

Student Teachers' Attitudes and Perceptions towards Assessment during an Initial Teacher's Education Programme in Cameroon

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Doi:10.5901/jesr.2015.v5n1p11

Abstract

This study investigated the attitudes and perceptions of student teachers towards assessment as they completed their teacher education training programme in a government teacher training college. Data were collected from 52 final year (end-of-course) student teachers using semi-structured questionnaires designed with the assumption that assessment and learning intersect during training. The results revealed that student teachers perceived learning experiences and assessments as opportunities to construct and reconstruct some of their core images about teaching. Various elements of teacher education assessment were valued by student teachers as helping them 'feel like' or 'perform as' teachers. To student teachers, assessment is seen as a means to validate their identity as future certified teachers. As demand for teacher quality is getting higher, there is also need to improve and enhance the pedagogic role of assessment in initial teacher education programmes.

Keywords: Assessment, Learning Outcomes, Teacher Quality, Initial Teacher Education Programmes.

1. Introduction

1.1 A Brief Historical Context of Teacher Education in Cameroon

Teacher education in Cameroon traces its roots by the late 19th century when Alfred Saker (1885) and the Roman Catholic Mission (1907) opened schools to train catechists and teachers for evangelization, as they were taught the basic skills in the 3Rs areas of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Major political changes brought evolution of teacher education in Cameroon; for example, the need of education for national development after independence brought expansion in primary schools at a fairly fast pace with high enrolment at both levels. The rapid expansion in primary and secondary schools after independence did not fail to put pressure on teacher training colleges for the need of more trained and certificated teachers. To keep up with the expansion of primary and post-primary education, teacher education was intensified by introducing and creating many training colleges across the country (Ngwa & Tansam, 1989; Tchombe, 1997; Tchombe, 1998).

According to Tchombe (2000), the first teacher training college in the British part of Cameroon was opened in Victoria in 1922 but was later moved to Buea and renamed the Normal College. The Buea Normal College trained teachers for teaching in lower primary classes for a two year course between 1927 and 1931, whereas in 1932, student teachers who had completed the first year course in Normal College were transferred to Kake in Kumba for further training. Further expansion of teacher education saw the institution of the Grade II course in Cameroon in 1945 at the Government Teacher Training College (GTTC) Kumba and thereafter, many more teacher training colleges were opened by both state and private initiatives for the training of Grade III, Grade II, and Grade I teachers all over the country (Tchombe, 2000; Tchombe 2000; Fonkeng, 2007).

Cameroon was obliged to close 24 of its 26 teacher education colleges under a series of IMF structural adjustment programmes in the 1980's and 1990's, but they were reopened in 1995 for the training of Grade I teachers for primary schools. Following the new educational policy based on law no. 98/004 of 14th April 1998, teacher training colleges started training for Grade I teacher certificate only with different types of entry requirements; thereby abolishing the teacher Grade II and Grade III certificates. Presently, there are state-owned teacher training colleges in all Divisions in Cameroon and also a few private-owned teacher training colleges by the Catholic Mission, Presbyterian, and Baptist (MINESUP, 1995, 1998; Tchombe, 2000; Tchombe 2000; Dembele, 2003; Fonkeng 2007).

Teacher training programmes for nursery and primary education end with an end of training examination and

certification of student-teachers for the Teacher Grade I certificate (Ngwa & Tansam, 1989; Tchombe, 2000). The state maintains significant control over teacher education by running national examinations for entry to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes and for graduation from the programme as a qualified and certificated teacher. Given the well-known influence of final examinations over the preceding curriculum, assessment of student teachers learning in this context is a key issue. Government policy since 2003 suggests a desire to balance the expedient accreditation of teachers for government schools with promoting learning that prepares student teachers well for their future profession (Tambo, 2000; Ndongko & Nyamnjoh, 2000). In other words, there appears to be an implicit recognition that teacher education and the assessment that is inherently a part of an initial qualification programme, have both social and pedagogic purposes.

During the recent revival of many ITE programmes, functional reforms have generally been overshadowed by organizational and logistic concerns. One of these reforms is a better harmonization of teacher education within both sub-systems by introducing a common policy in state certification. Under the post-Jomtien framework, the state, through its policy of decentralization and commercialization of services, has further reconfigured teacher education provision with private providers as important actors. While these policies are part of educational reforms aimed at promoting access, equity, and quality education, there is need to consider the implications for student teachers' learning, assessment, and certification (Tambo, 2003; Dembele, 2003).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework

The relationship between assessment and learning is fundamental to formal education, which on the one hand ideally seeks to know and build on what has already been learnt, and on the other hand usually requires some measure of what has been learnt to judge either the learner or the teacher, or both. The former is pedagogic in character while the latter is social. Both functions of assessment have been discussed extensively in the assessment literature. Literature on the pedagogic role of assessment addresses theories of both assessment *for* learning (formative assessment) and assessment *of* learning – summative assessment (Taras, 2005). The social function of assessment, often mediated by summative assessment, has also been an important part of the discourse. Given the social and economic value of academic qualifications (Taras, 2005), assessment of learning has significantly contributed both to subverting and maintaining power relations in different societies (Tabulawa, 1997; 2003; Struyven et al., 2005; Segers et al., 2008).

Attitudes or perceptions are not only the individual opinions of student teachers with regard to examinations and tests. Rather, they are framed in response to memories and experiences of social actions and interactions. From this standpoint, that which is 'memorable' is a function of shifting cultural categories which influence what is thinkable, what is appropriate, what is valued, and what is noteworthy (Brown, 2004; Peterson & Irving, 2007). Perceptions are in themselves part and parcel of reality. By exploring perceptions, this work implicitly examines the pedagogic function of student teachers' experiences of assessment through learning interactions. In this sense, it is *interpretive* because it elucidates assessment as a useful and 'performative' tool in student teachers' learning; that is, one that leads to a concrete actions and promotes learning. This work attempts to confront and validate student teachers' perceptions against important theories and models by which they learn to teach and also to give voice to student teachers' perspective of learning and assessment. For as it appears in literature student teachers' voices have the least power on what constitutes good pre-service learning (Coultas & Lewin, 2002; Gardner, 2006; Crossouard, 2009).

2.2 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to describe student teachers attitudes and perceptions towards assessment during initial teacher education training, and how such attitudes and perceptions might reflect on how they learn to become teachers. The study described how students teachers perceptions of assessment affect their learning, including how they negotiate the tension between the pedagogic value of assessment and its social role of certifying them as future teachers.

2.3 Study Context/Setting

Government Teachers Training College (GTTC) Buea was the setting for this assessment study. Assessment in this study is understood beyond its summative functions. The ambient context of learning, as the entire institution prepared

for final examinations, provided a favorable setting for the collection of data. GTTC was created by the Cameroon Ministry of Secondary Education (Creation Decree No. 85/1202) on August 1985; however, the training college started training in the 1986/1987 academic year with 168 students and 31 teachers trainers and three years after, from 1990-1995, there was a break in training. The purpose of the training college was to train "grade-one" teachers to be absorbed in the primary school system in Cameroon; with objectives to mold student teachers who will in turn teach primary school pupils using all the teaching competencies and improve on the educational standards in Cameroon.

GTTC Buea was selected for this study on the basis of accessibility, there are likely to be some commonalities that might make the research useful to other teachers training colleges in Cameroon. This is because all ITE programmes in Cameroon follow the same calendar and state board examinations centrally implemented under the auspices of the Ministry of Secondary Education. The duration of the ITE programme of study depends on students' entry level qualifications; students entering with 'O' Level qualification (5 years of secondary education) study for three years while those with 'A' level qualifications (two years high school certificate) or a bachelors degree take a one-year programme, all for the same "grade-one" certification.

3. Research Methodology

Semi-structured questionnaires were designed with the assumption that assessment and learning intersect in rather complex ways throughout the entire learning process and not only during summative evaluations of learning (Black & William, 2003; Torrance & Pryor, 1998; 2001). The questionnaires addressed student teachers' learning and assessments, particularly before, during and after specific learning experiences; as well as student teachers future as teachers; and the teacher certification examination at the end of the training. Student teachers' attitudes towards assessment were memorable experiences seen to have stimulated learning primarily in how student teachers perceived and reacted to examinations expectations and how student teachers saw themselves as future teachers. Student teachers' attitudes correspond to the ways by which assessment and concrete classroom experiences influence learning as to how student teachers cognitively reconcile assessment and learning how to teach (Lewin & Dunne, 2000; Karp & Wood, 2008).

For each sets of specific statements about teaching and learning, four answer options were given for participants to give their level of agreement as follows: (i) "strongly disagree" (ii) "disagree" (iii) "agree" and (iv) "strongly agree". Demographic items in the survey included gender, qualification used to enter the teacher training programme, and whether respondents have been teachers before getting to the programme. The semi-structured questionnaire was initially pilot-tested for clarity on a sample of six student teachers at a private run ITE programme within the same district.

After obtaining permission, a request was made to the final year student teachers of GTTC for participation in the project. The researcher informed them of the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw from participating at any time with no penalty. Copies of the questionnaire containing an introductory message at the beginning were given to two teachers of GTTC to administer to student teachers (in their final year of training) during their final examinations. A reminder was sent a week later (immediately after their examinations) to solicit additional responses. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, Version 17.0). Descriptive statistics were used to describe demographic characteristics of study participants and responses to survey items. Frequencies and percentages were used to analyze responses for each of the variables.

In addition to the percentage description of general perceptions on examinations and the certification examination, means were calculated into a low-high rating of the response choices. Initial perceptions were assessed by assigning numerical value to each rating ('Strongly Disagree' = 1; 'Disagree' = 2; 'Agree' = 3; and 'Strongly Agree' = 4), then calculating the mean for each item (on the basis of 52 different responses) and finally dividing the range of values into 'low' (0.1 to 2.0), 'medium' (2.0 to 3.0) and 'high' (3.0 to 4.0) to achieve the agreement ratings.

3.1 Demographics of Participants

Table 1 provides a summary of demographic characteristics of the survey participants. A total of 52 student teachers who were in the final year or at the end of their training responded to the survey; 11.5% of the respondents were male and 88.5% were female. More respondents (78.8%) indicated they entered or were admitted at GTTC with Advanced/Levels, while 13.5% entered with Ordinary/Levels, and 5.8% entered with Bachelor degrees. When asked about previous teaching experiences before gaining entry at GTTC, 82.7% respondents indicated they had no previous teaching experiences before the training, whereas 13.5% mentioned they had been uncertified teachers before entry the

programme.

Table 1: Characteristics of Study Population

Characteristics of Survey Respondents:	Number (n)	Percentages (%)
Gender (n = 52)*		
1. Male	6	11.5%
2. Female	46	88.5%
Entry Qualification (n= 52)*		
1. O/Level	7	13.5
2. A/Level	41	78.8
3. B.A/B.Sc.	3	5.8
4. Missing Data	1	
Teaching Experience before Training (n=52)*		
1. Yes	7	13.5
2. No	43	82.7
3. Missing Data	2	

*Number of Respondent is indicated in parentheses.

4. Findings and Discussions

General findings on student teachers' general attitudes and perceptions of regular examinations are summarized in Table 2 by survey items among participants. Majority of survey respondents, 78.8% strongly agreed and 11.5% agreed that examinations make them remember things studied in class; whereas 7.7% strongly disagreed that examinations make them to remember things studied in class. Most participants 82.7% strongly agreed and agreed 9.6% that examinations motivate them to learn how to teach better, while 3.8% disagreed and 3.8% strongly disagreed that examinations motivated them to learn how to become better teachers. Further, 63.5% of the respondents strongly agreed and 19.2% agreed that examinations prove to their teachers that they know the subjects materials, whereas it is not the case for the other respondents 7.7% disagreed and 7.7% strongly disagreed.

Table 2: Percentages of Student Teachers' General Attitudes and Perceptions of Examinations

Survey Items	SD	D	A	SA	Total
Items on written or oral examinations:	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n*
Examinations make me remember things done in class	4 (7.7%)	0 (0%)	6 (11.5%)	41 (78.8%)	51
They motivate me to learn how to teach better	2 (3.8%)	2 (3.8%)	5 (9.6%)	43 (82.7%)	52
They prove to my teachers that I know the subject material	4 (7.7%)	4 (7.7%)	10 (19.2%)	33 (63.5%)	51
They prove to me that I am progressing in my knowledge on how to be a teacher	1 (1.9%)	3 (5.8%)	5 (9.6%)	43 (82.7%)	52
They are accurate in measuring my skills as a teacher to be	6 (11.5%)	5 (9.6%)	9 (17.3%)	32 (61.5%)	52
How I perform at exams tell whether I can teach well or not	27 (51.9%)	4 (7.7%)	5 (9.6%)	15 (28.8%)	51

*Total number of participants responding to each survey item

A large percent of participants 82.7% strongly agreed and 9.6% agreed that examinations proved to them that they were progressing in their knowledge on how to become teachers, whereas 5.8% disagreed and 1.9% strongly disagreed that examinations prove they were making progress on how to become teachers. In addition, 82.7% of the respondents strongly agreed and 17.3% agreed that examinations were accurate in measuring their skills as future teachers, while 9.6% disagreed and 11.5% strongly disagreed. More than half of the participants, 51.9% and 7.7% strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively that their performances in examinations do not tell whether they will be quality teachers in the future or not; whereas 9.6% agreed and 28.8% strongly agreed that their performances in examinations tell that they will be quality teachers in the future.

Table 3: Rating of Student Teachers' General Attitudes and Perceptions of Examinations

Items on written or oral examinations	Agreement rating
Examinations make me remember things done in class	High
They motivate me to learn how to teach better	High
They prove to my teachers that I know the subject material	High
They prove to me that I am progressing in my knowledge on how to be a teacher	High
They are accurate in measuring my skills as a teacher to be	High
How I perform at exams tell whether I can teach well or not	Low

Table 3 shows statements and respective ratings of student teachers' general attitudes and perceptions of examinations at the end of their training. Ratings in the form of assessments are convergent and consistently used (with few exceptions) to determine "if" the student knows the subject matter. Hence, the ability to 'remember things done in class' and to 'prove to teachers that knowledge has been gained', are highly rated concepts when it comes to the evaluation of performance in examinations. These concepts proved the student teachers' understanding of the subject matter. Correspondingly, from a student's standpoint, teacher educators contribute to good performance when their 'notes are good' and 'understandable'; when 'questions are straight forward;' and when examinations are centered on topics taught during classroom sessions. These perceptions were highly rated among student teachers, with the exception of "how I perform at exams tell whether I can teach well or not" which was lowly rated among participants.

Table 4 presents the percentages of student teachers future as teachers as they prepared for their certification examination. Majority of the respondents strongly agreed, 67.3%, and agreed, 23.1%, that reading and memorizing their notes are very important as they prepared for their certification examinations, while 5.8% disagreed. Further, 67.3% and 13.5% of survey respondents strongly agreed and agreed that using past certification examinations questions were very important for high performance, while 11.5% disagreed and 1.9% strongly disagreed. Many respondents equally strongly agreed, 63.5%, and agreed, 23.1%, that studying in groups with other students is very important to them as they prepare for their certification examinations, whereas only 5.8% and 3.8 % disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. Furthermore, respondents also strongly agreed, 65.4%, and agreed, 28.8%, that revision classes were very important as they prepared for their certification examinations, while only 1.9 % disagreed and none strongly disagreed. Finally, 32.7% and 25.0% of survey respondents strongly agreed and agreed that doing more teaching practice was important as they prepare for their certification exams, whereas 19.2% and 15.4% disagreed and strongly disagreed that doing more teaching practice is important for certification examinations.

Table 4: Percentages of Student Teachers' General Attitudes and Perceptions as Future Teachers

Survey Items	SD	D	A	SA	Total
How important are the following as I prepare for my certification examinations:	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n*
Reading and memorizing my notes	0(0%)	3(5.8%)	12(23.1%)	35(67.3%)	50
Using past certification exams questions	1(1.9%)	6(11.5%)	7(13.5%)	35(67.3%)	50
Studying in group with other students	2(3.8%)	3(5.8%)	12(23.1%)	33(63.5%)	50
Revision classes	0(0%)	1(1.9%)	15(28.8%)	34(65.4%)	50
Doing a lot of teaching practice	8(15.4%)	10(19.2%)	13(25.0%)	17(32.7%)	50
I could become a "good teacher" if I:	SD	D	A	SA	Total
Recalled everything in my class notes	4(7.7%)	7(13.5%)	20(38.5%)	18(34.6%)	50
Passed all my exams in good grades	3(5.8%)	7(13.5%)	14 (26.9%)	26(50.0%)	50
Observed other teachers as they teach	0(0%)	3(5.8%)	12(23.1%)	35(67.3%)	50
If allowed to try other ways of teaching that I might like best	3(5.8%)	2(3.8%)	16(30.8%)	29(55.8%)	50
Observed more experience teachers and repeat what they do	0(0%)	2(5.8%)	13(25.0%)	33(63.5%)	50

*Total number of participants responding to each survey item.

To determine student-teachers' perceptions of becoming quality teachers, survey participants were asked to indicate how they could become "good teachers" in the future. Many participants strongly agreed, 34.6 %, and agreed, 38.5 %, that they could become "good teachers" if they recalled everything in their class notes, whereas 13.5 % and 7.7% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. Further, 50% of respondents strongly agreed and 26.9% agreed that they could become "good teachers" if they passed all the examinations with good grades, whereas 13.5% disagreed and 5.8% strongly disagreed. More respondents, 67.3% and 23.1% strongly agreed and agreed respectively that they could

become “good teachers” if they observed other teachers teach while 5.8% disagreed and none strongly disagreed. More than half, 55.8%, of participants strongly agreed and 30.8% agreed that they could become “good teachers” if they were allowed to try other ways of teaching which they might like best; whereas 3.8% and 5.8% of participants disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively that they could become “good teachers” if they were allowed to try other ways of teaching which they might like best. Finally, a majority of participants, 63.5% and 25.0% strongly agreed and agreed that they could become “good teachers” if they observed more experience teachers and repeat what they do, whereas 5.8% disagreed and none strongly disagreed.

Table 5: Rating of Student Teachers’ General Attitudes and Perceptions as Future Teachers

How important are the following as I prepare for my certification examinations:	Agreement rating
Reading and memorizing my notes	High
Using past certification exams questions	High
Studying in group with other students	High
Revision classes	High
Doing a lot of teaching practice	Medium
I could become a good teacher if I:	Agreement rating
Recalled everything in my class notes	Medium
Passed all my exams in good grades	Medium/High
Observed other teachers as they teach	High
If allowed to try other ways of teaching that I might like best	High
Observed more experience teachers and repeat what they do	High

Table 5 shows statements and agreement ratings of student teachers’ as future teachers as they prepared for the end of training certification examinations. A summary of agreement ratings shows that although examinations prove to teacher educators or teacher trainers that their students know the subjects materials taught in class, and also that the students are progressing in their knowledge on how to become teachers; examinations at the same time measure student teachers skills to become better teachers in future; but the way that student teachers perform in these examinations do not predict whether these student teachers will become quality teachers in future. As concerns student teachers future as teachers, becoming better teachers by validating the teacher certification examinations, the social function of assessment was emphasized by some student teachers who perceived their teacher education as a means of obtaining teaching certification with the hope of being integrated into the public school system.

5. Discussion of Findings

Student teachers’ attitudes towards assessment during initial teacher’s education was based on their general perceptions towards their regular examinations before, during and after specific learning experiences and the teacher certification examination at the end of the training. An examination of student teachers’ attitudes towards assessment in the final year of their initial teacher’s training revealed that for most of the participants examinations make them remember things studied during the course. A majority of respondents mentioned that examinations motivate them to learn how to teach and many accepted that examinations prove to their teachers that they know the subjects materials. A large majority of respondents indicated that examinations prove to them that they were progressing in their knowledge on how to become teachers and were accurate in measuring their skills as future teachers. More respondents mentioned that their performances in examinations do not tell whether they will be “good teachers” in the future, thus, neglecting the aspect of teacher quality in the assessment process during teacher education.

As student teachers prepared for their certification examination, majority agreed that reading and memorizing their notes were very important aspects to success in the certification examination. Another very important aspect as they prepared for their certification examination as many agreed were using past certification examination questions. Studying in groups with other student teachers and revision classes were also very important aspects for student teachers as they prepared for their certification examination. Many student teachers agreed and indicated that doing more teaching practice was important for their certification examination.

To determine student-teachers’ perceptions of becoming quality teachers during service, many accepted that they could become “good teachers” if they recalled everything in their training, if they passed all the examinations with good grades and if they observed other teachers teach. Similarly, many students teachers indicated that they could become

“good teachers” if they observed more experience teachers and repeat what they do and if they were allowed to try other ways of teaching which they might like best.

By observing other teachers teach, especially more experience teachers, and by allowing them to try other ways of teaching which they might like best, student teachers learn new ways of teaching that are contextually viable. This is because student teachers already have images of ‘a good teacher’ and of ‘what good teachers do’ as they come to pre-service learning. These are ‘rooted in their society’s views of education but also derive from their own personal experiences of schooling’ (Stuart et al., 2009). The social and pedagogic purposes of assessment are here intertwined as student teachers need to develop their teacher-selves as the confidence that comes with this is likely to help them be open and flexible to adapting to new and challenging circumstances and to gain their pupils’ trust and co-operation.

6. Concluding Remarks

Assessment of student learning outcomes has been a major issue for educational and training institutions. Other issues in professional training institutions come and go, but the assessment of student learning seems to be gaining more grounds. Accrediting agencies and employers have incorporated suggestive criteria for what constitutes an effective assessment activity. Teacher quality, for many teacher educators and educational administrators, goes far beyond performance in end of training examinations and certification examination.

The attitudes and perceptions of student teachers’ therefore suggest that assessment processes at GTTC are dominated by traditional methods such as repetition of facts and knowledge learned during training (Tabulawa 2003; Bigge & Shermis, 2004). However, as demand for quality learning outcomes are getting higher in basic education, emphasis need to be place on other factors for determining teacher quality in initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and not so much on the end results or social functions of the assessment of students teachers which is certification – performance in end of course examination (Tchombe, 1998).

Investing in other forms of determining teacher quality in basic teacher education by teacher educators or institutional administrators would requires student teachers graduating from Cameroon Teacher Training Colleges ideally seeking to know and build on what they learnt – pedagogic character. Pedagogic functions of assessment will enable student teachers to have adequate competences to become creative, innovative and inclusive teachers during service. As such, student teachers will become accountable for quality learning outcomes in Cameroonian nursery and primary schools (platforms for success in secondary and higher education) as expected in the post-Jomtien era, a learner-centered pedagogy which is still a distant reality in teacher education in Cameroon.

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