

TEACHER OBSERVATION ASSESSMENT FOR PRIMARY EDUCATION

¹**Reny Rika Puspita**, ²**Suyatno**

¹SDN Banjaragung II Rengel Tuban, Jawa Timur

²SDN Karangtinoto II Rengel Tuban, Jawa Timur

Corresponding email:renyrika110@gmail.com

Abstract: Teacher observation is an important but underutilized assessment technique. It is sometimes argued that teachers are unable to make appropriate and dependable assessment judgments from observations of students in natural settings. Handled carefully, teacher observations can provide important evidence for assessment judgments. In some cases, they provide the only way of obtaining evidence about particular learning outcomes, especially those involving practical techniques, performance activities, ‘real life’ projects and group work.

Keywords: Assessment, Teacher observation, Young learners.

INTRODUCTION

The role of assessment in educational settings has gained importance over the decades. Assessment is a crucial concern since assessment processes are considered to have an impact on learning. The lack of information about this aspect of education field is emphasized in the study of Broadfoot (1998). In this study, assessment is the most critical issue, and is not like the other aspects of education. Although the role of assessment has begun to be stressed in studies, according to the Bowman, Donovan & Burns (2000), “Assessment...is in a state of flux... There are a number of promising new approaches to assessment, among them variations on the clinical interview and performance assessment, but the field must be described as emergent. Much more research and development are need...” (p12).

Meisels and Atkins-Burnett (2000) stressed the issue of assessment education primary as “young learners assessment is a field in transition. Dominated from its inception by psychometric models and measurement strategies used with older children and adults, it is only now beginning to forge a methodology that is unique to very young children.” (p.231). Therefore, there is an increase in the support for further research in young learners’ education assessment.

Teacher observation as one of tools in assessment has been accepted as a source of information for recording and reporting student demonstrations of learning outcomes in education. As the student progresses, less attention typically is given to teacher observation and more is given to formal assessment procedures involving required tests and tasks taken under explicit constraints of context and time. However, teacher observation is capable of providing substantial information on student demonstration of learning outcomes at all levels of education.

Gathering and recording the evidence requires planning and preparation. This does not necessarily mean that all aspects of the process of observation need to be anticipated but that the approach taken is deliberate rather than happenstance. It is necessary, at least, to know in advance both what kinds of learning outcomes are anticipated and how evidence will be recorded. An adequate record is essential for good assessment.

Naturally, teacher observation can be characterized as two types: incidental and planned. Incidental observation occurs during the ongoing (deliberate) activities of teaching and learning and the interactions between teacher and students. In other words, an unplanned opportunity emerges, in the context of classroom activities, where the teacher observes some

aspect of individual student learning. Whether incidental observation can be used as a basis for formal assessment and reporting may depend on the records that are kept. Planned observation involves deliberate planning of an opportunity for the teacher to observe specific learning outcomes. This planned opportunity may occur in the context of regular classroom activities or may occur through the setting of an assessment task (such as a practical or performance activity). The general aim of this study is to determine the views of primary teachers about observation. The views of teachers are critical because teachers have the main role during classroom observation.

Observation in Primary Education

In educational settings, teachers make important decisions that affect the lives of learning. Observation serves as the basis of most of the child-care and educational decisions, both informal and formal. Based on the experiences, teachers learn to observe and to document children's skills, their knowledge, and accomplishments (participation in classroom activities and routines, interaction with peers, and works with educational materials). Observation is used as the best tool to enhance the understanding of teachers about how children are learning. Smidth (2005) defined observation as "taking careful note of everything said or done by a child or children over a defined period of time in a particular setting or context" (p.18).

Children's strengths, weaknesses, personality traits, interests and needs are determined through observation. Teachers' observations may be either spontaneous or planned. In some class situation, teachers take information as it happens and add it to internal thinking about each child. However, when there is no record or document related with the observation based on children's progress, bias and prejudice can occur and have an effect on decisions about children. The aims of this type of observation are listed as to truly get to know each child and to be ready to figure out the best ways to meet the needs of him or her. Moreover, through this observation, teachers are sure that no child is missed; none in the area of development is neglected.

Observing to plan a curriculum is the other way to use the gathered information from child observation. This kind of observation is conducted to organize the activities or procedures in educational settings based on children's needs. The baseline of planning a curriculum is the identification of a child/children's present performance and level, and then through the observation done in the classroom, teachers decide whether materials, activities, or interactions with others should be changed to support children to move to a higher level.

METHOD

Phenomenological case study was preferred as the research design. In this study, the phenomenon examined as the early childhood teachers' views on observation as one of the assessment tool in primary education. The study was conducted in 2 primary schools in Tuban, East Java where 23 teachers are working. The researchers also worked as primary teacher. The availability to the knowledgeable teachers about children's education and their assessment is very high. Therefore, the schools chosen as the setting of this study and convenience sampling was used in this study. Four teachers were chosen as the participants of the study among 23 teachers. The participants of this study were selected among the teachers to participate in the study based on experiences to give their views about observation as one of the assessment tools during interviews. A semi-structured interview was used in this study. The data was transcribed, translated and coded to gather information about teachers' views on observation as an informal assessment tool.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

All participants explained that assessment was a process of the whole education of students. Participants used the words “feedback”, “process”, “system”, and “different methods focusing pre and post” while they were defining the primary education assessment as a process-based assessment. Teachers believed that students’ development was in progress therefore, their education has to be in progress. In order to enhance the quality of this progress there should be an assessment process. The role of assessment in students’ education was stressed one more time with the response of T2 as:

“In my view, assessment is the pillars of education, which is can be done formally and informally such as through observation daily”. (Interview: T2)

Participants expressed their views about assessment in early childhood education. Along with the interview questions, some prompt questions were also asked to the participants. When the responses of the participants to these prompt questions related with assessment were noted, the results showed that all of the participants prefer informal assessment methods in their classroom, One of these informal tools, observation, was mostly preferred by teachers in their classroom. As expressed by participants:

To support formal assessment, I prefer to conduct observation in my class during the learning. I think, it can figure out students’ real condition and level of knowledge. (Interview: T4)

Observation comes first... actually the key point of everything is observation. (Interview: T1)

The role of observation in assessment of young children is the most important step of children’s assessment is observation. I think 90% of teachers’ opinions about children are formed with observation. (Interview: T3)

Teachers insisted that without observation they might not apply assessment tools related with children’s development. Therefore, the base of young children’s assessment was thought as observation. (Interview: T2)

While the role of observation in assessment was expressing, participants were also asked to explain their opinions about why they prefer observation in their classroom. All teachers agreed on the idea that observation was preferred because it helps early childhood teachers to know the child better in process. Participants argued that:

Through this process, there should be systematic observations. These observations identify students’ needs & interests and their developmental characteristics. Teachers focus their attention to the background of students’ problematic behaviors during observation. (Interview: T1)

For instance there is an introvert student, firstly I tried to understand the reason of this condition. I observed the student, and then actually the observation data were supported with the data from interaction and communication. (Interview: T3)

The participants believed that in order to solve a problem appropriately, possible causes of such problems should be found. In this study, participants explained that they made

classroom observation by focusing on students' needs, their developmental characteristics and also the background of the problems. They expressed that after the classroom observations were completed, they did analysis of these observation data in order to reach appropriate assessment. At that point, participants indicated that observation data analyses were completed through one-dimensional and also through multi-dimensional analyses.

This analysis process was important in order to emphasize the role of assessment because without data analysis, there should not be any interpretation related with the assessment of students' development. All participants explained that they firstly prefer one-dimensional analysis which includes their own interpretations on observation data. In addition to this, they conducted multi-dimensional analyses in which different people (administrators, colleagues, and parent) did brain storming related with the observation data. As one-dimensional analysis, there were interpretations of teachers individually. They interpreted the observation data with the previous data gathered through previous observation.

In addition to the one-dimensional analysis, teachers agreed that more than one person's interpretation would provide more appropriate information about an issue. Therefore, as multi-dimensional analysis, teachers interpreted the observation data with other teachers (colleagues)/administrators, and also with parents.

The multi-dimensional analysis as I think focusing on observation data and making an interpretation about children and also taking notes about this observation is very important. (Interview: T2)

To sum up, participants believed that assessment is a critical subject in students' education and there should be mostly process-based assessment. In this process-based assessment, observation had a very critical and important role since early childhood teachers believed that observation was the basis of the whole assessment and it provided a rich resource about children and their characteristic to teachers. Additionally, participants stressed that based students' interests & needs, their developmental characteristics and also backgrounds of the problems; teachers carry out their observation in their classrooms. In order to get suitable and appropriate clues from observation data, teachers did both one-dimensional and multi-dimensional analyses.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study is to determine the general views of teachers on observation as one of the assessment methods in primary education. Based on the responses of participants at the end of one-to one interviews and actions of teachers related with the application of observation; some educational implications can be discussed related with assessment in primary education. Participants believed that assessment is process-based. Because of the rapid and continuous change in this age group of students' development, there should be a continuum in assessment progress. This continuum may be provided through the application of different documents prepared in accordance with the characteristics of students at different grades. These documents may be a combination of checklist and observation forms that can be easily filled and simple. These documents may be passed to following grades and they may serve as previews of students' development in previous grades.

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