

Alternative Assessments and Teacher Readiness in the Philippine K to 12 Educational System

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The Philippine educational system is at its transition point. With the K to 12 reform agenda being piloted already in Grade 1 and Grade 7, concerns and issues on the day-to-day implementation inside the classroom has started to arise. The learner-centered approach to instruction and assessment, being the framework upon which the K to 12 curriculum is carried out, utilizes alternative forms of assessments to measure its expected learning outcomes. The diversion from traditional assessments to its alternative forms poses teacher readiness issues that could affect teacher efficacy. This paper aims to present certain concerns on alternative assessments as have and would be encountered by teachers engaging in the K to 12 process. The paper is not an actual study but relates to actual observations as the educational reform agenda evolves. The observations presented are supported by studies done by experts in order to make the presentation of the concerns more valid.

Keywords: alternative assessment, assessing students, assessment standards, assessment in K to 12

With the introduction of the Understanding by Design teaching framework and the K to 12 curricular reform in the Philippine basic educational system, the efforts in assessments have been diverted from a traditional set up to a more learner centered approach of alternative assessments. As such, teachers of both public and private schools have been subjected to orientations and short-term periodic seminar workshops in hopes of actually preparing themselves for the demands of the curricular transition. After the pilot year of implementation of the K to 12 curriculum in the Philippines for Grade 1 and Grade 7 in academic year 2012 - 2013, it seems that much has yet to be determined as far as the efficacy of such change in assessment style is concerned to Filipino students.

Although, it could be anticipated that much of the expected effects can partly stem from the teachers' capacity and ability to think and create appropriate alternative assessments that would showcase the students' acquired knowledge and skills that go beyond the facts and procedures stated in textbooks. Needless to say that the teachers' readiness to engage in the K to 12 transition and its entire process, to include assessment development and implementation, play a very crucial role in its success. It is from this premise that I shall review some teacher issues related to the employment of alternative assessments and the challenges that a teacher under the early years of the Philippine K to 12 curricular reform might confront while preparing quality assessments for his or her students.

The Philippine K to 12 Basic Education Background

As the Department of Education explains it, the proposal to have a 12-year basic education system in the Philippines has long been there since the 1920's. However, the consideration to push through with it has not been entertained until the time of President Benigno Simeon Aquino III when the gripping reality of our country's educational status, as compared to other nearby Asian countries and the world, presented certain issues such as low ratings in national tests, low international Math and Science rankings and substandard international perspective and acceptance due to the lack of educational years. Thus, the Philippine K to 12 Educational Program was instituted having a mandatory Kindergarten, 6 years of Elementary education, 4 years of Junior High School and 2 more years of Senior High School (DepEd, 2012).

The K to 12 Curriculum

The Department of Education highlighted a revised curriculum for both Elementary and High School for the K to 12 Program. The enhanced curriculum boasts of a spiral approach to its design where the same concepts are built on in increasing sophistication and complexity from Grade 1 to Grade 12. The desired outcomes are now defined by content standards and performance standards which allow students to display their learning as identified in the areas of Science, Mathematics, English, Filipino, Mother Tongue, Araling Panlipunan, Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao, Technology and Livelihood Education, Music, Arts, Physical Education and Health. It is also foreseen that modules in the different subject areas will be employed utilizing more self directed materials that could lead to more independent and collaborative learning (DepEd, 2012).

The K to 12 Assessment

Assessment is vital in any educational program. The K to 12 curriculum also spelled out a holistic assessment process, which is guided by the set content and performance standards. Several levels of assessments are involved in each of the subject areas to gauge a student's ability and capability. To wit, the knowledge level refers to the acquisition of content facts and information; the process level displays performance of the facts and information as one builds on his or her understanding; understanding level, on the other hand, allows a student to present his or her learning in a particular subject content through the enduring big ideas and generalizations; lastly, the product and performance level paves the way to showcase real life

applications as displayed in the various authentic tasks done by the student. Each of the assessment level is measured accordingly: 15% for knowledge, 25% for process, 30 % for understanding and another 30% for product and performance (DepEd, 2012).

Since the expected outputs are skills and standards based, the grading system for the K to 12 Program is also reflective of the performance produced. The assessments are valued as beginning where the student has not yet acquired the basic knowledge needed in process of understanding; developing tells the stake holder that the student has acquired the minimum basic learning but not sufficient enough to perform an authentic task, thus needing a lot of assistance; the approaching proficiency level describes the acquisition of the basic knowledge and the capacity to transfer his or her learning towards an authentic task with minimal help from the teacher or a peer; the proficient level is a notch higher where the student has developed the basic knowledge already and can transfer independently his or her learning to authentic tasks; the last skill grading is the advanced level where the student has developed competencies beyond the basic knowledge and has the ability to make use of his learning automatically and flexibly to any given authentic situation (DepEd, 2012).

Alternative Assessments and the K to 12 Program

An alternative assessment is any non-standardized, non-traditional, constructivist based test given to a student which aims to measure particular knowledge and skills that are, most of time, not captured in regular assessment methods (Merritt, 2008) such as the usual short answer supply type or multiple choice pen and paper tests. This form of assessment may range from simple graphic organizers and logs to portfolios and exhibitions to complex performance and authentic assessments. From the process of knowledge and skill scaffolding until the time the understanding is transferred towards real life applications, the K to 12 Program actually promotes the perusal of alternative assessments in lieu of the traditional forms. The Department of Education even encourages schools to have its own culminating activity every quarter to showcase the products created and performances done by the students as all of these things are considered as valuable evidences of learning (DepEd, 2012). The framework utilized in the implementation of the K to 12 Program inside the classroom is actually based on the Understanding by Design concept by Wiggins and McTighe (n.d.).

This approach to teaching uses the backward design where the goals are defined by the content and performance standards initially, followed by identifying the assessments and evidences that would demonstrate the understanding then, later on, plan out the scaffolding activities necessary to answer the essential questions and generalize the enduring big ideas. The Understanding by Design classroom, like the envisioned K to 12 classroom, is noted to be of the constructivist kind where students are more engaged in developing their knowledge and creating their own understanding. As such, various methodologies as well as assessment strategies are needed by the teacher to achieve a classroom that has more student learning than teacher teaching (Loeser, 2008).

Issues on Alternative Assessments

Though teachers in the Philippine setting has started to take note and open their doors to alternative assessments, especially with the K to 12 Program now in place, it is not by far that the common issues encountered by countries more advanced in educational ranking than the Philippines are also the same ones that the Filipino teachers are now battling with as they continue to cope up and align themselves towards the achievement and success of the K to 12 educational reform.

Baker, in the CRESST Report 772 in 2010, enumerated some items that raise concerns that I do believe, through experience, are also met by the Filipino teachers as they explore the alternative forms of assessments.

Need for Clearer Definitions of Alternative Assessments. If one were to look at the big umbrella of these kinds of assessments, it would be plain and simple to say that alternative assessments are any of the informal, classroom based, qualitative assessments (Janisch, Liu & Akrofi, 2007), which do not use the usual pen and paper test. However, alternative assessments have almost always been synonymous with authentic assessment, performance assessment and portfolio as well. In the process perspective, all of the above-mentioned types connote a similar multistep and complex task production, which is actually a main criterion for alternative assessments. So how does one differ from the other? What are the parameters of using each? When is the right time to require each one? Does each have a certain format to follow? These questions need to be clarified as one poses a clearer picture and meaning of alternative assessments and its types.

Need to Identify Standard Procedures in Developing Alternative Assessments. Confusion may arise as one teacher tries to formulate a problem, project or perform a task, as there are various ways on how to go about it. Furthermore, at the very core of the development, certain questions need to be clarified from the beginning: what is being assessed and what is the purpose of the assessment? The answers to these inquiries need to be understood explicitly by the teacher so as to ensure the appropriateness of the assessment to be given for a particular target content. The lack of knowledge in developing alternative assessments has also been cited as a dilemma in the paper of Sasmaz Oren, Ormanchi and Evrekli in 2011.

Need to Review Rubrics for Rating. Generating the rubrics to be used for a certain alternative assessment is already a problem on its own. Which would be more efficient to use, an analytic rubric or a weighted rubric? What is more appropriate to use, a standard rubric or a checkbric? What criteria should be included in the rubric? Will one teacher have the same interpretation of the same criteria as another teacher? Having a common standard criterion for a particular task or activity may lessen the questions but it still may not erase the issue of reliability and equity. If a particular task has an inter-rater component, will all raters have the same perspective of the criteria and descriptor as they rate the actual performance or product? The question of the existence of high-level subjectivity in the usage of

alternative assessments has also been raised (Sasmaz Oren et al., 2011). Sasmaz Oren et al., 2011 also cited a very important finding that can be included in the list of issues earlier presented by Baker (2010).

Need for more time. Truly, the implementation of alternative assessments may eat too much time. Findings in the Sasmaz Oren et al., (2011) study has been consistent in both Elementary and High School. The completion of a complex task or performance starts out with planning and ends with the actual created or displayed product. As compared to the traditional assessments that could be done in one sitting, those assessments at the understanding and product or performance level may consume more time as expected. Even the formulation of appropriate alternative assessments as deemed necessary by the teacher may also take time. By observation, this is also a common problem that the teachers in our institution have experienced as they piloted the K to 12 Program.

Janisch et al., in 2007 included the following as concerns in the implementation of alternative assessments:

Need to Look Beyond Test Scores. School administrators and directors are almost always preoccupied by test scores especially when we are talking about external normative tests. Those examinations that would put the institution in a particular mark or standing among competitor schools will create tunnel visions for them. Though it is understandable why it is necessary to get excellent scores, the focus of assessment may not become consistent with its purpose. As evidenced by current examinations, there still seem to be some misalignment as far as instruction implementation in schools and construction of national tests are concerned. Most questions, as of the moment, are still factual and knowledge based as compared to skills based and problem oriented instruction in the classroom. If pushed by school administrators, teachers may be forced to go back to traditional teaching and assessment where book based instruction is given priority rather than its application to the real world. We are all still looking forward that such disparity between instruction and assessment will be addressed as we progress in the K to 12 Program so as not to compromise good practice in the teaching learning process.

Need to Motivate Students. Students, at this point of the K to 12 Program, are still in the transition where they are used to teacher directed activities. Alternative assessments push them to have self-initiative and self-reliance. Alternative assessments exert effort to make students think critically and reflect. Thus, teachers need to take time and plan out carefully how to involve and motivate his or her students in order to make them realize the importance of taking responsibility for their own learning as the learner centered teaching employs.

Making Most Out of Alternative Assessments

The items mentioned above are but some of the issues and concerns that one can look at during this initial stage of K to 12 Program implementation. Though much is yet to be polished, we could not discount the fact that alternative assessments do

have its own advantages as applied by teachers in their respective classrooms. As discussed by Merritt in 2008, alternative assessments provide students with a more authentic way of relating tests and the real world. Real life skills needed to perform the authentic task are developed allowing students to collaborate and engage in more active roles. Higher order thinking among students is enhanced by each performance permitting creativity, resourcefulness and flexibility to be demonstrated in its full capacity.

Teachers, on the other hand, are given the opportunity to be facilitators of learning (Merritt, 2008). Unlike the traditional teacher who is burdened of being the primary source of information and knowledge inside the classroom, teachers in the K to 12 set up using alternative assessments serve only as a coach and mentor allowing students to explore as they discover and develop their own understanding. Likewise, observations of the simulated performances allow them to gather a wide range of student-covered competencies that could capture student growth and development over time. The data gathered serves as immediate feedback to which the teacher can respond by aligning his or her lessons and assessments accordingly.

Teacher Readiness to Engage in Alternative Assessments under the K to 12 Program

After the first year of K to 12 implementation in all public schools and some private schools in the Philippines, the question of how ready are the teachers to engage in the changes in instruction and assessment still floats. Are teachers willing to embrace and accept the challenges presented during the transition of the program and the years after? Will the resistance be an issue of the usage of alternative assessments or will it be more of the K to 12 Program per se?

Though there is still no or limited actual study done on teacher readiness on the use of alternative assessments in the Philippine setting, it was noted in a foreign study that teachers seem to see, in general, significant advantages in the utilization of alternative assessments and think that such approach contribute to the development of student learning as they enjoy the process, spend time understanding the world outside the classroom and reduce anxieties of learning (Sasmaz Oren et al., 2011). It was mentioned also by Simpson in her 2009 paper that teachers have the desire to enhance student cognitive development, understand the structure of instruction in their respective subject areas given the chance to observe the progress of learning, and pose improvement on their own teaching and understanding of the entire teacher student engagement process. These things can actually be achieved through the exercise of alternative assessments.

The K to 12 educational program in itself is a development in progress. A lot have been brought down already at the level of the supervisors and teachers but despite of which, getting everybody involved at the very heart of the reform seem to have not sunk in yet. Most teachers, especially those who have been in the profession for the longest time and have been used to the traditional approach to teaching and learning, would implement out of compliance and not because they really want to.

Part of this challenge is actually because of the lack of training and information on how to manage the curriculum inside the classroom. The curriculum developed for the Elementary level, the Grade 7 and the incoming Grade 8 is still very fluid in nature, undergoing modifications as needed in certain subject areas. The entire curriculum provides only general standards for content and performance that need to be met at the end of each level but no definite prescribed way on how to go about the nitty-gritty daily implementation in the classroom which leaves the teacher in an experimental mode in the day to day planning of the lessons. I believe that it could have been a different story and the acceptance level much higher if the teachers are fully equipped with the necessary tools that are definite and more structured to make the facilitation easier. On the other end of the line, I also believe that the Department of Education has been doubling its efforts to organize this reform agenda as evidenced by the progress that they have created already since it was announced to the public. They have been consistently planning and involving the teachers in the process to make them understand the true essence and value of the educational reform. The loop holes and the inconsistencies are but part of the birth pains which, at this point, can still be considered acceptable since we are still in the transition stage. However, the stakeholders of the academe sector are also hoping for a more stable K to 12 system the soonest time possible.

Conclusion

Observing the developments in Philippine Basic Education as it moves toward a more competitive and global perspective and approach is truly exciting. The K to 12 learner centered approach to teaching and learning has opened the doors of academic institutions and classrooms in the creation of a new culture towards assessment and its alternative forms. The path towards the success of this endeavor is still long and, by natural occurrence, would still encounter a lot of queries and criticisms. Learning from other more advanced countries, we should be able to address the specified concerns immediately so as not to produce further confusion and misalignment.

Teachers are learners as well. As we try to cope up with the challenges of the K to 12 Program, we learn in the process. The individual learning, both in instruction and assessment, can be noted and later on be synthesized to form best practices that can be shared with everyone.

The Filipino people believe that education is important. Education is the key to a more successful and better living. The achievement of this dream cannot be done by the government alone or the teachers individually. All stakeholders in the learning process must be active in owning the responsibility and should reflect on how his or her actions can affect the entire Philippine educational system.

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