

Teachers' Perspectives and Challenges in Assessment of Revised Teachers' Training Programs

Abstract

This study investigated teachers' reflective perspectives regarding assessment practices of revised teachers' training programs in the Punjab province by employing qualitative approach. Faculty members of the two universities and their affiliated colleges (N=18) where these programs are introduced were interviewed and the texts were coded and analyzed qualitatively by employing Grounded Theory Approach (Creswell, 2003). The main perspectives that emerged as a result of analysis are graded activities, criteria for marks allocation for formative assessment, summative assessment, concept of rubrics, evaluation of student ability, freedom of academic sharing, satisfaction level, problems that are encountered by the teacher educators during assessment practices and suggestions for improvement. In a nutshell, the interview data revealed dissatisfaction of the teacher educators with the assessment system of revised teachers' training programs.

Keywords: *Assessment Practices, Rubrics, Teacher Educators, Prospective Teachers, Grounded Theory Approach, Thematic Analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

Assessments are an essential component of the instructional process. The success of any education system directly depends on the efficient practice of its assessment process. This process helps the teachers and educationists to make judgments about students' academic performance. For effective functioning of the instructional process, the teachers require information regarding the levels of students' achievement. Through this information gathering process, the teacher can locate the under achievers and students who are capable and ready for the next class. The National Education Policy 2009 being the latest, proposed phasing out the teacher education certification programs PTC and CT courses with a 4 year B. Ed by 2018. The bridging program of Associate Degree in Education (ADE) was being introduced

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for prospective teachers. These reforms in teacher education programs demand teacher educators to engage prospective teachers in thinking and reflection about their learning. It was also anticipated that the new degree would emphasize learner centered, active learning approaches that would encourage the development of requisite skills and dispositions for teaching, in addition to content knowledge. Research studies of assessment practices attempted to determine the alignment of assessment practices with approaches toward learning and teaching that are embedded in the curriculum and instruction (Biggs, 1996; Brownstein, Allan, Ezrailson, Hagevik, Shane, & Veal, 2009; Martone & Sireci, 2009). These studies contributed in developing a description of classroom practices and are therefore, based on qualitative approaches. In the Pakistani context, literature reveals some studies done on instructional practices in schools (Naeemullah, Inamullah, Sarwar, Muhammad & Hussain, 2010; UNESCO, 1997), but there are none on assessment practices in the teacher education institutions. The present study attempts to fill the gap, with the hope that it will raise further questions for more research on the assessment practices and their influences on instruction, specifically in pre-service teacher education classrooms.

The universities which introduced B. Ed (Hons) and ADE programs have prescribed assessment policies to do away with the traditional method of declaring the students fail or pass. Keeping in view this changed scenario, the basic aim of this study was an exploration of teachers' reflective perspectives regarding revised teachers training programs in the Punjab. The current study was conducted in 2012. Two universities and their affiliated colleges teaching B. Ed (Hons) and ADE programs were selected randomly with all the teachers in the sample institutions being the population of the study. A total of 18 teacher educators were selected as sample of the study. In order to elicit in-depth information regarding assessment practices, these teacher educators (N=18) were interviewed. The epistemological position of the research team also suggested that for generating in-depth data, they would have to interact with the teachers as key informants, talk to them, listen to them and gain access to their insights and articulations in order to capture their "lived experiences" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p.317). A semi-structured interview (SSI) protocol was prepared to obtain in-depth information as to how the assessment instruments were assembled by the teachers in the first place. The interview protocol for teacher educators from colleges and universities was developed to understand the process followed by teacher educators in constructing assessment tools. Teacher educators were probed to elicit responses regarding test blue prints; rubrics for allocating weight to each cognitive trait and criteria for deciding the number of items relevant to each cognitive trait included in the mid-term and final term papers.

Research Questions

1. What is the degree of alignment between the content and cognitive traits embedded in the course objectives and those being assessed by the formal assessment activities in B. Ed (Honors) and ADE Programs in the Punjab, as measured against Bloom's Taxonomy?
 - a) What content and cognitive traits are embedded in the course objectives of the pre-service teacher preparation courses?
 - b) What content and cognitive traits are assessed in the selected courses through the two most heavily weighted formal assessment instruments administered in the selected courses of B. Ed (Hons.) and ADE?

Data Collection Procedure

The study was conducted in 2 stages:

Stage-1

The first stage involved the following steps:

1. Development of interview protocol.
2. Procurement of formal approvals from all the concerned university officials including the selected teacher educators.
3. Development and training of research teams for the collection and analysis of data.

Stage-2

At the next stage, for developing an in-depth understanding of the processes involved in the development of the instruments, we conducted SSI with a sample of teacher educators (N=18) drawn from the population of teacher educators teaching in selected institutions.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The analytic procedure of the interview transcripts was based on immersion in the data and repeated organization, coding, and constant comparisons, which are the main features of grounded theory approach. "The core feature of qualitative data analysis is the coding process" (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p. 132). "Coding is a central part of a grounded theory approach and involves extracting meaning from non-numeric data such as text" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p.349). It is a "process of grouping evidence and labeling ideas so that they reflect increasingly broader perspectives" (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p.132). The other important feature of grounded theory is "constant comparison" which is a procedure where the researcher compares one component of the data with the other components of the same data to find out similarities and differences among them (Lodico Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006, p.272).

For the purpose of qualitative analysis of the interview, transcripts of the participant teachers, codes and categories were sorted, compared, and contrasted until no new codes or categories were produced. This was followed by “a procedure called ‘discriminant sampling’ where the researcher posed questions that relate the categories and then returns to the data and looks for evidence, incidents and events that support or refute the questions, thereby verifying the data” (Creswell, 1998, p.209). The entire text was then organized in terms of major themes that arose from the data analysis. “Themes are typically ‘big ideas’ that combine several codes in a way that allows the researcher to examine the foreshadowed questions guiding the research” (Lodico, *et al.*, 2006, p. 307). The pattern of themes characterizes “a necessary dialogue between data and researcher, which emerges from and then helps to further make sense of data, and to provide a structure for writing” (Holliday, 2007, p.94).

Several themes emerged from the interviews of teacher educators. These themes were later grouped together into larger perspectives that provide an answer to the qualitative research question (Creswell & Clark, 2007). The main perspectives that emerged as a result of analysis are graded activities, criteria for marks allocation for formative assessment, summative assessment, concept of rubrics, evaluation of student ability, freedom of academic sharing, satisfaction level and problems that are encountered during assessment practices and suggestions for improvement. The detailed description of these themes is as follows:

Graded Activities

Participants were asked about the graded activities in their B. Ed(ADE) and ADE programs. It was revealed by the responses of the informants that various types of graded activities were practiced in different institutions. There is no homogenous practice in institutions in this regard, and institutions were not restricted to any specific pattern by the university. Following are the activities which were practiced to assess the students of B. Ed (Hons.) and ADE programs in sample institutions.

- Mid Term paper
- Final Paper
- School based task
- Home Assignments
- Presentations
- Projects
- Portfolio
- Class Participation
- Class quiz
- Reflective journal

Criteria for Marks Allocation for Formative & Summative Assessments

Participants belonging to university 1 expressed that they assigned different percentage for the activities. For example in a 100% mark allocation, 20% is allotted to mid-term and 80% is for final term. The 20% is further divided as given below:

Mid-term	10%
Assignment	5%
Presentation	3%
Attendance	2%

The participants of university 2 revealed that they had different criteria for marks allocation for formative and summative assessments:

Final-term	60%
Mid Term	20%
Portfolio	10%
Class Participation	10%

Concept of Rubrics

Rubrics can be used in assessment process, and individual student assignments and projects. Wolf and Stevens (2007) defined rubric as “a scoring tool used to evaluate a performance in a given outcome area based on a list of criteria describing the characteristics of products or performances at varying levels of accomplishment (p.4). The concept of Rubrics was clear to most participants although there was some misconception in usage of rubrics i.e. they perceived marks division for different parts of questions as rubrics. Division of rubrics was done in terms of content, handwriting, relevant material and references. Most of the instructors also expressed that they share rubrics with students. However, this sharing was only for the portfolio. At the same time, some participants revealed that the activities or assignments are not designed in the line of some defined rubrics, nor are shared with the students in written form; instead they verbally inform students about their marking criteria.

Evaluation of Student Ability

Mid-term and final-term test were taken in the sample universities in written form. Responses of these tests revealed that they assess students' cognitive abilities through different types of activities. Research has also demonstrated that for assessing students' abilities, other curricular activities should be used in addition to written tests. Kotzé, (2002), stated in this regard that “time-restricted written tests and examinations alone do not suffice any more, although there will always be a need and place for covering certain basic knowledge and skills in a more traditional way (p.79). The participants expressed that through role play activities they analyze students' abilities and evaluate students through their self-expression, problem solving skills,

and communication skills. In presentations, they judge students' exploration of innovative ideas (creating). The daily routine activities provide opportunities for analyzing and evaluating the students' abilities such as their ability of good recitation, their manner of discussion in class, ability of singing songs and being active participants throughout. The participant teachers further revealed that their instruction is predominantly exam oriented as they have limited available time to complete the syllabus, and the university gives only 20% of the total marks for mid-term exam, projects, assignments and class participation. Therefore, their main intention during teaching is only that their students should pass the final exam and they are always worried about how to prepare the students for the final examinations.

Freedom of Academic Sharing

Participants stated that they have the freedom of sharing their experiences with colleagues and this interaction between instructors is mainly for the development of assessment tools. Participants further stated that their discussions with faculty members are focused mainly on the development of assessment techniques and for the arrangement of resource material. Similar findings are revealed in a study by Wright, Burnham, and Hooper (2012) who stated that faculty members have collaborated on research studies, manuscripts, books, teaching pedagogies, and ideas for years (p.43). One of the participating teachers Mr. S.M stated:

“We discuss with other faculty members while constructing mid-term papers and other assignments in a formal meeting held for this purpose.”

Satisfaction level

Most of the participants were not satisfied because of lack of instructions on marking criteria, instructions regarding exam papers, no intimation of the schedule for final exam.

The teacher Ms R.C complained:

“We do not have any advance material to teach the students in practical way and prepare them for assessments, that's why I am not satisfied with the current system of ADE program.”

Problems encountered regarding assessment practices

The teachers say that they faced a number of problems in the construction of midterm and other related continuous assessment in the form of assignments, quizzes, and projects/presentations since the only marks allocation with them in the new system is only 20%, which is very little for doing justice to all the assessment practices.

Teacher Ms I.K said in this regard:

“Pattern has not been given by the university about the percentage of marks in objective as well as subjective.”

All participants complained of no uniform criteria for marks allocation in universities which are offering B. Ed (hons) and ADE programs. They were of the view that each university has set its own criteria for assessment practices.

The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts of teacher educators revealed that the teachers assessed their students' abilities through different types of activities such as presentations, projects, portfolios and class participation. Data also revealed that majority of the teachers did not have a clear concept of rubrics. Mid-term papers were set by the respective teachers, but the teachers focused mainly on final-term exam preparation, instead of measuring students' abilities. The hard copies presented by the teacher educators of the portfolios and projects etc. during interview sessions also reflected that they only assess their Remembering and Understanding abilities. Participants' data also expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the marks allocation policies of the two universities, since university 1 had given comparatively more freedom to the affiliated colleges for internal assessment. However all the participants agreed that at least half the share should go to the internal assessment system. They believed that the respective teachers can assess students' abilities more accurately. As far as university 2 is concerned it gave only 20% weightage of the total marks for internal assessment of the affiliated colleges whereby 10% was reserved for mid-term test, and the remaining 10% assigned for all other activities such as projects, presentations, class participation etc. The participants from university 2 were thoroughly dissatisfied with this small percentage and complained that they could not assess students' abilities properly through this restricted allocation of marks.

Contributions of the Study

The current study has uncovered several issues related to the evaluation of teacher education at grass roots level and offers practical recommendations to improve the situation. Although majority of the problems encountered during the data collection phase were not directly related to the main objectives of the study, they had very close connection with the quality of the teacher education system of the country. The research team realized that some recommendations based on the observations during the field visits would also be valuable in the improvement of teacher education. It is anticipated that the recommendations based on study findings and the observations of the research team can make distinctive contributions in the following major areas of teacher education:

Awareness-Raising among Education Policy-Planners and Administrators

The focus of the present study is basically to look at the teacher educators' practices of assessment which affect Teacher Education in Pakistan. Presently, the policy planners and administrators of teacher education in Pakistan are concerned about quality assurance in this area. The development of curricula, courses of study in this process etc are aimed at following a consistent, coherent and cumulative approach for prospective teachers graduating from universities and colleges. The revised B. Ed (Hons) and ADE programs are planned to offer an opportunity to make interactive, inquiry oriented teaching and learning methods a new reality in the classrooms of Pakistani schools. Field data regarding interviews of teacher educators revealed their dissatisfaction with the prevailing assessment system of B. Ed (Hons) and ADE programs. Participants were of the view that the new system is not clearly defined and therefore needs not only improvement in assessment practices but greater interaction with the teachers through different workshops and training. Policy-planners should pay attention to the teacher educators' problems at grass root level. Due to lack of complete awareness about ground realities, their policies will continue to prove unsuccessful.

Awareness-Raising among Teacher Educators

The findings of this study will give awareness to teacher educators in realizing the significance of rubrics while assessing their students; the study informants used rubrics for assessment, but they did not have any idea about using standard criteria, such as the criteria used in this study. The research team had discussed the usage of cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy as rubrics in assessment practices with teacher educators in interview sessions. It is anticipated that awareness about proper usage of rubrics in assessment practices is raised in interaction with teacher educators during data collection process and the study findings as well. The study findings would help teachers in making efforts to develop rubrics in accordance with all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

The present study provides information of how teachers can handle problems related to assessment practices. The personal experiences of the research team during the whole research process and especially in the data collection process suggest that there is still a large gap to be filled in for enhancing and improving the prevailing assessment practices of teacher education. Prospective teachers should know how to promote and assess critical thinking across curriculum. Wright, *et al.*, (2012) have stated that faculty adhere to traditional methods of sharing work and thus may be unwilling to try new, innovative methods of co-creating writing products, which can be more efficient and manageable (p.43).

CONCLUSION

The quality of teacher education is of primary concern in the present era of globalization and educational standardization. Central to the idea of a quality education is the quality of teaching provided by teachers to the students. Assessment practices are directly related to quality education. Therefore, prospective teachers should be exposed to appropriate assessment practices. They should also be explicitly taught about multimodal assessment practices during their pre-service and in-service teachers' trainings. Research studies also give practicable suggestions in this regard. Wilson and Scalise (2006) proposed process for discussion named moderation and explained that:

Moderation is the process by which instructors, teaching assistants, readers, students and others involved in a course discuss student work and the scores for work, ensuring that scores are interpreted similarly by all in the moderation group. In instructor moderation (p.657)

A follow up may therefore be done with the National Curriculum Review Committee to examine if the curriculum objectives of all courses in the 4 year B. Ed and 2 year ADE programs adhere to the assessment practices that encourage students to think analytically and critically, with understanding by applying knowledge in a creative manner.

Recommendation

Participants proposed that the instructors should be given an opportunity of sharing assessment practices with other faculty members and educational experts. In this regard, they further proposed that senior faculty members from affiliated colleges should be consulted while constructing final term assessment papers. Participants also suggested that frequent meetings should be arranged especially at the start of the semester to set the criteria of rubrics for all the assessment practices. All participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the marks allocation criteria. They proposed that at least 50% marks should be allocated for the internal assessment of the affiliated colleges, so that they can assess their students properly.

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