' with continuous and comprehensive evaluation as its central core was developed and implemented by NCERT at primary level in all Demonstration Schools of RIEs, and in some of the Kendriya Vidyalayas on experimental basis in 2001. The outcomes of the project were found successful and promising, and the above schools continued practising continuous and comprehensive evaluation, even after the project completion. Meanwhile, it was observed that a few States like Kerala and Karnataka in the southern region had ventured into introducing grading to assess students at different levels phase-wise in their schools.

The National Curriculum Framework (2005), which came later, elaborated the need for pedagogical shift highlighting the point that the learners are capable of constructing knowledge on their own, and the teacher's role is that of a facilitator rather than a transmitter of knowledge. With this perspective as the basis, it had reflected some of the recommendations of the earlier frameworks in its document along with certain other measures to improve upon the evaluation system in school education. It recommended the need for a shift from content-based testing to problem-solving; assessment of projects, activities and assignments of various kinds and lab work; assessment of higher thinking abilities; assessment of participation, interest and level of involvement in group work, etc.

Despite the above concerns and emphasis on reforming the evaluation practices, the problems of assessment of learning seemed to have remained perennial due to several inconsistencies and narrowly conceived views and aims of learning and assessment. The assessment practices carried out in different parts of the country in school education raises serious concerns towards quality of learning and assessment. While few States in the country had attempted to bring in some innovation in their assessment schemes which are debatable, and needs an analysis, the CBSE had also made efforts to bring in some

evaluation reforms in its schools. It made continuous and comprehensive evaluation as mandatory in its affiliated schools by formulating formative and summative schemes along with the guidelines for the teachers to implement them. The research projects carried out on the implementation of continuous and comprehensive evaluation in certain states and in the CBSE schools reveal some of the myths and the misconceptions held by the teachers, parents and students as well. The actual purpose of the continuous and comprehensive evaluation and its ways and means seemed to have been totally misconstrued by the practitioners in the field. The assessment practices related to continuous and comprehensive evaluation in schools show clearly that there is a gap between what is intended and what is actually practised in the field. In the absence of clear understanding of the purpose and the implementation procedures, the continuous and comprehensive evaluation ends to become more of a ritual and of an administrative requirement rather than guiding the learners towards better learning and development.

In light of the above, it is intended in this paper, to discuss about the conceptual premises of continuous and comprehensive evaluation, its ways and means to improve the assessment practices that help in the learning process as well as in the overall development of

learners. Some of the observations made in the paper regarding the classroom assessment practices are field based, which necessitates a need for reconceptualising our ideas of assessment, its means and procedures for improvement. The main concern is how the assessment of learners is carried out in classrooms, and its possible consequences on learning and development of learners. The paper also seeks to examine the status and the role of formative assessment in the context of constructivist learning and suggests measures for aligning the assessment with the pedagogical context of present school education.

Conceptual Premises of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation

Most of the teachers believe that continuous and comprehensive evaluation is nothing, but a couple of formative and summative assessments of students' learning. The continuous and comprehensive evaluation is based on the principle that learning is a process and a continuous activity which needs to be assessed in order to know how the learner is learning. It implies that there is a need to assess the learner in order to ascertain how much she/he has understood and attained the expected levels. It is a continued monitoring process of students' progress through its formative means and tools in the regular classroom assessment, as well as through

the other formative modes such as assigning projects, assignments, etc. Not only continuously assessing, but it also involves feeding forward for improvement in an area of learning. While the students' progress is monitored at regular intervals, the progressive or retrograde changes are estimated and teacher's support and guidance is provided. The continuous and comprehensive evaluation shifts its focus from the notions of 'passing' and 'failing' to the idea of ongoing 'growth' or 'improvement'. The shift in assessment can also be understood from the de-emphasis of comparing one individual with another, to re-emphasis on developing knowledge and competencies. The continuous evaluation is holistic in its aims, wherein, it recognises the need of encouraging development through its formative procedures not only in academic subjects but also in cross-curricular and co-curricular skills.

The comprehensive evaluation involves a holistic assessment of cognitive understanding, application and other higher order thinking abilities, as well as the assessment of health habits, work habits, cleanliness, co-operation, and other social and personal qualities through simple and manageable means of tools. It not only helps in checking the standards of performance in both scholastic and co-scholastic areas, but also in decision-making regarding various aspects of teaching-learning process, improving the learning performance of students, increasing

quality, efficiency and accountability. It covers a whole range of learners' experience in the context of total school activities which include physical, intellectual, emotional and social-personal qualities, interest and values. Because of this, it also necessitates a need to use a wide range of assessment techniques such as individual and group assessment procedures, performance assessments, self and peer assessments and multiple assessment tools in addition to certain conventional ones. Since continuous and comprehensive evaluation is also based on the assumption that the teacher knows her/his students best, so she/he should only be entrusted with the responsibility of assessment. In this perspective, it becomes the responsibility of the teacher to select the most appropriate technique depending upon the situations and to determine what to assess and why and develop the necessary tools accordingly, rather than depending upon certain rigid and conventional modes of assessment. The continuous and comprehensive evaluation implies that there should be congruence between the expected levels of performance, teaching-learning process and assessment, thus making it an integral part of the teaching-learning process.

Planning of various learning experiences and creating learning contexts that help in the attainment of desired performance of learners,

and providing continuous feedback and feed forward should be an inbuilt part of the teaching-learning process. It should also yield a basis for planning the next educational steps in response to students' needs and learning problems. Unfortunately, the continuous and comprehensive evaluation in our schools is perceived to be simply giving an account of students' performance on formative and summative assessments. The identification of learners' learning problems and difficulties in attaining the desired performance levels and facilitating learners' improvement by providing alternative learning experiences seemed to be totally out of focus. The basic point to be remembered is assessment provides information on children's strengths and weaknesses, in relation to expected curriculum goals, which teachers could use in planning what to do next. The formative and the summative assessment procedures used under continuous and comprehensive evaluation help to maintain desired standards of performance, thus maintaining quality control. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) policy task group on assessment defines formative assessment in terms of monitoring learning and informing teaching decisions on a day-to-day basis. It also means that teachers using judgements of children's knowledge or understanding to feedback into the teaching process and to determine

for individual children whether to re-explain the task/concept to give further practice on it, or move on to the next stage. The focus should be on 'how learning can be improved', and on the progress and achievement of learners rather than their failure. The assessment becomes a worthless activity, if the results do not have an impact on the learning process.

The continuous and comprehensive evaluation necessitates the role of teachers and students as partners in the process of reflection, dialogue and decision-making. But the present scenario of CCE in schools shows lack of understanding of these purposes, and tends to be more ritualistic and teacher-centred. The present assessment situation also shows that there are many problems related to formative assessment which necessitates a need for discussion in order to understand its purpose, so that it can be used constructively for the development of learners.

Continuous Assessment— the Existing Realities

Formative assessment which is continuous in nature, during the course of instruction provides feedback to both the teachers and the learners for taking decisions regarding the modifications to be brought in the transactional approaches and improving learning. Very little of such activity seemed to be taking place in classrooms at least within the context of teacher

assessment. The continuous assessment is treated more as a ritual and a mechanical process in those schools where it is implemented. The teachers do not know why they assess learners, what they ought to assess and how to assess. The assessment is been treated as an isolated activity far from teaching-learning process just to fulfil the rituals of scheduled formative and summative assessments. The formative assessment is merely looked upon as assessing the projects, assignments and some activities which are randomly chosen and given, without feedback mechanisms to improve learning. In case of learners who have problems in learning certain concepts are totally left to themselves without any academic assistance or guidance. The demands of grading and fulfilling the administrative requirements seemed to be outweighing the potential for providing helpful feedback. The learners' characteristics, their prior experiences and abilities seemed to be not the concerns of teachers, either while teaching or assessing. Emphasis is seemed to be given more to the assessment of learning outcomes, rather than the learning processes – how children learn.

It can also be said that the projects and assignments are not preceded by specifications of tasks; determining the durations at which the progress has to be monitored; identifying the processes, skills and abilities to be assessed and so on. Besides

this, the assessment questions and items are poorly planned without any presupposed set of objectives or standards of attainment, which tend to assess mainly the lower cognitive outcomes rather than the higher cognitive abilities such as applying, analyzing, inferring, evaluating and so on. The assessment questions do not have flexibility and accommodating scope for the multiple responses of learners which may be close to the right answers. Above all, the analysis of report cards show that the marks or grades used to report learners' performance do not reflect what has been learnt and what has not been learnt.

It is also important to recognise some of the problems and the constraints that seemed to come through in many teachers' accounts of their current practice. In some of the teachers' view, the indicators provided in the guidelines for the assessment of curricular areas as well the other areas lack clarity, and some of them do not have scope for assessment. Some of the misunderstandings and problems of workload and support that have been reported needs to be considered seriously. There is a need to reflect on the intense anxiety expressed by some of the teachers. There seemed to be two main problems parallelly emerging from the teachers' responses. One is related to the learner-centered instruction, where the teacher's motivation is demanded to get to know the students' prior

experiences and knowledge, and plan appropriate learning experiences. Second is concerned with measurement, categorization and accountability where the focus is on assessing, recording and reporting learners' progress overall. From this, it is obvious, that the teachers seemed to regard 'assessment' as a distinct activity from teaching. Furthermore, they have been asked to conduct formative and summative assessments of specific numbers for the purpose of accountability, rather than to benefit themselves and their students for further progress. Rather than becoming a tool to improve the quality of learning and teaching, the CCE seemed to have become more of a burden and a source of anxiety and stress to the student population as well. The students seemed to be constantly under the pressure of completing the overcrowded assignments and projects which are given in all subjects at the same period. In certain instances, it is also reported that the teachers use it as a power string and as a threat to control the students. Regarding the assessment of personal and social qualities and the skills in areas like art and physical education, it is seen that, the assessment is either done in a haphazard manner without following any criteria or not done at all. In most cases, it is seen that the descriptive reporting shown in the report cards of students reflect a stereotyped use of words and adjectives that have been picked up

from the guidelines prescribed for reporting students' skills, abilities etc.

Overwhelmingly, it is observed that assessment is perceived as a formal activity oriented to producing formative and summative measures of performance and teacher assessment is assumed to be a major part of this process. There is a need to reorient the teachers on the integral process of teaching, learning and assessment, and above all their purpose in improving learning as well as teaching. It is also important to consider the premise on which CCE needs to be viewed for its prospective improvement. For instance, the learning paradigm — whether it is of behaviouristic or constructivistic, or eclectic in orientation needs to be considered, while planning for CCE in schools. Because, the means adopted for continuous assessment undergoes a change based on the learning paradigm, we choose to believe in for our educational system. The teachers' role has to be re-emphasized in the context of learning paradigm practiced, rather than simply giving an account of formative and summative measurements to the authorities.

Continuous Assessment— Prospects for Improvement

At a theoretical level, formative assessment could be grounded in a behaviouristic or in a constructivistic approach to learning. In the behaviourist paradigm to learning, the instruction is organised aiming

at mastery learning, while in social constructivist paradigm to learning, the learning is organised around the learners' world of understanding, giving attention to the quality of teacher-learner interaction and scaffolding of learning in action. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) has also emphasized upon the need for pedagogical changes in school education, in the context of which the constructivist approaches to teaching and learning process was stressed. There is a need to examine the virtues of this perspective to learning and assessment practices in our system.

Learning is viewed more as an interactive process by the cognitive scientists. According to them, the students do not simply encounter and learn material, moving from the simple to the complex, but actively engage with and attempt to make sense of what they encounter and incorporate it into their developing schematic understanding. This takes us to the formative assessment deriving from the social constructivist perspective, which affords the active engagement of the learner, a much more central role, and the role of teacher-learner interaction in the learning process. Here the teacher-learner interaction goes beyond the communication of assessment results, and teacher's judgement of learner's progress. It includes identification of learning problems and assisting in the process of learning and to comprehend and engage with new ideas and problems.

The process of assessment itself is seen as having an impact on the student, as well as the product of learning — the result.

According to Vygotsky, it is important to identify, not just what students have achieved, but what they might achieve, what they are now ready to achieve with the help of an adult or in some circumstances, a collaborating peer in the 'zone of proximal development'. Thus learning should be scaffolded by providing appropriate support to the students, with the purpose and focus of assessment being, to identify what they could achieve next. With this perspective, formative assessment should be planned to identify the level of task that a child is ready to undertake on the basis of what he can already do, as long as she/he receives possible help from the adult. What we have here then, is a notion of assessment which looks forward rather than backward and which envisages teacher-learner interaction as part of the assessment process itself. At the same time, it is important to consider the learning standards or the statement of attainments determined for each unit of area of learning that provides direction for teachers as well as students to pursue them in the process of learning.

In the present context of teaching-learning, where the teachers are expected to create a learning context in which children explore the concepts through activities, observations,

interactions, etc. the assessment should aim to discover what the learner knows, understands or can do. This can be achieved by flexible planning on part of the teacher, instead of giving a fixed number of projects and assignments as rituals in the name of formative assessment. The formative or continuous assessment must directly relate to the learning attainments and the learning experiences. While planning for continuous assessment, the learning attainments or the expected standards have to be targeted, so that assessment results can be effectively utilized to guide activities toward overall course goals. Careful examination of the course and identification of learning attainments that include both the learning process as well as the learning outcomes is needed. The higher order thinking abilities such as the learners' ability to apply, analyze, evaluate, create and performance of certain skills and abilities, along with the development of appropriate attitudes need to be mapped in the context of the content and the learning experiences. Also, the assessment modes along with the questioning for each lesson could be mapped while planning before teaching. However, the prior planning of these could be flexible enough to accommodate changes in instruction as well as in assessment based on the reflections of teachers which should be daily based.

The flexible planning of teacher should incorporate several alternative

modes of questioning and assessing the students during the process of learning. The open questioning and tasks which stimulates learners' thinking processes should be used to a large extent rather than closed or pseudo-open questioning. Sometimes, certain aspects of learners' work/responses might provide insights into their current understanding, and misconceptions. Prompting them to reflect on their own thinking might also provide a lead to an understanding of their prior conceptions, based on which the present conceptions or misconceptions have been built up. One of the research studies report that the teachers appeared to ask 400 questions per day, out of which 65% of those questions were concerned with recall of textbook information and the learning consisted mostly of responding to teacher questions and virtually no questions were asked by students. There is a need to explore the kinds of questions that teachers ask their students and how those questions may be classified—factual, conceptual, procedural, analytical and value questions. The conceptual questions are concerned with understanding of ideas, phenomenon and reasoning, while, the procedural questions are concerned with observation, recall of facts, possible experimentation and the procedures involved in a particular phenomenon. It involves reasoning also, in order to confirm the connections between the facts and observations. The analytical

questions are those that require the students to think, analyze the given problem or a situation which involves critical examination, seeing relationships between different elements that are involved in the given problem or situation. These types of questions help students to develop higher order thinking skills. The value questions are concerned with the issues and social concerns such as equality, discriminations, poverty, health issues, environmental issues etc. Appreciation and attitudes of students can also be known through asking open type questions which is quite different from the closed type of questions which demands a specific answer. The open forms of recording the observations such as narratives and anecdotes should be used extensively, instead of just ticking the list of specifications and assigning marks or grades. The traditional tests which demand specific right answers and memorized facts need to be replaced by assessment types which measure the higher order thinking skills. The open-ended and contextualized questions where the students' expression can find place should gain importance. Along with regular classroom questioning, worksheets, classroom activities either in groups or individual as regular features are required for continuous assessment which help in knowing the understanding and the attainment levels of students. The projects and assignments given should also reflect what learning

attainments are expected of students. As stated earlier, the tendency among the teachers seemed to be towards assessing only the final product of the projects and the assignments. Many times, one is not sure whether the expected learning goals have been achieved through the given task or not. The assessment of these could be planned in such a way that both the process and the product performance are assessed with the constant feedback from the teacher along with interactions. The self-assessment and the peer assessment along with the teacher assessment could be a part of the assessment of projects, presentations, discussions etc. In continuous assessment, the students' responses should be used to enrich lessons, alter learning strategies, and the content organisation. Sometimes, it may also require simplifying the key questions that lead to learning of the concepts. Since the goal of formative assessment is to identify and correct conceptual errors, teachers must provide constructive and relevant feedback specific to the learning activity and assessment results to clarify misconceptions.

It is also seen since decades until now, that the assessment practices whether they are formative or summative have been mostly judgemental or quantitative in nature, which is expressed either in the form of marks or marks converted into grades. The students are treated as mere the recipients of assessment

made. Instead, the assessment should be more descriptive rather than purely quantitative or judgemental in nature. In the context of the learner-centered education, the involvement of students should be both initiators as well as the recipients of assessment. This calls for the students' partnership with the teachers in the process of assessment. To identify the role of the student and assert the importance of her/his playing an active part in the process is also important. But this is usually less articulated than the teacher's role. The conventional thinking is that, the students understand and act upon the information produced by the assessment, rather than actively engaging with or being affected by the process itself. Besides teacher assessment, the self-monitoring, self-assessment and reflections on part of the students play an important role in assessing one's own strengths. For the students to be able to improve, they must develop the capacity to monitor the quality of their own work during actual process. This, in turn, requires that students possess an appreciation of what high quality work is, develop evaluative skills necessary to compare with some objectivity, the quality of what they are producing in relation to the higher standard. This leads to the development of certain moves which can be drawn upon to modify or improve their own work. This also helps them to reflect on and assess

their own learning experiences – leading to self-regulatory habits essential for “Learning to Learn”. To be most effective, the formative assessments must be ongoing and continuous by providing opportunities for reconstructing meanings and guiding students toward learning attainments. What has to be realised is, continuous assessment is an ‘assessment for learning’, where the assessment results are used as the constructive feedback for further learning or relearning those that have been alternatively conceptualized.

Conclusion

Many countries in the west are paying more attention to the formative and developmental assessment where the learners' development is given more importance. It is also seen that the concept of assessment has progressed from the traditional notion of testing in isolation, to assessment of holistic development of the learner. Though, continuous and comprehensive evaluation has found its way at last in some parts of our country, there are many myths and misconceptions held by the practitioners as discussed in this paper. Understanding the real essence and the purpose of continuous assessment will change the narrow perspectives and the assessment procedures and practices as well. The points that have been highlighted on improving continuous assessment have a wider application and might contribute to

a better understanding of formative assessment wherever it takes place. It is also widely claimed that all assessment practices will have an impact on students' learning which can be either positive or negative. This claim can be substantiated by the evidences assembled through classroom experiences of the teachers. The assessment practices featured in constructivist context, and at the same time not losing sight of the learning attainments can be very challenging as well as promising

towards learners' development. Reflections on instructional and assessment practices based on the observations of learners' progress, and one's own insights and experiences of classroom processes and their effectiveness on learners' development would help teachers to understand their own strengths. Finally, the teachers' orientation on these lines should attempt to orchestrate the positive possibilities of classroom assessment, rather than to reduce it to a formula.

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