

## **Sociocultural Perspective on Assessment for Learning: Exploring Pre-Service Teachers' Understanding**



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**ABSTRACT:** Assessing students' performance in a particular context is crucial for teachers. Teachers should have enough knowledge and skill of how students construct their knowledge to enhance their learning. The study aimed to explore the pre-service teachers' understanding of assessment for learning from a sociocultural perspective. In a qualitative research design, a semi-structured interview was conducted with five second-year secondary pre-service teachers studying 'Assessment for learning' as a foundation course in their B.Ed. programme. The analysis of the finding revealed that participants had minimal understanding of assessment for learning. Participants were not adequately prepared to assess students' performance in a sociocultural paradigm.

**KEYWORDS:** Assessment for learning, pre-service teacher, sociocultural perspective, teacher education

### **1. ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING: FROM A SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE**

Formative assessment received more attention after Black and Wiliam's (1998) comprehensive review of many researches on formative assessment, where they argued that formative assessment has significant benefits for enhancing students' learning. Black and Wiliam (1998) framed formative assessment as "encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (p.1). The notion of formative assessment included diverse practices such as self-assessment, learning goals, negotiations and mastery learning. Assessment for learning (AFL) focuses on the purpose of formative assessment, which provides evidence of students' learning progress.

In an AFL classroom, a teacher must define and share the learning intention and assessment criteria with students at the beginning of their learning. Learners play an active role in their learning process and learn about the scaffolding they receive during interaction to achieve learning intentions (Sardareh & Saad, 2012). During the teaching-learning process, learners constantly collaborate with their teachers and peers to monitor their current level of achievement with the learning intentions and communicate with their parents. AFL helps the teachers and learners monitor their progress in the teaching-learning process and gives feedback to them to improve teaching and learning. Some studies (Black et al., 2003; Eraut, 2006) were conducted to align AFL with psychological learning theories based on the idea that AFL practices fit well with constructivist learning theories, mainly on the role of social interaction. Social constructivists acknowledge that social interaction and knowledgeable peers shape learners' experiences (Sardareh & Saad, 2012).

In a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985, 1991; Willis, 2009), knowledge is cultural understanding and competent participation. Learning occurs through participation in social activities. Individuals construct ideas and values through their experiences in a particular social context. Teaching assists learners in knowledge construction. The learners' performance depends on the situation; they learn things quickly in their familiar context. Teachers must assist learners and allow them to learn things through activities in their context. This perspective provides the opportunity to integrate learners' valued behaviours, cognitions and contextualized performance into assessment activities.

Smith et al. (2009) stated that "Assessment from this perspective recognizes the importance of the sociocultural activity as the vehicle for integrating these desired outcomes, and it anticipates the variability in performances that can occur across particular situations" (p. 40). Based on Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, AFL is an interactive process in which teachers and learners discuss learning intentions and how to improve teaching and learning performance and accomplish success (Sardareh & Saad, 2012). Thus, teachers' and more knowledgeable peers' assistance and scaffolding given to the students when they are in their ZPD help them to move forward in their learning (Berry, 2008).

Thus, from a sociocultural perspective, AFL is seen as the opportunity to show learners as active and independent in their learning, knowledge constructed through social interaction with others, primarily through cooperative and collaborative participation.

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Teachers are the primary source to assist the learners in a classroom; they should know the purpose and process of AFL and the capacity to implement that.

Given the importance of AFL, the teacher education programme (TEP) plays a crucial role in developing assessment capacity among pre-service teachers. Teachers' assessment capacity includes self-assessment, using different sociocultural pedagogy, making good relations with learners, listening student voices, making them independent learners, and understanding their social and cultural context. There has been little attempt to explore teachers' understanding of AFL from a sociocultural perspective. The prospective teachers should have assessment capacities aligned with the current educational policy visions to enhance the learner's participation in the learning process. Therefore, the present study explored the secondary pre-service teachers' understanding of AFL from the sociocultural perspective.

### 2. AFL IN INDIAN SECONDARY TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME

The curricular and policy documents have emphasized student-centric learning processes and assessment practices for quite some time. National Curriculum Framework (2005) emphasizes the constructivist approach in the classroom, where the student plays an active role in their learning. Taking cognizance of changing school contexts and demands, the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (2010) realized a new approach to teacher education curriculum to bring qualitative improvement in education. It suggested for assessment and evaluation studies a separate curricular component within the area of curriculum and pedagogy to provide pre-service teachers with capacities and perspectives on various assessment practices, including assessment for learning. National Council of Teacher Education [Recognition Norms and Procedure] Regulations (2014) indicated that a course on the theoretical perspectives on 'Assessment for Learning should be included in the teacher preparation curriculum under curriculum and pedagogic studies to improve pre-service teachers' knowledge of assessment. The National Education Policy (2020) considers regular formative AFL as one of the fundamental principles guiding the education system. It recommends adopting experiential learning at all levels, adequate space for holistic learning experiences through student-teacher interactions, collaborative and cooperative engagement of learners in the learning process and employing different assessment tools in alignment with the learning outcome and developing the capabilities and disposition required for the specific subject area. It assumes a robust continuous assessment will help teachers and students and ensure student learning.

### 3. THE CURRENT STUDY

A qualitative research method was used to explore the pre-service teachers' understanding of AFL. The pre-service teachers who were available and willing to participate comprised the sample of the study (incidental sampling). Five second-year pre-service teachers studying a two-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programme in the Department of Education, University of Delhi, participated in this study. Data was collected through a semi-structured interview. During the interview, the researcher asked a few questions to elicit participants' understanding of AFL. Transcribed interview data were exposed to inductive data analysis. Inductive data analysis was used to discover the patterns and themes that emerged from one's data set (Patton, 2002).

### 4. FINDINGS

The following themes have emerged from the analysis of the transcribed data.

#### 4.1 Understanding of Learner

The findings of this study indicated that participants had an idea that while doing an assessment teacher should keep in mind the student's socio, cultural background and cognitive level. The following extracts illustrate this idea:

*"Few students does not have source to complete the project. Library also does not provide data for that particular project. So they got less mark in that. The problem is not with them, with their social background .....like that"* (Participant 3)

*"Assessment helps in improving ....if the teachers knows where the child stand , how much he/she gain ....( Participant 2).*

#### 4.2 Assessment as A Continuous Process

Participants in this study mentioned that AFL is a continuous process which used to measure the overall personality of the students. They also have ideas that child-centred assessment and continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE) are as per the need of the learners. Participants are also aware of different ways and processes of measurement involved in the assessment. Illustrations of these ideas are below:

*"There should not be any hard and fast rule for assessment. One should use both quantitative and qualitative ways of measurement to assess the student progress level. It should be as per the student"* (Participant 1)

*"Whether student can achieve or not achieve; not only the academics (but also) over and above that. For example value, ethics and all other field and co-curricular activities all of them need to be assessed continuously"* (Participant 5)

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Participants said that, they learned about rubrics, blueprints, and question construction according to Bloom's taxonomy from their assessment and pedagogic courses. They are also having an awareness of the consequences of assessment. Furthermore, they also know difficulties in following CCE, issues like student-teacher ratio, class size, teacher's beliefs of assessment etc.

### 4.3 Feedback and Scaffolding

Participants believed that feedback from the assessment process helps teachers and learners to improve their teaching and learning. In addition, if teacher make learners into a group, they will get peer scaffolding to achieve learning goals. One of the participants expressed that,

*"First sensitizing the students' ability and social background to make group, so that their friends will help them in learning. In psychology and inclusive paper (that) we are studying (informs) if we mix the students who is brighter and who is little slow learner. If they come together and study that would benefit both the learners"* (Participant 3)

### 4.4 Reflection on Field Experiences at School

The participants revealed that they did not see any authentic assessment practice done by the school teachers to measure the students' educational progress. They were also not getting any opportunity to practice different assessment activities at school during their School Experience Programme (SEP)/ School Internship. One of the participants mentioned that,

*"Schools never appreciated the different assessment task done by the pre-service teachers"* (Participant 2)

Another participant said that there is an inconsistency between schools and assessment course taught in teacher education programme on how to do an assessment. School Teachers mainly depend on the test to assess the student's educational level in schools. Moreover, there was not much interaction happened between participant teachers and learners. There is no emphasis on participants to practice assessment during SEP.

### 4.5 Expectation of Orientation for AFL Practice

All the participants expected that the B.Ed programme should include the practical aspects of assessment. They also expected orientation of AFL in teacher education programme. One of them mentioned that,

*"(field) Excursion at the schools.... where student assessed by new ways.....to understand the AFL"* (Participant 1)

And another participant said,

*"Studying only theory and no practical orientation won't help to assess the student in many ways....."* (Participant 5)

Moreover, they expected more formative assessment practicals during their SEP, as illustrated below:

*"In SEP there should be something related to assessment that you need to assess the student in these way or that way. If we get the opportunity to assess the student based on all the aspects studying in assessment paper that could be better .... Practical (experiences) will help to learn more than theory"* (Participant 4)

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research aimed to explore pre-service teachers' understanding of assessment for learning as a sociocultural process. Interviews with the second-year secondary pre-service teachers revealed they have theoretical knowledge about AFL. Khumalo and Maphalala (2018) also found the similar results in analysing the pre-service teachers' practices of formative assessment from a sociocultural perspective. Smith et al. (2009) emphasized that assessment should be integrated with learners' valued behaviours. Participants in this study also understand that assessment aims to measure learners' overall personality, not only their academic achievements. Furthermore, one should assess the development of learners as continuously with multiple ways of doing assessments (Quizzes, Assignments, Projects etc.). Participants thought collaborative group activities would help learners more than other activities. This idea is almost similar to others (Gipps, 1999; Sardareh & Saad, 2012) that students helping each other in group activities will contribute to achieving the learning goals.

However, participants had a minimal understanding of doing AFL in the classroom. Participants' understanding was limited only to continuous and comprehensive evaluation. From the findings, it seems that they do not have a proper understanding of social interaction in the classroom, how to build a relationship with learners to understand their cognitive level and how to make students an independent learner. Importantly, participants were unaware of self-assessment, which is helpful for both learners and teachers. The reason for this might be an assessment course in B.Ed. programme and school assessment practices are not in a continuum, so they find it challenging to comprehend assessment in the context of social interaction. Izci's (2016) study also found that pre-service teachers were not getting enough time and resources to practice and reflect on a formative assessment even though they had knowledge of it. Hence, more scope for practicing formative assessment with enough infrastructure to be incorporated into teacher education programmes for pre-service teachers to gain confidence in formative assessments.

Results also revealed that participants had understood behaviourist and constructivist approaches in the teaching-learning process but not much idea about sociocultural paradigm. They are learning something about considering the social and cultural background of the learner while learning about assessment from other courses like psychology, philosophy and pedagogy. The assessment course must teach how to incorporate all these aspects into the assessment.

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Participants also expected practical aspect needs to be included in the assessment course. Assessment is very important for stakeholders (students, teachers and administrators) and the success of the educational reform movement, and it has consequences in student life. The teachers' role is to assess the student properly, and the teacher education programme should train the teachers for that. Hence teacher education institutions should initiate some efforts like conducting a workshop to develop minimum assessment competencies among pre-service teachers. Field works and assignments to understand the different notions of assessment (i.e., assessment as, assessment for and assessment of learning) will help pre-service teachers to perform better in their profession.

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