



Competence-Based Assessment in Pre-primary School Classrooms: The Case of Pre-primary Schools in Dar es Salaam Region, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on the study which sought to examine assessment practices in pre-primary classroom settings. Specifically, the study sought to examine pre-primary school teachers' knowledge of competence-based assessment strategies and abilities to employ competence-based assessment strategies in improving classroom teaching and learning. A descriptive case study design was employed in which 15 quality assurance officers, 15 head of schools and 15 pre-primary school teachers from Kinondoni, Ilala and Tembe Municipalities of Dar es Salaam Region were involved. The data were collected through interviews, observations and documentary reviews and the analysis was done using thematic analysis approach. The findings indicated that teachers lacked a clear understanding of competence-based assessment strategies such as natural observations, checklists, oral interviews, peer interviews, cumulative forms, rating scales, projects and portfolios. The findings also revealed that most of the pre-primary school teachers were not able to employ competence-based assessment strategies in improving classroom teaching and learning as they were mostly using traditional ways of assessing children development such as written exercises, tests, and examinations. Based on these findings, it is recommended that Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) should conduct regular training on competence-based assessment to enable teachers understand what it entails and how it can be effectively implemented. It is also recommended that Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) should specify pre-primary school assessment strategies and tools which are reflective of the Tanzanian context so that the pre-primary school teachers do not encounter challenges in employing them. Lastly, it is recommended that teacher training institutions, including universities, should adopt competence-based teaching and learning styles during the preparations of teachers who will then work in pre-schools and colleges.

Key Words: Assessment, Authentic assessment, Child assessment, Competence-based assessment, Traditional assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The change of global market demand has generated the need for the change in whole educational system, and with it the need to review the pedagogical instruction and evaluative practices. The competence-based curriculum arose as a response to the global market demands so as to create the relations between educational goals and the labor challenges of the globe market. Many countries globally including Tanzania adopted CBC to cope with the demand of the 21st century and global market demands. The adoption of CBC was done following the educational reforms which called for paradigm shift from content based-curriculum to competence-based curriculum (Kouwenvoven, 2013). Thus, the change of paradigm from content-based curriculum to CBC was followed by the changes in teaching and assessment strategies. With the shift from Knowledge-Based Curriculum to Competence-Based curriculum, assessment is not only used to assess learning but also for and as learning. CBC insists on the use of Competence-Based Assessments (CBA) to measure mastery of learned skills among the learners. The change of assessment methods from traditional assessment to authentic assessment implies changes from evaluating the amount of knowledge learned to mastery of learned skills.

In Tanzania, CBC was adopted for the first time in 2005 at secondary education level. The adoption came about following a curriculum review which was necessitated by economic, social, political, labour market demands, and cultural changes (Mringi, 2012). This adoption led to the development of competence- based teaching and assessment strategies (World Bank, 2011). Introduction of CBC in all levels of education including pre-primary level shifted the orientation from content to competency-based learning, which in turn called for changes in teaching, learning and assessment approaches (Wangeleja, 2010; World Bank, 2011).

It is worth noting that the adoption of CBC at pre-primary-school level was meant to enable learners at this foundation level of education acquire basic skills needed for the subsequent levels of education. These include arithmetic, reading, writing and simple life skills, including self-help skills. In order to establish whether learners at preprimary school level have mastered these skills, a paradigm shift towards CBA is inevitable. According to Kouwen (2003), CBA is more useful for competence- based curriculum than other forms of assessment. This is because of its focus on needs, abilities and interests of the learners (Brown, 2008). Learners' assessment in pre-primary education is an important component in ensuring that learners' data are collected, reviewed and used to plan learning activities that relate to the understanding level of a child as well as improving teaching and learning process (Lupeja & Komba, 2021). It also plays an important role in the provision of baseline data on children's knowledge, skills, understanding, interests and dispositions (Wortham, 2004). Moreover, when the assessment is integrated into teaching process, it enables teachers to make observation and documentation of a child's work and performance and accumulate a record of the child's growth and development.

Ongoing assessment of teaching and learning helps to observe and record information about the child's level of development and/or knowledge, skills, and attitudes in order to determine what has been learned, improve teaching, and support children's progress (The National Academies Press, 2008). It also helps teachers to determine whether they have met the learning objectives or not. Assessment at pre -primary education should be designed to provides information on child's development in all domains such as physical, social, cognitive and emotional as insisted in CBC (MoEST (2016). Kitta and Tillya, (2010) insist that teachers are encouraged to use authentic assessment methods such as portfolios, classroom activities, field observations, projects, oral presentations, checklists, anecdotal records and interviews in assessing classroom teaching and learning process. Therefore, CBC emphasizes integration of assessment in the teaching and learning process and makes it a tool for learning than an end process because it informs teachers and learners about effectiveness or ineffective of teaching and learning strategies and the action to be taken so as to promote effective learning (Zepke & Leah, 2010).

Assessment is a process which involves variety of tasks ranging from development of assessment tools, creating achievement standards, conducting assessment, scoring and applying the assessment feedback in making decisions (Stiggins (2017). According to Stiggins (2017) when choosing assessment methods there is need for teachers to be aware on the merits and demerits of chosen strategies and select suitable ones to assess learners. Child assessment practices differ in nearly a similar way as the methods of teaching and learning (McMillan, 2004). Assessment methods can be both traditional or alternative depending on the user's preference, learning activities and the duration of the assessment (Gronlund, 2006). Traditional methods of assessment involved summative assessments of learning which evaluate the learner at the end of a learning activity or a given period of time. Objective tests have been traditionally used by teachers to examine acquired knowledge through the use of quizzes, tests and exercises. Traditional assessments such as matching items, true-false and multiple choice tend to be lower in authenticity but use short time to conduct and score. On the other hand, alternative authentic assessments such as portfolios, observations interviews with children, work sampling, and running records, anecdotal records, children's work portfolios, checklists, rating scales and other performance-oriented ones. These methods are both difficulty and authenticity and also require a longer duration of time for administering and scoring compared to the traditional assessments (Gronlund, 2006). Both traditional assessment and the alternative assessment methods have been used to collect information about children's development and learning progress.

On other hand, other scholars urged that assessment can be formal or informal. Formal assessment include norm referenced standardized performance tests and teacher ratings are commonly used in early childhood years. Standardized tests aim to measure children's performance on different tasks which are considered as representing

important theoretical construct (Downs & Strand, 2006). Standardized tests are generally conducted two or three times in a year, this limit teachers from collecting continuous information on child's learning and development progress. As CBC emphasized child assessment should be on a daily basis in order to obtain valid and reliable data on child's development and learning. On other hand, informal assessment requires the use of alternative assessment which is called as authentic assessment. In this strategy, child's learning and development is assessed using real life events (Taylor & Nolen, 2008). Authentic (informal) assessment methods involve observation, checklists, rating scales, rubrics, portfolio, interviews, directed assignments, narrative reports and technology-based assessments (Wortham, 2008).

TIE (2016) urged that method of assessing children can be done through authentic and naturalistic observations which are done on daily basis as children involved various activities, so as to describe the development and learning of children. Therefore, assessment is an ongoing process and not a one-time event because it is difficulty to gather valid and reliable information about development and learning. According to TIE (2016), child assessment can be done by using reliable and valid assessment tools such as portfolio, checklists, observation schedule, interview schedule, anecdotal notes, questionnaires, cumulative forms of assessment of children progress, clinic card and rating scales. These tools are more reliable in documenting child's development and learning progress. (TIE, 2016).

In recent years, assessment of learners' achievement has received great attention in education systems. Assessment is one of the key components of a teaching and learning process. With the paradigm shift from knowledge-based curriculum to competence-based education, assessment is not only done in a summative manner but also formatively to monitor children development. In competence-based curriculum (CBC), assessment can be used in gathering comprehensive information and making judgments on whether the intended competences have been achieved. In addition, the assessment is used for preparing proper intervention programs and placement decisions for each individual child (Wortham, 2008). The integration of assessment in the teaching and learning process is emphasized in CBC and it is considered a tool for learning. When assessment is done continuously, it informs both teachers and learners about the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies and actions to be taken to promote effective learning (Zepke & Leah, 2010). Competence-based assessment employs methods which provide opportunities to observe children's behavior within the natural context. In order for a teacher to gather information and make appropriate judgments on whether learners have achieved the required competence, assessment must be integrated in the entire teaching and learning process. Despite the fact that CBC emphasizes the change from traditional assessment practices to competence-based assessment, teachers still continue to use traditional methods of assessment. Therefore, this study sought to examine pre- primary school teachers' abilities to employ competence-based assessment strategies in improving classroom teaching and learning.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach in which a descriptive case study design was used. The design was adopted because it allowed the researcher to understand the reality and meanings of phenomenon as socially constructed by teachers as they engage in teaching children in school contexts. The study was conducted in Dar es Salaam Region which was purposively chosen because it has a good number of pre-primary schools. For example, according to Basic Education Statistics (2023), Dar es Salaam had a total of 905 pre-primary schools. Having such a big number of schools implies that the researcher was able to generate information from a broad spectrum of respondents, hence enhancing reliability of the study. The sample for this study involved a total of 45 participants, including 15 pre- primary school teachers, 15 heads of schools and 15 quality assurance officers from 15 selected primary schools in Kinondoni, Ilala and Temeke Municipalities of Dar es Salaam Region. The participants were purposefully selected because they assumed to be well informed about the problem under investigation and could provide relevant information about teacher's practices in implementing competence-based curriculum in pre-primary schools. In this study the researcher collected data using multiple data collection methods included interviews, documentary reviews and observations so as to offsetting the weaknesses or biases which may occur because of the use of single method. Interviews were conducted to pre- primary teachers and quality assurance officers for the purposes of getting their views on teacher's ability to employ competence-based assessment strategies during teaching and learning process. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis strategy.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Pre-primary School Teachers' Understanding of Competence-based Assessment Strategies

The first aspect which was sought to be examined in this objective is the teachers' understanding of assessment strategies used in competence-based teaching and learning. Interviews were conducted with 15 pre-primary school teachers. During the interviews, the researcher was interested to find out whether teachers had a clear knowledge of competence-based assessment strategies as suggested in CBC. In the first place, the respondents were asked to explain their understanding of competence-based assessment strategies. In responding to this question, one of the respondents from had this to say:

"I understand that competence-based assessment requires the use of formative and summative assessment to assess children's academic progress and development in various aspects of development such as physical, cognitive and social development. I personally use question-and-answer and written exercises in assessing my students" (Teacher 3).

The other respondent also added this:

"Based on my knowledge, competence-based assessment methods require the use of continuous assessment methods whereby teachers are supposed to assess children regularly using oral questions, exercises and homework. I prefer using oral questions and exercises in assessing my learners (Teacher 13).

The responses indicated that teachers lacked a clear understanding of competence-based assessment strategies emphasized in CBC such as authentic assessment which involve the use of natural observations, checklists, oral interviews, peer interviews, cumulative forms, rating scales, projects and portfolios. This suggests that the implementation of CBC was ineffective due to the fact that teachers who are key implementors had limited understanding of competence-based assessment strategies as suggested in CBC.

These findings concur with those of Moshi (2015) who revealed that teachers were not aware of the competence-based assessment practices due to lack of in-service training on the competence-based assessment. A study by Kabombwe and Mulenga (2019) found that teachers' understanding of competence-based assessment was limited because majority of them lacked in-service training on CBC. Similarly, Ndomondo (2022) found that teachers lacked a clear and adequate understanding of assessment methods emphasized in CBC such as peer assessment, oral interviews, portfolios and others. Generally, teachers' understanding of assessment was still dominated by the traditional pen and paper methods, mainly exercises, tests and examinations.

3.2 Pre-primary School Teacher's Abilities to Employ Competence-based Assessment Strategies

The researcher examined teachers' abilities to employ assessment strategies recommended in CBC, including portfolios, cumulative record cards, checklists, interviews, and anecdotal records. In order to achieve this, documentary reviews and interviews were conducted involving quality assurance officers and pre-primary school teachers in which teachers were asked to explain their abilities to employ competence-based assessment strategies in assessing children learning progress.

3.2.1 The use of portfolios in the assessment of children learning and development progress

In the course of examining whether teachers use portfolios or not in assessing children, data were collected through interviews and documentary reviews. During the interviews with teachers, the researcher was interested to find out whether teachers had abilities to use portfolios to assess children. One of the respondents had this to report:

"On my side, I use other methods like exercises and exams to assess children learning progress..... I rarely use portfolios method for assessing children due to the fact I have a big class with about fifty children, so it becomes difficult for me to use this method" (Teacher 8).

When the quotation above is examined, it could be deduced that most of pre-primary school teachers were not using portfolios in assessing children learning and development progress. Most of the interviewed teachers stated that they

did not use portfolios because of the challenges of overcrowded classrooms and lack of financial resources to buy files. This implies that most of the teachers used traditional assessment methods and tools such as tests and exams.

On the other hand, 15 quality assurance officers were interviewed to provide their views on whether pre-primary school teachers use portfolios or not. In responding to this, one officer stated that:

“Most of the pre-primary school teachers do not use portfolios for keeping information about children learning progress overtime. Although they are insisted to prepare a portfolio for each child, they do not do that in practice.” (Quality assurance officer B11).

When this excerpt is examined, it could be deduced that most of the pre-primary school teachers do not use portfolios for documenting children’s works. This implies that the implementation of competence-based assessment could be ineffective as teachers do not use CBA strategies.

In order to obtain more information on whether pre-primary school teachers have abilities to employ portfolios in the assessment of children’s development and learning progress, teachers were asked to teachers did not use portfolios as assessment tools for children’s development. The findings suggest that pre-primary school teachers were not using portfolios tools of assessment for assessing children academic progress and achievement over a period of time as recommended in CBC provide portfolios, they were using for documenting child’s work samples and documents related to outcomes being assessed. The children’s portfolios were also reviewed to find out whether teachers documented children’s work samples and other documents for the purpose of assessing their progress and achievements in various areas of the curriculum. The findings revealed that all the observed.

3.2.2 The use of cumulative record card in the assessment of children

In investigating this, interviews and documentary reviews were made. Interviews were conducted with pre-primary school teachers and quality assurance officers in which the researcher was interested to find out whether teachers used a cumulative card to assess children’s development and learning progress. In the first place, the respondents were asked to explain whether they are using a cumulative record card or not. In responding to this question, one of the respondents from school K had this to say:

“On my side, I am not using a cumulative record card in assessing children academic progress and achievement. This is due to the fact that I have crowded class with big number of children about seventy. The teacher is supposed to fulfill the progress report of each child based on each specific competence, thus it is difficult” (Teacher, A6).

Looking at the above quotation, it is evident that most of the pre-primary school teachers do not use cumulative record forms to assess children academic progress and achievement. This suggest that pre-primary school teachers do not use cumulative record forms in assessment of their learners apart from being aware of the availability of prepared forms that guide them in the use, due to challenges of overcrowded classes and overwhelmed by teaching responsibilities.

On the other hand, quality assurance officers were asked to provide their views on the pre-primary school teachers use cumulative records forms or not. In responding to this question, one respondent had this to say:

“Apart from being insisted by the authority to use competence-based assessment strategies to assess children learning progress, yet majority of pre-primary school teachers do not use those strategies including a cumulative form. This is due to lack of knowledge and skills on how to use cumulative form. Generally pre-primary school teachers need training on CBC” (Quality assurance B15).

The quotation still builds on the preceding excerpts that pre-primary school teachers did not use a cumulative record form in the assessment of children academic progress. Their responses indicate that apart from teachers being insisted to use cumulative forms in the assessment of children over time during the course of study, they were not using cumulative form to assess learners in their classes.

3.2.3 The use of checklists for the assessment of children

In investigating this, interviews and documentary reviews were made. Interviews were conducted with quality assurance officers and pre-primary school teachers in 15 schools. During the interviews, the researcher was interested to find out whether teachers were using checklists in the assessment of children or not. In the first place, the respondents were asked to explain whether they are using checklists to assess children learning progress and achievement. In responding to this question, one of the respondents said:

“I never use checklists as a to assess children development and academic performance. I do not have knowledge and skills on how to prepare and use it. I normally use other methods like oral questions, exercises and tests” (Teacher 4).

This quotation imply that pre-primary school teachers did not use a checklist for assessment of children development and academic progress and achievement resulted to poor implementation of competence-based assessment. The reason for not using checklists for assessment of children learning might be attributed to lack of training on competence-based assessment.

On the other hand, quality assurance officers were requested to provide their views on the pre-primary school teachers ability to use checklists for assessment. In responding to this question, one of respondents had this to say:

“Most pre-primary school teachers do not use checklist as a tool for assessing children in pre-primary classes as insisted by the education authority. This is due to lack of knowledge and skills on how to employ checklists but also other competence-based assessment strategies. Generally pre-primary school teachers need training on CBA” (quality assurance B2).

When this excerpt examined, it could be deduced that pre-primary school teachers did not employ authentic assessment which require the use of checklists in the assessment of children development progress and academic performance as emphasized in CBC. This implies that the implementation of CBTL is ineffective as teachers lack skills on the use of competence-based assessment strategies.

3.2.4 The use of interviews in the assessment of children

Interviews were used to collect data from key informants with a view of establishing whether pre-primary school teachers used interviews to assess children learning and development. In the first place, the respondents were asked to explain if they were using interviews to assess children learning and development. In response, one of the respondents had this to say:

“I do not use interviews to assess children in my class. It is because I have a large number of children as you can see. Therefore, it is difficult to conduct interviews to each child because I have other responsibilities to perform like preparation of teaching materials, lesson plans and learning activities for the following day’s sessions” (Teacher 15).

When the above quotation is examined, it could be deduced that pre-primary school teachers do not use interview in the assessment of children learning and development. The reason for this could have been attributed to lack of training on competence-based assessment and other challenges like overcrowded classrooms.

On the other hand, quality assurance officers were requested to provide their views on the pre-primary school teachers abilities to use interviews in the assessment of children learning and development. One of the respondents had this to say:

“Pre-primary school teachers do not use interviews as one of the assessment strategies for assessing children’s abilities in learning as emphasized by CBC. I can say that most of the pre-primary school teachers employ traditional ways of assessment which, including the use of tests and exams” (Quality assurance B1).

The above quotation still builds on the preceding quotations that pre-primary school teachers did not use interviews in the assessment of children learning and development progress in pre-primary schools. The responses indicate that the teachers had either inadequate knowledge and skills about competence-based assessment or poor working environment like overcrowded classrooms which hindered effective implementation of CBA in actual classroom settings. This implies that the implementation of CBC is likely to be ineffective, given that the teachers did not use competence-based assessment strategies as recommended in CBC.

3.2.5 The use of anecdotal records in the assessment of children

The researcher was interested to find out whether pre-primary school teachers used anecdotal records in the assessment of children's development and learning progress. The documentary reviews and interviews were conducted with quality assurance officers and pre-primary school teachers. In the first place, the respondents were requested to explain whether they were using anecdotal records or not. In response to this question, one respondent from had this to report:

"I am not using anecdotal records for assessing children learning and development progress in my class. This is due to fact that I am not knowledgeable enough on the use of this method as I was not trained about competence-based assessment strategies" (Teacher 2).

The above quotation indicates that most of the pre-primary school teachers do not use anecdotal records to assess pre-primary school children development progress and learning experiences. It is evident that teachers lack knowledge and skills on the use of anecdotal records, which is attributable to lack of pedagogical skills.

In the same light, to get the views of quality assurance officers on whether pre-primary school teachers use anecdotal records, one of respondents had this to say:

"Most of pre-primary school teachers do not use anecdotal records in assessing children development and learning experiences. This is because most of the teacher lack pedagogical knowledge needed for effective use of competence-based assessment strategies" (Quality assurance officer 14).

When these quotations are examined, it could be deduced that pre-primary school teachers do not have abilities to employ anecdotal records as a tool for assessing children development and academic progress. This implies that the implementation of CBC in pre-primary education level was ineffective due to the fact that teachers who are key implementers had limited knowledge about competence-based assessment.

Generally, the findings have revealed that teachers had limited understanding of competence-based assessment strategies emphasized in CBC such as alternative assessment which involve an authentic assessment and natural observations of children through the use of assessment tools such as portfolios, interviews, projects, observation schedule, anecdotal, checklists, cumulative forms of assessment of children progress and rating scales. Their limited understanding of CBA strategies among pre-primary school teachers could hinder effective assessment of children development and learning progress as intended. It was also revealed that most of the pre-primary school teachers were not able to employ competence-based assessment strategies in improving classroom teaching and learning. The continued use of traditional methods of assessments promotes rote learning and reproduction of learned materials and assessment of amount of learned content which is different from competence-based assessment strategies which measure learners' mastery of skills.

These findings are similar to those of Banda (2011), Komba and Mwandanji (2015), Kabombwe and Mulenga (2019), Kahwa (2009), Mdukula (2012), Ndomondo (2022), Timothy (2011) and Shemwelekw (2008) who found out that assessment practices in classrooms remained traditional, involving the use of tests, quizzes and examination. Also, Kafyulilo et. al., (2012) reported that apart from having a paradigm shift in teaching and learning, the assessment methods remained the same as those used for assessing knowledge-based teaching and learning. Similarly, studies by Muneja (2015) and Nzima (2016) found out that traditional pen and paper assessment were commonly used by teachers in the assessment of learners in the class. The same observation is in Ndalichako (2015) who revealed that traditional assessment methods were dominantly used in schools.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is concluded that most of the pre-primary school teachers have limited knowledge about competence-based assessment strategies and the use competence-based assessment strategies in assessing children development and learning progress as emphasized in competence-based teaching and learning approaches. Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are given: First, it is recommended Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) should conduct capacity building programmes on CBC to tutors of all teacher colleges which are responsible to train pre-primary school teachers. Secondly, it is also recommended that TIE should specify pre-primary school assessment strategies and tools which are reflective of the Tanzanian context so that the pre-primary school teachers do not encounter challenges in employing them. Lastly, it is recommended that teacher training institutions, including universities, should adopt competence-based teaching and learning styles during the preparations of teachers who will then work in pre-schools and colleges.

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