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Classroom-Based Assessment Practices and Perceptions of Primary School Teachers in Rural Gambia

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Article Info

Abstract

This study explored how primary school teachers in rural Gambia perceive and implement classroom-based assessment (CBA). With growing emphasis on formative assessment in global and national education policies, understanding how teachers apply CBA in low-resource contexts is essential. Using a qualitative case study design, the study engaged teachers from Cluster One in the Central River Region Five South through semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that teachers view CBA as a practical tool for understanding and monitoring learners' progress. This helps to inform teachers on key decisions related to their teaching styles and promoting students to the next level. The study indicates that challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and contextual language barriers undermine the consistent and equitable implementation of CBA. Despite all these challenges, teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to effectively using CBA. The implications from this study highlight the need for systemic professional development and contextually appropriate resources to ensure the equitable implementation of CBA in rural Gambian schools.

1. Introduction

Classroom assessment of students has been a long-standing common practice in educational systems (Lewkowicz & Leung, 2021) [25]. Moreover, classroom-based assessment (CBA) now plays a central role in modern-day teaching as educational systems become increasingly learner-centered globally (Liu, 2024) [26]. When teachers assess, they can identify weaknesses and improve students' understanding, thereby gathering valuable data to improve and gauge their method of teaching (Hock *et al*., 2022) [22]. Classroom-based assessment is any practice organized by the teacher to evaluate students' performance on curriculum tasks, provide information on their progress, and determine whether further support and scaffolding are necessary to facilitate learners' learning progression (Lewkowicz & Leung, 2021) [25]. CBA is not only about students' scores but also about improving classroom teaching, as it encompasses all activities aimed at enhancing student learning and teachers' lesson delivery style. Therefore, assessment is a vital teaching process through which educators can evaluate their students' skills or knowledge (Hock *et al*., 2022) [22]. Teachers utilize various assessment types to evaluate their students. This includes classwork, tests, quizzes, assignments, and homework, since it represents a more learner-centered evaluation strategy than a teacher-centered assessment style.

In addition, Cheng *et al*. (2004) [11] highlighted that CBA aims to inform and enhance students' learning progress rather than simply checking for outcomes. On that note, CBA intends to support, empower, and recognize students' learning needs. It is believed that it can help develop students' abilities, adjust learning instructions, and direct attention to students (Dang *et al*., 2022) [13]. Given the context above, CBA is perceived to be a practical pedagogical approach within an ongoing process where teachers and learners regularly use informal practices to monitor and promote improvements in quality teaching and learning.

In The Gambia, the education system was first decentralized into four regions in the 1976–1986 education policy (Njie & Fye, 1989) [33]. This was made to ensure that several administrative affairs are handled within each educational directorate. This is particularly useful, as several issues are handled within each educational directorate, rather than being handled solely in the main office, Banjul. Currently, there are eight educational directorates, and within each educational directorate, schools are further grouped into clusters of schools. These school clusters are overseen by cluster monitors, whose primary objective is to enhance administrative efficiency, service delivery, and the quality of education (MoBSE, 2011) [27].

Within this decentralization framework, continuous assessment has been adopted as a key national strategy to monitor students' learning progression and improve educational outcomes. However, rural teachers are faced with significant challenges such as limited teaching resources and inadequate professional development opportunities (Senghor, 2014) [37]. These gaps undermine the effective implementation of CBA and hinder the progress toward national learning goals. Thus, the Government of The Gambia, through the education policy 2015-2030, prioritizes foundational learning with a strong focus on improving assessment practices to support student achievement by 2030 (MoBSE, 2016) [28].

Moreover, a key part of this agenda was to ensure the improvement of literacy and numeracy. To better understand the magnitude of success and retrogress in this agenda, MoBSE (Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education) realized that classroom-based assessment plays a vital role in both "assessment of learning" and "assessment for learning". Such a policy change aligns with the shift outlined in the MoBSE's Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) (2016 – 2030), which focuses on access to quality learning outcomes (MoBSE, 2016) [28]. Therefore, understanding teachers' perceptions and use of CBA is crucial for meaningful educational reform to achieve educational goals, especially in rural areas with limited resources.

However, over the last 25 years, low-income countries, Sub-Saharan Africa in particular, have witnessed a high rate of enrollment (Bold et al., 2017) [8]. Despite this good news, the above study has further reiterated that most of the children enrolled in these schools are faced with inadequate basic reading, arithmetic, and writing skills, thus leading to a "global learning crisis" in such countries. Critics like Sayed and Kanjee (2013) believe that one of the key reasons for this global learning phenomenon is that many assessments are gauged through Western standards and views. Despite asserting that many countries' education systems across the world are common, Sayed and Kanjee (2013) [36] reaffirmed their stance by highlighting that these issues vary widely between countries hence they found themselves in a dilemma of whether to borrow policies or draw ones that suit their national context. For this reason, teachers, despite their clear intention to implement CBA to test their teaching quality and students' learning outcomes, are faced with challenges such as personal and conceptual factors hindering their implementation of CBA in the classroom (Yan et al., 2021) [45].

Furthermore, a study by Iddrisu et al. (2025) [23] highlighted that inadequate teacher training, frequent student absenteeism, inadequate support from school leaders, and other students copying their peers are key factors derailing teachers from implementing CBA. For this reason, they recommended the need for a better support system, CBA guidelines, and shifting school schedules to successfully implement CBA.

Narrowing to the context of the Gambia, CBA implementation has been faced with continuous impediments, especially in the rural areas where both human and capital resources are scarce (Senghor, 2014) [38]. Factors such as inadequate teacher training and low teacher motivation are at the core of this menace. These factors are compounded by large classroom size and teacher attrition (Tanimu & Tanimu, 2025) [42]. Addressing these hurdles would require improving teacher working conditions, teacher development, drafting and implementing policies that support assessment meaningful assessments for student and teachers' teaching improvement. Given that the above studies are centered on urban Gambia, shows a void in the literature for this current research to fill. With the above problem stated, this current paper is intended to understand how rural Gambian teachers perceive CBA and identify challenges they face in its implementation in the Gambia.

Findings from this research would help to guide teachers, school administrators, and policy makers on practices and strategies used by rural Gambian teachers. Moreover, understanding rural primary school teachers' perceptions, strategies, and challenges would offer valuable insights into how CBA is applied as well as the challenges faced by teachers in rural contexts of various sub-Saharan countries, specifically in The Gambia, where this current study is based. Given that CBA is a vital part of understanding learners' progress as well as gauging teachers' teaching methods, this current study would contribute to the existing literature on thus addressing the knowledge gap in the Gambian rural context.

Classroom-Based Assessment: Global Perspectives
CBA is widely recognized as a practical way to improve student learning because it allows teachers to modify their instruction based on ongoing feedback (Black & Wiliam, 2009) [7]. Feedback is crucial in shaping learning quality, and its effectiveness often depends on the teacher's overall teaching approach (Black & Wiliam, 2009) [7]. According to Heritage (2021) [21], when applied correctly, CBA can motivate students, help them manage their learning better, and lead to improved academic results. However, successful implementation of CBA requires careful planning, professionally trained teachers, and a supportive school environment (Hock et al., 2022) [22]. A recent mixed-methods study in Sudanese medical schools shows teachers support formative assessment (FA) (Almahal et al., 2023) [3]. However, Heritage (2010) [20] argued that many find it hard to implement correctly because of limited resources and unclear formative assessment goals.

Teachers' Perceptions and Practices
Teachers' beliefs are crucial for understanding and applying assessment methods in the classroom (Xu & Brown, 2016) [44]. Xu and Brown (2016) [44] reiterate that a gap exists between national assessment policies and actual classroom practices in many sub-Saharan regions. Teachers tend to focus more on summative assessments, like tests and exams, than on using assessments to support learning throughout the teaching process (Asare, 2020; Sayed & Kanjee, 2013) [5, 36]. This disconnection is made worse by common challenges

such as overcrowded classrooms, limited professional development, and a lack of clear guidance on effectively implementing classroom-based assessments.

A study in Ghana and Brunei by Asamoah *et al*. (2024) [4] shows that while many teachers use assessment to inform learning, few do so consistently. According to (Faizefu, 2016) [17], this approach is influenced by a lack of awareness among primary school teachers, as seen in how inclusive assessment strategies are practiced since all students are assigned the same approach regardless of their needs in Cameroon.

Assessment in Rural and Low-Resource Contexts

Teachers in rural areas often face systemic challenges such as limited teaching materials, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient opportunities for professional development (Egeberg *et al*., 2016) [15]. Research by (Sanders & Rivers, 1996) [35] shows that the quality of teaching is one of the most important factors influencing student achievement, emphasizing the need for well-trained and supported educators.

In Zambia, school inspectors report that teachers should use learner-centered assessments while relying on simple test formats due to practical limitations (Mulawo, 2017) [31]. In countries where national policies support continuous assessment, such as The Gambia, a significant gap between policy and practice undermines the effective implementation of CBA in rural schools (MoBSE, 2016b) [29].

Sociocultural Context and Assessment

Sociocultural approaches to assessment emphasize the importance of context in shaping educational practices. Berisha *et al*. (2024) [6] argue that assessment should reflect learners' cultural, institutional, and social realities. They highlight the need to carefully consider what is assessed, who is being assessed, and when the assessment takes place. According to Tai *et al*. (2023) [41], standardized assessments that treat all students the same can be inappropriate, as they often overlook individual learners' backgrounds and current circumstances. Instead, assessments should be inclusive and supportive, encouraging students to engage with diverse perspectives. Based on the above, Pastore (2023) [34] highlighted that teachers' assessment literacy is the knowledge and skills they need to effectively enact assessment in the classroom. It is shaped by their communities of practice and influenced by the tools, norms, and values that guide their work (Fulmer *et al*., 2021) [18]. These ideas are essential when creating practical and meaningful assessment strategies in rural African settings.

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on the Sociocultural Theory of Learning developed by Vygotsky & Cole (1978) [43], which asserts that learning does not occur in isolation but is a socially mediated process shaped by people's cultural tools, language, and interaction with others (Shepard *et al*., 2018) [40]. These authors reaffirmed that the socio-cultural theory is designed to offer a powerful and integrative account of motivational learning aspects such as self-regulation, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and identity, all of which are entwined with cognitive development. In addition, this theory applies to classroom-based assessment (CBA) because it views learning and assessment as dynamic and socially constructed processes shaped by students' environment.

The framework outlines that assessment should not only be used as a tool for measurement, but its practice should be embedded in the teaching and learning process (Shepard, 2019) [39], which is shaped by cultural, institutional, historical, and local context. For example, classroom norms, resources, and teacher beliefs influence how assessments are designed, implemented, and interpreted.

The application of Vygotsky's theory to CBA in rural Gambian schools aligns with the contextual nature of teachers' assessment practices. This is based on the sociocultural realities of the communities they find themselves in, which could influence their assessment methods. (Morton & Guerin, 2017) [30] argued that sociocultural context may include language barriers, class size, limited learning and assessment resources, or evolving educational policies. Seeing assessments from a sociocultural perspective can guide and help us understand how teachers use their context to inform assessment strategies.

Formative assessment is a crucial part of learning, aligning with Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – what learners can do on their own and what they can accomplish with guidance. Proper and effective implementation of CBA can help teachers identify students' ZPD and provide scaffolding. This enables teachers to develop the appropriate support for individual student needs and encourages learning (Nasir & Hand, 2006) [32]. According to (Donato & McCormick, 1994) [14], sociocultural Theory offers a strong perspective on analyzing what teachers do and why they do it in a particular manner or condition. It supports a culturally responsive approach to assessment, which can be adopted in resource-constrained rural schools in The Gambia.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine how primary school teachers in rural Gambia understand and implement CBA and the challenges they face. A qualitative method is appropriate for this investigation because it provides a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, perspectives, and classroom conditions (Johnson & Christensen, 2020) [24]. The study uses a case study design, focusing on a specific group of teachers in one region to gain detailed insights into implementing CBA in a rural setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) [12].

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in Cluster One, Central River Region Five South, a rural area in The Gambia. Cluster One is part of the school clusters located in the Central River region of the Gambia. It comprised about 15 schools, which include early childhood education centers, lower basic schools, basic cycle schools, and a senior secondary school. Furthermore, the participants selected for this research are those teaching in the primary school with varying years of teaching experience. They were selected through purposive sampling. (Etikan, 2017) [16] highlighted that the purposive sampling technique allows researchers to intentionally choose participants based on specific features and criteria relevant to the research objectives. This sampling method was chosen to ensure the inclusion of voices with relevant and rich information about classroom-based assessment practices.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and document analysis. This kind of interview combines both predetermined questions and undetermined ones, thus allowing the researcher to flex between the two thus enabling the gathering of in-depth insights from participants (Adamson, 2006; George, 2022) [1, 19]. The interviews lasted between 15 and 20 minutes and were conducted in a quiet environment within the school setting. Questions focused on participants' understanding, use, and challenges related to CBA. Teachers' lesson plans and assessment records were also reviewed to provide a triangulated perspective of their practices.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. According to (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) [9, 10], it is a qualitative data analysis method that is used to identify, analyze, and report patterns, especially in interview data. Responses from the interviews were transcribed and manually coded. The codes were then grouped into categories that led to the emergence of three main themes. The analysis focused on recurring patterns that reflected participants shared and divergent perceptions of CBA.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was sought from relevant authorities, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities, and data were securely stored (Ajemba & Arene, 2022) [2].

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings from interviews and document analysis conducted with three primary school teachers in rural Gambia. The data were thematically analyzed, and three overarching themes emerged.

Results

Assessment to Understand Learners and Inform Instruction

Teachers consistently described assessment as a tool to understand their students' learning needs. They saw it as a way to identify areas where pupils struggle and to determine the most effective teaching methods. Respondent A explained, "If the assessment is not conducted, you will not know your weak areas." He emphasized that assessments help teachers adjust lessons and focus more effort on complex topics.

Similarly, Respondent C noted, "After the explanation, I take them to oral [questions], then give classwork to see how they have understood the topic." These strategies help teachers assess understanding and decide whether to reteach or move on to the next lesson or topic. Respondents also used classroom observations and questioning as routine informal assessments, adapting their teaching based on students' answers and behavior.

Teachers recognize that using different assessment methods is crucial for meeting diverse learning needs. Respondent A stated, "People are different and students' abilities differ… that is why you need to pick the right teaching method to accommodate all students in your class."

Assessment to Monitor Learning and the Effectiveness of Teaching

All teachers said that assessment helps them monitor student progress and reflect on their teaching. Respondent B explained that "assessing your kids means assessing yourself as a teacher." He described how students' results assist him in evaluating whether his teaching methods are effective or need adjustments.

Frequent use of classwork, homework, oral questioning, and monthly tests allowed teachers to gauge how well students understood each topic. Respondent C emphasized that "the assessment results will be analyzed to see the percentage that has done well and the percentage that is behind. Then you develop on that."

Teachers also emphasized the importance of feedback in this process. For example, Respondent A described feedback as "the report that will show you where to improve and where to adjust, whether you are on the right track or not." Feedback helped them identify gaps in learning and plan appropriate next steps.

Assessment to Make Decisions and Be Accountable

Teachers see assessment as essential for advancing students and making informed decisions about their learning. Respondent C noted that classroom-based assessment "helps [students] move on to the next level of their education," allowing teachers to evaluate students' readiness to progress. The assessment was also connected to institutional accountability. Respondent B explained how results were documented, ranked, and shared with the headmaster. He said, "We submit it to the headmaster's office… and post it in the class [so] the kids will also try to evaluate themselves."

Teachers also used assessment results to communicate with parents about their children's progress. They explained that providing clear feedback helps justify students' performance and enhances parent understanding. As Respondent A states, "If students get a score, pass or fail, you must analyze it and provide feedback." His statement emphasizes teachers' importance in using assessments to explain outcomes and reflect on the results for future instruction.

Additionally, teachers emphasized the importance of fairness and inclusivity in assessment. They recognized the need to support slow and fast learners and promoted peer support through group work. However, all respondents pointed out challenges like resource shortages, language barriers, and a lack of professional training in classroom-based assessment. The findings show that teachers in rural Gambia view classroom-based assessment as a crucial part of their teaching. They use it to understand their students' needs better, monitor learning progress, modify instruction to promote inclusivity, and meet their professional duties. However, their ability to implement CBA effectively is often limited by deeply-rooted obstacles such as a lack of resources, language barriers, and insufficient training access. These systemic challenges continue to impact how fairly and thoroughly teachers can use assessment to support student classroom learning.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into how teachers in rural Gambia understand and apply classroom-based assessment (CBA). The three themes, using assessment to understand learners, monitoring progress, and supporting decision-making, demonstrate a grounded and practical approach to assessment practices. Teachers do not see CBA as an external requirement but as a vital part of their teaching routine.

First, the focus on using assessment to understand learners emphasizes teachers' commitment to tailoring instruction based on students' needs. Their comments demonstrate that assessment helps identify learning gaps and guides adjustments in teaching methods, which closely aligns with what Heritage (2010) [20] described as the role of formative assessment in supporting individual learning paths. Teachers' emphasis on spotting struggling students and modifying lessons accordingly shows that even in resource-limited settings, they adopt learner-centered approaches and promote inclusivity.

Secondly, using assessment to monitor learning and reflect on teaching shows that teachers do not view assessment as a separate entity from instruction. Instead, they use it to evaluate their effectiveness. This reflective approach to assessment echoes Xu and Brown's (2016) [44] argument that teachers' beliefs strongly influence assessment practices. It also supports Fulmer et al.'s (2021) [18] view that teacher assessment literacy is shaped more by daily experiences and practical decisions than by formal training alone.

Thirdly, the way teachers connect assessment to student promotion and institutional accountability shows the dual role of CBA in both teaching and administrative tasks. Teachers use assessment results to make informed decisions about whether students are ready to move to the next level and to report outcomes to head teachers and parents. While this practical application is necessary, it also highlights the burden of teachers meeting expectations without enough support.

It is crucial to recognize teachers' limitations, especially the lack of training, materials, and support. These findings reinforce earlier concerns in the literature by (Egeberg et al., 2016; MoBSE, 2016b) [15, 29] that systemic obstacles continue to influence how effectively CBA can be implemented in low-resource settings.

Overall, this study contributes to an expanding body of research indicating that teachers can use assessment to enhance teaching and learning. However, they need context-specific tools, ongoing support, and opportunities for professional development. In rural areas like Cluster One in the Gambia, where resources are scarce, teachers still find ways to adapt and apply CBA to serve their students. More targeted training and practical support would help ensure that these efforts lead to more consistent and equitable learning outcomes.

4. Conclusion

This study examined how primary school teachers in rural Gambia understand and carry out classroom-based assessment (CBA). Through interviews with teachers in Cluster One, Central River Region Five South, three main themes emerged: using assessment to understand learners, track progress, and support decision-making. The results showed that teachers view CBA as essential to their teaching. They use it to evaluate students, reflect on their teaching

methods, and improve their practice.

Despite these positive attitudes, teachers encounter several challenges that hinder the effectiveness of classroom-based assessment. These include limited access to teaching and assessment resources, a lack of professional training, and contextual barriers such as language differences. These constraints indicate that although there is a strong willingness to use CBA, the necessary conditions for its success are not always present.

The study enhances the broader understanding of CBA in low-resource settings. It shows that teachers are actively involved in assessment, often with limited formal support, and are finding creative ways to address their students' needs. However, without proper training and ongoing support, the full potential of CBA to improve learning outcomes may not be achieved.

In conclusion, for classroom-based assessment to be effectively implemented in rural Gambian schools, it must be supported by ongoing teacher development, access to appropriate tools, and assistance that reflects the realities of the classroom. Strengthening these areas will enable teachers to utilize CBA to improve student learning fairly and meaningfully.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the current study recommends that there should be regular practical and professional development that enhances teachers' skills and knowledge on how to design, implement and analyze teaching and learning. Moreover, for the effective use of CBA, schools need to design their assessment template, learner profiles and feedback tools that teachers can use in their classrooms to gauge teaching and learning fairly. Considering the realities of language and learning diversities, national and regional education authorities should produce guidance documents tailored to rural settings. To avoid students from copying directly from their fellow classmates or being helped by senior students verbatim, teachers should encourage peer tutorials among students. This can be attained by school heads sensitizing parents on the significance of CBA. To validate the effect of the above recommendation, there should be a supportive supervision system to track how CBA has been utilized in various rural schools while offering constructive feedback rather than mere compliance. Last but not least, school leaders and cluster monitors should encourage collaboration and peer learning among teachers. With this strategy, teachers can exchange experiences and skills relating to assessment practices through teacher learning communities and circles.

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