Assessment in the 21st Century Classroom: The Need for Teacher Autonomy

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Abstract: - This study is aimed at finding the teachers awareness of autonomy and its relationship towards teacher’s assessment practices. Teachers, like most professionals need a fair amount of autonomy in their work. Nevertheless, question arises in the teacher’s awareness of autonomy and its implication on their practices especially in assessment. The transformation of assessment in the turn of the century in Malaysian Education System, namely School Based Assessment (SBA) has brought great challenges and responsibilities among the teacher’s. This is due to the role of the teacher as implementers of government policy. This qualitative study is carried out among ten primary school teachers in Perak, Malaysia. An in-depth semi-structured interview, observation and document analysis was carried out to get a better view and understanding of the teacher’s view of autonomy and assessment practices and its impact on their work and student performance. The findings recorded teacher’s view of autonomy and assessment practices as moderate. This shows that the teachers have room for inculcating their autonomy and assessment practices in their working environment while contributing significantly for student betterment.

Keywords: autonomy, assessment, education policy, school-based assessment, Assessment for Learning, professional practices

I. INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the 21st century, education has attracted a lot of attention globally as well as locally. The need to acquire and master the 21st century learning skills has brought great challenges to the educators particularly and the stakeholders in general. The urge to be at level with developed nations worldwide, the government of Malaysia through its education wing, Malaysian Education Ministry, drafted out new curriculum based on standard replacing the existing curriculum. Primary School Standard Based Curriculum made significant changes particularly in the assessment method. With the view that exam-oriented education system is damaging and the change towards more meaningful learning is rampant, school-based assessment (SBA) was introduced in the Malaysian education system (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2011). This was done with the view that the present education system was entangled with the exam-oriented system that gives little emphasis to the students learning. Tuah (2007) indicates the mismatch that occurs between the learning objective and the assessment method that has no significant contribution to meaningful learning among the students. Yong and Lim (2008) also firmly state the need of school-based assessment to counter the emphasis given to the exams in school.

SBA contributes significantly to the students meaningful learning as it is modeled around the importance of students learning and knowledge.

SBA emphasizes the assessment of a wide range of abilities which offers a comprehensive appraisal of students’ performance. By integrating learning and teaching with assessment, it helps students understand their strengths and weaknesses through quality feedback from teachers. SBA also reduces dependence on the results of public examinations and boosts students’ confidence and motivation to learn and enhances autonomous learning. (HKDSE, 2013)

Teachers have greater roles to play as the students learning process and knowledge imparted is gradually assessed. It is done to ensure the student’s progress and the learning objectives are attained. The aim of SBA is to enable teachers to engage greatly in the students learning process thus constantly monitor their progress through assessment. Gallo, Sheehy, Patton and Griffin, (2006) emphasizes the importance of assessment as part of the teaching and Learning (T&L) process or embedded in the teaching so as not to isolate assessment from the T&L process. Assessment should be a platform that supports students learning. SBA has the potential to promote meaningful learning and grasp of essential skills and knowledge among the students as it is well structured and holistic in nature.

The emphasis of Assessment for Learning (AfL) in the SBA system paves way for better classroom assessment. It is rather important to note that the education system that has drifted apart from holistic assessment to exam-oriented system has done little in enhancing students learning and increasing their learning potential. Introduction of SBA creates more room for AfL to take place. AfL has been center of attraction particularly among the scholars as the debate about its benefits has been prominent. The talk about AfL brought different views among the scholars although the nature of assessment is to examine the level of achievement and to identify student’s strengths and weaknesses in learning. Summative assessment
helps teachers identify student’s achievement while formative assessment helps in identifying the students learning process. It is very important to note that prevention brings better results than cure. Identifying students learning problem in the preliminary stages of learning process will help to address the problem immediately thus make learning more meaningful. Meaningful learning refers to the concept that the learned knowledge is fully understood by the student and the student knows how that fact relates to other stored facts.

Assessment Reform Group (2001); Stiggins(2002,2007), Black (1998,2007) relates AfL to four important stages. They are sharing of learning outcome, questioning, peer and self-assessment, and feedback. This model of AfL has been widely used in the implementation of SBA. All the four stages of AfL are paramount in determining the student’s learning process. The entire process of AfL starts form the moment a teacher begins his/her lesson. Sharing of the learning outcomes creates a positive mind-set among the students as to what to expect from the lesson. It will be the guiding element and focus of the student’s through-out the lesson. Creating an environment that stimulates knowledge building and thinking would be able to boost meaningful learning. Questioning in the teaching and learning process would likely build up the thinking skills while gradually guide the students to explore on their readily available or existing knowledge. Several types of questioning strategies and techniques enhance students thinking and help in building of knowledge. Cotton (1988) defines classroom questioning as instructional cues or stimuli that generates ideas of the learning elements and direction for what and how to generate the knowledge. Peer and self-assessment helps in building of the knowledge through negation and respectful discourse. Feedback serves as suggestions to improve on their work and build of knowledge.

The evolution of teacher’s role in the classroom as preacher of information to infuser (developer) of student knowledge demands greater responsibilities among the teachers. The need of autonomy among the teachers in performing their duty cannot be denied because of the heavy responsibilities they have to shoulder. Pearson and Moomaw (2006) suggests that autonomous teachers were able to handle their workload positively while disseminating the duties well. With the need to master the 21st century learning skills, quality of teaching is a key factor that will determine the educational achievement particularly in realizing the new curriculum set by the Malaysian education department. The increase in autonomy as stipulated in the new curriculum will render teachers more freedom and flexibility in carrying out their duties. Greater autonomy given to the teacher means they have greater responsibility and are accountable of their actions.

II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative study is to determine the teacher’s assessment practices especially AfL in the classroom. It is understood that effective classroom assessment in the Teaching and Learning process will, to certain extend, help in the building of student’s knowledge and meaningful learning. Teachers play very important role in influencing student learning and guiding them in their learning process. Teachers are also required to constantly keep track of their student learning which is done with the help of the classroom assessment. The demand of the 21st century learning skills on the students requires the teachers to plan their assessment that will eventually lever student’s learning skills. Mastering of the communicative skills, collaborative skills despite the critical and creative skills among the students challenges the teachers to plan their teaching and learning activities as well as their classroom assessment. The tremendous amount of workload and responsibilities that the teachers endure in their working process paves way for this study to determine their practices and the demand for autonomy that will ease them in making decision related to their work.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This exploratory research is intended to explore the teachers’ assessment practice and the level of autonomy needed by the teachers to carry out their duty. Ten teachers from the Malaysian Cluster schools in the state of Perak, Malaysia were identified to carry out the interview and observation of their teaching and learning process despite relevant documents such as the student’s assessment materials. The participants were chosen based on their teaching experience and their willingness to share their practice. For the interview, a semi structured interview protocol was prepared and conducted the viability test. The observation done based on the four steps of AfL to determine the level of applicability of its practice in the classroom.

IV. FINDING

Nearly all the participants of the study have a positive view and mind set towards AfL. Their classroom practices were aimed at fulfilling what they have planned to deliver to the students. Taking into consideration the 21st century learning demands and student’s readiness, teachers plan their teaching and learning activities and strategies that fulfills the students need. As an autonomous professional, teachers plan their teaching and learning activities based on the standard curriculum planned by the ministry of education which they have little say about and the students need. Teachers were given greater autonomy in determining the type of assessment to be given to the students as the purpose of assessment is to monitor student learning. Knowing the fact that students can assessed in many ways such as observation, aural-oral test, written work, role play and so on, it is the teacher’s prerogative to determine the type of assessment to be administered that will give type of result the teacher intended. It can be easily summed here that the teacher’s role is of immense value that need to be supported with autonomy.
Finding’s on the teacher’s assessment practices shows different degree of implementation and understanding among the teachers. A sizable number of the respondents said that AfL is an assessment carried out by the teacher in the classroom after completion of a topic and some of them claimed that the assessment is done on a schedule prepared by the school. Quite a reasonable number of respondents were able to grasp the idea of AfL and implement it as it should be done. These teachers were able to grasp the distinctive aspect of AfL which is an on-going process in Teaching and Learning. They were able to scrutinize some aspects of AfL like the sharing of learning outcomes of the lesson prior to the assessment, pose probing questions during their teaching and identify the pupils need through real-time intervention and give immediate feedback to pupil’s response on the questions posed. Somehow, majority of the respondents fail to inculcate peer evaluation and self-evaluation to their work as they find it difficult to inculcate them during the teaching and learning process. Some of the teachers also said that the students are not ready to do self-assessment and they believe students won’t be able to do peer assessment.

The implementation of AfL in the classroom varies based on the teachers understanding and acceptance of the distinctive aspects of the assessment. Sharing of learning outcome prior to the start of the lesson enables the students to have a mind set on what they are about to learn. Although the teachers agree that it is important, it has not been the practice of many teachers. This was seen through the classroom observation. It is believed that teachers an accustomed with certain method of teaching that they could not adopt and make a switch of their practices. The students are not guided to understand the learning outcome they must acquire from the lesson they learn. Although majority of the teachers interviewed view sharing of learning outcome as important but sharing them has never been the practice of the teachers.

Questioning during the teaching and learning process boosts the students understanding and desire to learn. Probing during the questioning enhances the thinking radius of the students. It is therefore very important to pose right kind of question and positive probing that will help in the building of knowledge and diversify students thinking. Knowing the importance of questioning in teaching and learning, teachers pose questions to encourage student participation and to probe on the students understanding. Observation of the teachers practice reveals that teachers pose as high as thirty questions in a thirty-minute lesson. Most of the questions the teachers pose are meant to test students understanding of the teacher’s lesson and mainly based on the content knowledge. Teachers do very little to pose higher order questions that will enhance critical and creative thinking. This is seen as a hindrance in knowledge building as it doesn’t help in building of the knowledge but more apt for memorizing. This shows that the teachers are lack of knowledge in posing higher order thinking questions and they find it difficult to pose questions ad-hoc based on the student’s answers and remarks.

Observation on teacher’s evaluative method and assessment of student’s written work reveals that teachers lack the knowledge and skill to give feedback on students work. It is very evident from the written work in their exercise books and the worksheets answered by the students. All the teachers in this study only give motivating remarks like ‘good’, ‘keep up the good work’, improve on your writing’ etc. They agree that valuable feedback helps students learning and enables the students to identify their strength and weaknesses thus help them to improve their learning. Teacher’s fail to give valuable feedback on students work shows that they are not able to guide the students and provide meaningful feedback that enhances students learning.

Another aspect of AfL that gets little attention from the teachers is self-assessment and peer assessment. Classroom observation of the teaching and learning process gives little evidence about teacher’s practice on encouraging self-assessment and peer assessment among the students. It is an aspect that teachers tend to over-look due to its complexity. It is complex because teachers must provide guidance for the students to do self-assessment and peer assessment. Although teacher’s feel that self-assessment and peer assessment helps in developing the essential 21st century learning skills like communicative and collaborative skills, the complexity of its nature becomes the stumbling block in developing the essential skill. It is also due to the various levels of knowledge that the students have that makes it difficult to implement self and peer assessment. But instances such as students giving correcting the error done by their peers during group work can be considered as peer assessment. Teachers should pick at whatever lead they get and encourage on it if such an act will be fruitful in developing meaningful learning.

V. DISCUSSION

Literatures have been reviewed to look for the possible gaps that exist in the implementation of SBA particularly the classroom assessment. Most studies done investigated the implementation of SBA such as teachers’ attitude on SBA (Majid, 2011), teachers’ readiness and knowledge but less focus was given to teachers practice in the implementation of classroom assessment. The talk of AfL and its positive impact on students learning has elicited the need to carry out a comprehensive study to investigate the need of 21st century learning skills and teachers’ practice in attempting to substitute student learning through assessment. It is very interesting to see that the implementation of AfL in the classroom doesn’t go well with the teachers in this study. Although teachers in this study possess wide knowledge about assessment and its implementation procedures, their practice varies from one another depending on their understanding of the AfL. Students must be positively engaged in the learning process and what they learn makes sense or meaningful. It is the role of the teachers to make sure that their students are involved in the learning process and to provide such an environment that will engage the students in the learning
The focus of AFL is on the students. The student’s engagement in the teaching and learning process is very important to make sure the implementation of AFL fruits positive result. Teachers as the main medium in the classroom should play their role effectively. Effectively here refers to the involvement either to improve the understanding of AFL or to put to practice AFL in the classroom. From the start of the lesson till the end of it, teachers must fine tune their student’s attention and keep them within their attention radius to make sure positive student engagement. This can be done through questioning that will engage the students in active thinking, communication and collaboration between them while keeping them within the desired learning outcomes. Although it is tough to create such an enormous learning environment, it is teachers’ role to make a difference.

Teachers’ classroom practices are determined by the level of autonomy they possess. It cannot be denied that autonomous teachers possess all the desired professional qualities and they can work independently. Their decision-making ability are not to be questioned and their level of knowledge and grasp of the curriculum is in depth. However, their ability to disseminate and transform student’s potential in developing the 21st century learning skills is the key factor to be addressed at this point of time. Deriving conclusion from the interview and observation data and the documents analyzed reveals that the teachers can handle the situation given little time and space for them to conceptualize the need of AFL practices and methods. Despite that, teachers are also able to inculcate the demands of 21st century learning skills in their teaching and learning process to fulfill the need of the students. The AFL caters very much for the fulfillment of the students need as it is centered around the students to nurture their potential. Communicative skills and collaborative skills are among the 21st century skills that can be enhanced through the implementation of AFL. Developing critical and creative thinking to be innovative and engage the students to the learning are among the skills that is emphasized in AFL and can be materialized with its implementation.

VI. CONCLUSION

Successful implementation of AFL depends greatly on the role of the teacher. Positive acceptance and digestion of the idea among the teachers will benefit the students learning. The changes that take place within the students learning environment supported by the teacher’s autonomous approach will lead to many positive outcomes. It is the teachers’ decision-making capabilities that will determine the outcome of desired teaching and learning process. This study has concluded the teacher’s role is the most crucial factor that will determine the successes of the classroom assessment practice. The level of autonomy enjoyed by the teachers will give the space and freedom for the teachers to plan their lesson and assessment so that the coherence between them exist. It is also important to take note that the complementary fact between the lesson and the assessment will make the learning meaningful. The ability of the students in acquiring the 21st century learning skills isa key factor to investigate as the changes in the learning trends and demands of the knowledge-based economy requires the students to equip themselves with the necessary skills. Despite the communicative and collaborative skills and critical and creative thinking, the students are also required to equip themselves with worldly knowledge and computer literate. Preparing the students at the elementary level with all the necessary 21st century learning skills will be of significant help in the stages to come. Given greater autonomy to the teachers and implementation of AFL would have a positive impact on the students meaningful learning.

AUTHOR NOTE

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