FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN ELEMENTARY ENGLISH CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY OF SEMI-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION OF PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Formative assessments are valuable tools that can be used to monitor academic progress and increase student learning. This study focused on examining their experiences with the practice. The research question that guided this study was: What are teacher's experiences with formative assessments? Cognitive sense-making framework served as a theoretical lens to explore this phenomenon. Utilizing case study, five elementary school teachers of semi-government organization participated in semi-structured interviews to discuss their experiences with the practices in English subject classroom. The themes generated in this study indicated that the participants were initially confused when first asked to implement formative assessments; however, their understanding developed over time. There were also barriers to implementation which were a lack of time and student behavior. The findings suggest that the participants would benefit from training that emphasizes introducing the learning goal at the beginning of a lesson.

Keywords: formative assessments, sense-making, case study

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

During the process of instruction, most classroom teachers try to identify whether their students understand what is being taught. Teachers may use many activities to determine the learning status of their students. According to Burke and Depka (2016) activities that are used to identify student progress and modify instructional methods based on learning needs are known as formative assessments. Examples may include simple questioning or informal observations (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2017). Other activities may be a student's written summary of what was learned (Dirksen, 2017) or their response to a question following a lesson, known as an exit ticket. Formative assessments typically are not used for grading purposes because they are implemented during the process of learning (Burke, 2016; Burke & Depka, 2018; Hammerman, 2019). The information gathered from these activities is used to identify whether students are learning specific skills or if they need additional instruction. If learning deficiencies are observed, teachers may need to re-teach a skill or provide additional practice activities.

At an elementary school situated in Taluka Ratodero, District Larkana, Sindh. Teachers were expected to use formative assessments on daily basis. Over the period of time, teachers were to utilize this practice to assess the students' learning outcomes and check for understanding throughout instruction and concluding a lesson. In addition, information gathered from these activities should be used to address the learning needs of students. Although the use of formative assessments was an expectation, the factors and variables that influenced the

teachers' experiences has not been explored. Hence, their individual experiences with the practice is unknown.

1.2   Statement of the Problem

The current conditions in education policy in the Pakistan also point to the need for more research around instructional strategies that are effective in raising student achievement. With the demise of No Child Left Behind, the nation is going through a very large educational policy shift (Saeed, Tahir, & Latif, 2018). The NEP 2009 and the major reports on assessments particularly, highlight the consistent assessment of "Low cognitive skills, the persistence of the dilemma of 'rote memorization' and the capacity of assessment centre school systems in implementing multiple forms of assessments and the procedures for standardized assessment development, administration, marking, results analysis and reporting (Hameed-ur-Rehman & Sewani, 2013). Assessment systems are quality measures that cater to a number of requirements of the education system. These can be used to measure overall system efficiency as well as individual students' performance for movement in the education system (Shiekh, Chohan, Jawad, & Naseem, 2013). Thus, formative assessment may be made compulsory part of school internal assessment (Ahmed, & Hussain, 2014).

For this research, researcher is looking specifically at how teachers understand and use formative assessments. The present research is unique in its nature as it will help to identify the existing perception of teachers' regarding usage of formative assessment. Researcher observed the gaps during executing the assessment that most of the schools, teachers focus on the summative assessment rather than formative in order to secure good grades in board exams therefore teacher pay more attention towards to summative assessment and this practice is prevail is education system of Sindh. Though, formative assessment is key ingredient to achieve the best results in summative assessment but it is neglected by the majority schools and teachers. While searching, it is found that this type of work has not done previously at district Larkana, Sindh Pakistan.

1.3   Research Questions

The following question was guided my study:

1. What are the Semi-Government Organization's teachers' perception about using formative assessment in the elementary English classroom?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The goal of this research is to examine the experiences of teachers with formative assessments. The cognitive sense-making framework developed by Spillane, Reisner, and Reimer (2002b) will be used to explore this phenomenon (Tazewell, 2018). Spillane et al. (2002b) used the term sense-making to describe how individuals develop an understanding of educational policies. In the cognitive sense-making model there are three constructs which are: individual cognition, situated cognition, and role of representations (Spillane et al., 2002b). Interactions among these constructs influences how individuals comprehend and make interpretations regarding certain educational reforms (Spillane et al., 2002b). A thorough description of the components of the framework will be explained in greater detail in the subsequent paragraphs below (Tazewell, 2018). Spillane et al. (2002b) applied the sense-making model when examining educational policy to identify other explanations for teacher responses to reform. Some traditional explanations suggested that teachers attempt to change or intentionally ignore aspects of a policy (Spillane et al., 2002b). These reasons neglected to consider other factors that may be involved in how individuals understand and

interpret reforms (Spillane et al., 2002b). Thus, Spillane et al. (2002b) recommended examining the impact of the variables in the cognitive sense-making model to understand the behavior of teachers in response to educational policies. The understandings that teachers develop may determine how well some reforms are implemented. Hence, using this framework will be helpful to explore the factors that may be involved in how teachers implement formative assessments (Tazewell, 2018).

2.1.1   *Individual cognition*

The individual cognition component of sense-making involves individuals using experiences, existing knowledge, and beliefs to develop meaning regarding new policies (Spillane et al., 2002b; Tazewell, 2018). Spillane et al. (2002b) affirmed that individuals process stimuli by relying on experiences and current understandings. Existing fragments of knowledge, known as schemas, help individuals relate what is already known to new information and guide how the information is processed (Spillane et al., 2002b; Tazewell, 2018). It is common for persons to rely on what they currently understand to connect with new information. Conversely, this prior knowledge can have negative consequences for reform implementation (Spillane, 2016; Spillane et al., 2002b). When given new information, most individuals seek to keep their current ideas instead of evolve them (Spillane, 2016; Spillane et al., 2002b; Tazewell, 2018).

2.1.2   **Situated cognition**

Another construct that influences sense- making in policy initiatives is situated cognition or context (Spillane et al., 2002b). Spillane et al. (2002b) noted that many aspects of a situation can influence how individuals make sense of policies. In this component of the framework Spillane et al. (2002b) suggested that contextual factors such as the structure and history of a school organization, as well as one's professional knowledge and affiliations can influence how individuals interpret policy (Tazewell, 2018). Spillane (2016) noted that collaborative exchanges allow teachers to clarify misunderstandings regarding the reform with one another. In addition, peer engagement with policy permits teachers to construct new understanding and practices that assist in implementing the reform (Coburn, 2015). Conversely, without collaborative engagement teachers are more prone to reject policies before attempting to utilize them (Coburn, 2015). Thus, schools that support collaborative engagement in their organizational structure create a context that helps teachers develop meaning about certain reforms individually and collectively.

2.2   **Sense-Making of Educational Policies and Reforms**

If a law is effectively introduced may be affected by many factors. Conventional theories have indicated that factors influencing compliance derive from the nature of policies, as well as the capacity and willingness of a person to enforce the reform (Spillane et al., 2002b; Tazewell, 2018). The sense-making paradigm indicates that certain factors, such as one's views, prior awareness, perceptions, contextual pressures, and policy interpretations, affect how individuals develop reform meaning and influence the reform process involved (Spillane et al., 2002b). Studies have noted that teachers will engage in reform making sense (Coburn, 2015, 2016). Additionally, a report by Spillane et al. (2002a) showed that school leaders can also be interested in policy making sense.

2.2.1   *Impact of individual cognition*

Teachers respond to policies based on their understanding and perspectives on curriculum, subject areas, and teaching strategies (Spillane, 1998a). They also affect their existing practices on how they adapt to changes (Spillane, 1998a). In addition, they are using their observations and current understanding to build new policy awareness (Spillane & Callahan,

2018). Spillane (1998a) noted that due to their backgrounds and differences in prior knowledge teachers will develop different ideas about a program. Although some previous knowledge of a reform may help teachers respond to a policy, studies have found that familiarity can have a negative effect on implementation (Spillane & Callahan, 2018; Spillane & Zeuli, 2017). Study by Spillane and Zeuli (2017) on the mechanism involved in changing teachers 'mathematics practices found that some mentioned being familiar with such requirements, but most of the participants failed to incorporate them during their training. Spillane and Zeuli (2017) indicated that policy implementation goes beyond knowledge of policy elements, but individuals that require more time to acquire new knowledge and appreciate how this awareness may impact their classroom practices.

2.2.2   *Impact of situated cognition (context)*

Professional relations and affiliations are also contextual factors which influence the making of sense (Spillane, 1998b; Spillane et al., 2002b; Tazewell, 2018). Research on how two school districts implemented reading policy, Spillane (1998b), found that district administrators had different professional connections which affected their understanding of the reading reform. This study noted that the professional contacts of the administrator affected their preference for lecture instructional activities (Spillane, 1998b). In comparison, their choice of instructional approaches affected their interpretation of the policy and led them to view it differently (Spillane, 1998b). This research demonstrated that one's professional affiliations has serious implications for sense-making and can cause individuals to produce different interpretations of the same policy.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research design with case study approach was chosen for the present study. Qualitative research is useful for investigating the meaning humans give to a certain problem (Creswell, 2007, 2009). It is concerned with the perspectives of the participants, including what they think and why they hold certain views (Fraenkal & Wallen, 2009). A case study (qualitative in nature), such as this present study, provides a unique example of real people in real situations (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013), easily understood, directly interpreted and is good for investigating issues in depth (Bassey, 1999; Burns, 1997).

Population of the study were semi-government organization's teachers of elementary schools of Taluka Ratodero, district Larkana Pakistan. The purposive sampling method based on the convenience was employed for this study. A convenience sampling strategy was used because data were readily collected from the teachers, as they were all conveniently available to participate in the study. The participants in this study consisted of five full-time elementary school teachers who engaged in implementing formative assessments in their English class during the 2019-2020 year. They were recruited from a single elementary school run by semi-government organization of Taluka Ratodero, district Larkana Pakistan.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. All of the interviews were conducted in the participants' classrooms. The interviews were held over an 8 week period. Interviews were transcribed. Most of the interviews lasted an hour and some were shorter in duration. Each interview was audio recorded on two devices. Using the semi-structured method, researcher had a set of questions to guide the interview, but researcher also asked unplanned questions to gather additional needed information. Prior to beginning the interviews, researcher reviewed the purpose of the research and discussed the consent forms. Additionally, to enhance trustworthiness researcher maintained a reflexive journal as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

4. RESULT

Spillane et al. (2002b) cognitive sense-making framework was used to conceptualize this research. This framework suggests that individual cognition (prior knowledge, experiences, and beliefs), situated cognition (contextual factors), and the role of representations (policy representations) influence how individuals understand and interpret educational policies (Spillane et al., 2002b). These factors can affect how teachers carry out certain school related directives and policies. Thus, the sense-making framework served as a lens to understand how the participants experienced implementing formative assessments. Several themes that were generated in this research related to the theoretical framework and contributed to a greater understanding of the complex issues involved in executing instructional policies in classrooms.

The first theme, *initial confusion* is related to the individual cognition component of sense-making. The individual cognitive component of the sense-making framework recognizes that prior knowledge and experience can influence how individuals interpret educational policy (Spillane et al., 2002b). This theme relates to this part of theory because one of the five participants who was not initially confused about formative assessments had prior coursework and experience with the practice. This participant also mentioned that she would often reflect on her previous coursework while she implemented formative assessments in her classroom. This prior knowledge appeared to contribute to her understanding during the implementation process.

The theme *initial confusion* also is linked to the policy representations component of the framework. Spillane et al. (2002b) noted that how a policy is communicated influences how it is interpreted. Several participants experienced confusion and also made dissimilar statements about how they were directed to begin implementing formative assessments. One participant recalled being asked to bring the activities to planning meetings which caused her to believe the assessments had to be a product. The other participants had different explanations regarding what they were told and also experienced a lack of clarity about what formative assessments were. This suggest that the participants may have benefited from a clearer message at the start of the implementation process. Thus, a more explicit message about what formative assessments were and how they should be implemented may have contributed to a better initial understanding.

The next themes *understanding developed over time* was related to the situated cognition element of sense-making. This part of the framework suggests that contextual factors in the local school can contribute to how individuals understand policy. Contextual factors may include norms of social interaction in the school's organizational structure. The theme *understanding developed over time* is related to the situated cognition component because the participants frequently discussed formative assessment activities with members of their grade level.

The theme *various formative assessments* is evident in the policy representations component of the sense-making construct. The formative assessments that several of participants utilized reflected the message that was communicated through ongoing professional development. They were given examples of many different formative assessments and several of their stories illustrated the activities they used. Hence, the range of formative assessments the participants utilized appeared to echo the message they received regarding the acceptable practices they should implement in their classrooms.

Lastly, the theme barriers to implementation, did not directly relate to elements of the theoretical framework. This theme had two subthemes which are *lack of time* and *student*

5

behavior. Although this theme encompassed the environmental factors that affected the participants' ability to implement formative assessments, it did not influence their understanding or interpretation regarding formative assessments.

5. DISCUSSION

The review of literature in this research includes sense-making studies, formative assessment literature, and other studies on formative assessment. Several of the themes identified in this study relate to the literature. Thus, there is evidence of some alignment between the themes and the literature review.

Several studies demonstrate alignment to theme *various formative assessments*. Sense-making studies found that when individuals collaborate with their peers they are able to better understand policy (Coburn, 2015, 2016). Literature also noted that teachers can help develop the formative assessment practices of their peers (Bell & Cowie, 2016; Brookhart et al., 2018; Wylie et al., 2018). Additionally, formative assessment literature also recognizes many activities such as observations, questioning, ABCD cards, and exit tickets that were also found throughout the *various formative assessments* theme. Studies noted that questioning (Ruiz-Primo & Furtak, 2017; Torance & Pryor, 2001) and observations (Dixon & Williams 2013) were used to assess student learning and monitor their progress. Other strategies such as ABCD cards and exit passes were recommended by Wiliam (2018) to gather evidence of student learning. These activities were described in the participants' interview.

The theme *barriers to implementation* and the subtheme *lack of time* relate to an issue found in literature. Cizek (2015) extensive work on formative assessment noted that time may not be available during the teaching day implement the practice. One of the participants described this issue in her story. Buck & Trauth-Nare (2019) research also found that being able to give students feedback about their work was difficult due to time restrictions. Although this problem was not found in this study, two participants stated that they had difficulty finding time to provide students with additional instruction when needed. Both Buck & Trauth-Nare's (2019) finding and the issue described by the participants identify a greater problem not found in the literature review. This issue relates to teachers not having adequate time to meet the learning needs of students after obtaining data from formative assessments.

6. RECOMMENDATION

On the basis of finding, Following recommendations are suggested:

1. Teacher preparation programs should include coursework and training that will help pre-service teachers develop a thorough understanding of formative assessment practices. Pre-service teachers should be introduced to different formative assessment activities and receive training on how to use them.

2. It also would be meaningful to identify how teachers involve students in their own process of learning when using formative assessments.

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