Innovative Assessment Practices at Secondary School Level: Case Study of a School in Sikkim

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Abstract: *The present study uses in-depth case study method to document the innovative Assessment practices of Secondary Level Schools in Sikkim. In order to collect direct data and get an idea of the best assessment practices followed, one of the secondary schools was selected purposively on the basis of the findings of the quantitative phase of this study. In the course of study, both classroom observations and interviews with the selected teachers were carried out. More specifically, each participant was interviewed once and the researcher looked directly at the assessment practices that teachers applied, rather than relying on other alternative accounts. The findings indicate that in the scholastic area, the teachers in these schools had been taking right decision on their day-to-day assessment practices on the aspects like- what was going to be learnt in a particular session, clearly defining and communicating the learning goals to the learners, probing the questions wisely, designing tasks to check the learning outcomes, providing right feedback and opportunities for learners to use the feedback provided to further progress. Moreover, it was revealed that unique co-scholastic assessment practiceswere followed at the school thatwas supported by a proper assessment system which had been developed for strengthening assessment practices and maintaining its sustainability. Limitations and Implication of the study are discussed and consequently, recommendations to develop and establish a school-wide agreement about the best practices of assessment across all the subject areas are made.*

Keywords: Innovative Assessment practices, Scholastic assessment, Co-scholastic assessment, and In-depth Case Study

1. Backdrop

It is a serious business to assess the students effectively, for assessment does not end with just the grading or declaration of result; actually, it is from there the whole process of analyzing it and then making judicious use of it begins. The time and effort required to gather and analyse assessment information is only worthwhile if that information is used to improve outcomes for students. And as expected, there were a few secondary schools in Sikkim, which have been instrumental in the effective implementation of Assessment Practices at their institutions.

In order to collect direct data and get an idea of the best assessment practices followed, one of the schools was selected purposively on the basis of the findings of the quantitative data as well as the information collected from Interviews and Field Verification.

About the School

The investigator selected one secondary school out of a few other schools who were following the best assessment practices as per quantitative and qualitative findings.

Figure 27: Picture of the school selected for the case study

The school is located in the forward (Urban) block in East district of Sikkim. The area of the school is 0.60608 hectare which could be considered to be enough as per the state's topographical context. The school was found to be having sufficient infrastructure and recently, one new 4 room school building under SAMAGRA Siksha was found under construction. Further, one 100 bedded Scheduled caste girls' hostels under social welfare department Govt. of Sikkim were almost completed and ready to be handed over to the school.

There was a total of 23 teaching staff for a total of 280 students; which reflected that they were having a good teacher-student ratio of 1:12. School head was found to be quite senior with an experience of 19 years and qualification of M.A., B. Ed. He had attended various orientation programme regarding assessment practices at secondary school level. Under his able leadership, the school was performing well in the Board Examination. For instance, for the last two years their result was 100 percent.

2. Methodology

The present study followed the in-depth case study method for the purpose of documenting the innovative Assessment practices of the selected school.

All the secondary schools of Sikkim with good assessment practices comprises the target population of the study. For the purpose of this study, one best practicing secondary school was purposively selected from the East District of Sikkim.

Both the classroom observations and interviews with the selected teachers were carried out. More specifically, each participant was interviewed once and the researcher looked directly at the classroom assessment practices that teachers applied, rather than relying on other alternative accounts. The researcher was a non-participating observer and maintained detailed notes of the assessment activities carried out during the lesson transaction. Moreover, the researcher took a note of the way teachers formed their questions and also jotted down some dialogues between teachers and students.

Observation schedule that was used for the purpose was focused on the following aspects:

- Assessment of Scholastic Areas (for learning/as learning/of learning).
- Assessment of Co-Scholastic Areas.
- Assessment of the different categories of students' viz., gifted, weak, differently abled.
- Remediation and
- Feedback.

Based on the above cited aspects, the researcher tried to explore the following:

a) The way they conduct the Assessment of Scholastic Areas (for learning/as learning/of learning)
b) The way they conduct the Assessment of Co-Scholastic Areas
c) Assessment of the different categories of students' viz., gifted, weak, differently abled.
d) Remediation and
e) Feedback.

a) The way they conduct the Assessment of Scholastic Areas (for learning/as learning/of learning)

While observing classes in the selected school, the observer could see the following:

Assessment for Learning

One of the teachers under observation entered the classroom (standard-IX) on time and did not wait for the students to greet, rather she greeted them with a smile; and started, "Good morning children, I believe, you must have studied the last lesson at home, she continued, today we shall try to find out how much you all have learnt the lesson-Physical features of India." Then she threw her question to the whole class, when no one answered, she waited for a while and asked one of the students to answer the question. I noticed that the student was not giving the convincing answer but she listened to the student patiently and she said, "*Good to see that you tried well.*" Next, she asked rest of the class to try more. When a boy added to the answer given by the first boy, she praised him and asked one of her girl students from the middle row, "*Sabina, can you give an example of what Abhisek means?*"

It could be observed that the teacher not only had a good idea about motivating the students for a class but also possessed a skill in probing questions related to assessment for learning. Jones (2005) advocates, "Assessment for learning strategies should be implemented in such a way that quality feedback provided to learners based on an assessment method, will help to challenge the gifted learner to reach new levels of achievement and, in doing so, reach their full potential. The individuality of feedback, by its very nature, has the facility to support weaker learners and challenge more able learners."

In another class observed, the male science teacher of the school entered the class room with a handful of cards which when enquired later, he mentioned to be as low-cost no-cost TLMs developed from locally available materials to use as a quick assessment tool. The teacher completed the remaining portion of the lesson on, 'Our Environment.' The teacher distributed each student a set of three coloured cards. After some time, I could see that many of the students were holding up green, some yellow and a few were holding red colour cards in their hands. After which the teacher asked to red card holders, "Which area of the lesson you did not understood at all? The students replied, "Ecosystem," and the teacher started with an example of- a pond in which there was some algal growth. There were a few small zooplanktons which fed on those algae and in turn were consumed by some worms which in turn were fed upon by the frogs living there. So, I could see that the teacher was trying to re-teach the concept in a story form. And at the end of the class, I enquired about the use of those coloured cards and he shared, "Whenever I ask my students if they have understood a concept or not, they almost every time say, yes sir." He added, "But that is not true always. So, I started to give them these coloured cards and if they show me green card, it means they understood the concept well, if yellow, then they have understood it to some extent, but if it is red then they are completely lost; accordingly, I re-teach or change my strategy of teaching that particular concept."

It was really a great quick, assessment tool to assess our heterogenous students. The method used by the teacher revealed that he has been using innovative ways in assessing his students in a science class. Van Zee et al., (2001)

identified that "Questioning is a frequent component of science talk" and Harlen (2006) states that "questioning is a key feature of scientific activity and of teaching science." Studies in the area have revealed that both the questioning and the feedback always helps one to know whether everything is fine with teaching learning or not.

In the schools with effective practices of the assessment for learning, the following could be found to be existing in their school system:

- Assessment for Learning included in the School Improvement Plan.
- Assessment for Learning needs frequently discussed in the staff meetings.
- Assessment for Learning was driven by a committed School Head who not only had tangible goals but was also able to share that to all staff.
- Examples of good practice were being identified from within to help illustrate, contextualise and further encourage the Assessment for Learning initiative to all the teachers.
- Assessment for learning was aimed at closing the gap between the present situation of learners and the expected position they were to be.

Assessment *as* Learning

In the selected school, it could be observed that the teacher guide and provide opportunities for each student to monitor and critically reflect on his or her learning and identify next steps.

For instance, during a Geography (Resources and Development) period, one of the teachers used Assessment as Learning as a tool to review Map skill strategies for class X and were assigned in turn, to mentor class IX students. Through the process, the class X students became proficient at using both teacher-created criteria and their own criteria and were able to mentor class IX students in Map skill quite well. It could be observed that, those class X students could successfully start each lesson with a stated learning intention.

In these schools, it could be seen that to promote learning, they followed the following practices:

- Provided each student with accurate, descriptive feedback that would help them to develop independent learning habits.
- Provided each student with ideas for adjusting, rethinking, and planning his or her learning.
- Indicated each student's level of understanding.
- Encouraged students to think over their own knowledge or views.

Figure 28: Assessment *as* learning in progress

Assessment of Learning

In the selected schools, it could be observed that they had a good system of providing information to the stakeholders about the students' proficiency in relation to learning outcomes.

In one of the selected schools, the teachers had adopted a unique way, for instance, they usually gave students common misconceptions about the topic they were studying, and let them explain whether they agree or disagree. For example, one teacher in a class (lesson was 'solar system') made a statement, "The sun goes down at night" and asked students to discuss on that statement. The students went on telling a lot about the statement; some were confident that it was all because of the rotation of the earth and some were a little confused with the concept. It could be understood that a student's understanding of the solar system could be assessed very well by their answers.

In one of the classes observed, it could be seen that after a lesson, the teacher asked students to list three things they learned, two things they found interesting, and one question

they still have. This quick check for understanding could give teacher really valuable insight on his/her students' need; it could be instrumental in making a decision to provide more help to the needy students as well as give information on how to better tailor lessons to their students' interests.

In this school, it could be seen that to promote learning, they used the assessment information to:

- Provided the foundation for discussions on placement or promotion.
- Provided students with a detail report about their learning.
- Reported fair, accurate, and detailed information that could be used to decide the next steps in the student's learning.

All in all, the findings indicate that the teachers in these schools had been taking right decision on their day-to-day assessment practices on the aspects like- what was going to be learnt in a particular session, clearly defining and communicating the learning goals to the learners, probing

the questions wisely, designing tasks to check the learning outcomes, providing right feedback and opportunities for learners to use the feedback provided to further progress. Moreover, it was revealed that a proper assessment system had been developed which helped in strengthening assessment practices and maintaining its sustainability.

b) The way they conduct the Assessment of Co-Scholastic Areas

Teachers in the selected school were found to encourage participation of each child in some activity or the others; when discussed in detail they shared, "We always try to ensure that no child is left out from participation in activities organized at the school." Another teacher added, "If they participate well in school level activities, then we along with the sports teacher give such student chances to take part in interschool competitions also."

It was found that the teachers carefully examine the behavior/skills/ competencies of students in the school on all possible occasions, and maintain records of the performance of students. In the said school, teachers were motivated to work collaboratively with other teachers to facilitate and assess learner's performance and then finally assign grades.

Some other unique co-scholastic assessment practices:

i) Value Bank:

The school had a corner in the library with a box written 'value bank'; inside the box there were paper slips containing different values. Students could take the value slips from the librarian (each value slip had certain weightage, so, maximum value slips with a student all through a semester means maximum weightage) and had to stick with that value in future. For instance, if one student took a value slip with an inscription, "I will respect my elders," then he/she must continue to live that value and if he/she fails to do so then he/she had to return that value slip which would lead to deduction of points under good values during the preparation of report card each semester.

Figure 29: Student depositing the value slips

ii) Story Time:
The school had a practice of encouraging students to tell stories with moral values during their evening assembly. It was instrumental in assessing not only their growth in expression and language but also to inculcate good values in the students.

Figure 30: Student sharing moral story in the assembly

In the school, the following practices were observed:

- Committees were formed for different aspects.
- Teachers were vigilant to observe the day-to-day activities of students.
- Students were scored for games and sports as well as for music and art.
- Assessment of Co-scholastic Areas was continuously done by collecting information.
- The records of co-scholastic assessment, after interpretation, were found to be reflected in the Report Card of the students in the form of grades.
- Co-scholastic activities were graded on a 5-point grading scale (A to E) for classes IX-X.
- The team of teachers (as these schools were having committees for the same) would make an objective assessment of the level of performance/ participation

demonstrated by a student throughout the academic year and finally assign grades.

Table 5.1: The basis of assessment that this school followed for Co-scholastic Areas

Co-scholastic Areas	Outcome	Assessment Practices
Health and Physical Education which includes Work Experience	Overall fitness	Participation, team-spirit, commitment and honest effort
Art Education	Expression, creativity and Aesthetic appeal	Participation, cooperativeness, patience, systematic approach, neatness and cleanliness in work and workplace and devotion and honest effort in work.

c) Assessing of different categories of students viz., gifted, weak, differently-abled

In the selected school, it was observed that the students were given special assignments depending upon their specific learning needs. Assessment for Learning strategies were implemented in such a way that quality feedback provided to learners help to challenge the gifted learner to reach new levels of achievement and, in doing so, reach their full potential. The individuality of feedback, by its very nature, had the facility to support weaker learners and challenge gifted learners.

The differently abled students were helped by giving special assignment, reframing oral questions, ignoring spelling and grammar error and providing alternative questions.

As it was not possible to observe all the varieties of interventions used during the limited period of observation, the researcher had to enquire specifically about certain aspects. For instance, it was felt that there was not much of direct observation recorded in the line of dealing with the slow learners; hence, the researcher enquired about the same with some teachers. When enquired about the way of dealing with the slow learner, one of the teachers shared, *"We try to pinpoint the specific problem rather than neglecting the student; she added, it is required to be figured out what is actually posing to be a problem for a child. Once, the trouble spot is identified; it will be easy to deal with that particular area only."*

Another male teacher shared, *"If I notice that a student is struggling in my class, I try to monitor the student very closely for some time and even take notes on their apparent areas of difficulty and then try interventions."* He continued, *"For example, in class X, we have a student who is very slow in writing so, always struggles to copy notes down, if I try to help him there, it slows the whole class progress; hence, I give him my diary at the end of the class so that he can complete the left-out notes during the off period."*

It could be understood that the teachers in these schools try vast array of interventions to ensure that their students learn better in every situation. The key to a good assessment is that it is quick and easy, especially in the daily classroom situation. Formative assessments can be given during the last few minutes of class, and the best part is that they don't need to be graded every time. Many of the times, they can be used simply to give teachers feedback about how well their students are learning.

d) The way teachers follow remediation of the students
In the selected school, it was found that teachers always tried to correct a deficit rather than teach students to cope with the deficit. The following strategies were found to be followed in these schools:

Reteaching: Teachers presented the information to the student again. If a student struggled with solving a math equation, for example, the teacher simply showed him/her the method again.

Alternative Instructional Strategies: Some students may require alternative teaching strategies which are often based on students' individual learning styles. For instance, in one of the schools it was observed that when one student was not found to comprehend material from a lecture on the parts of speech, the teacher made him work with a partner to make a poster on parts of speech using pictures cut from a magazine provided by the teacher. Later it was revealed that the student was a kinaesthetic learner, who could learn concepts better with hands-on activities.

One-on-One Tutoring: Teacher in some classes were found doing one-on-one tutoring, which was proving to be a very effective method for struggling students. Though it was an expensive and time-consuming method, it was really inspiring to see some teachers using it for the benefit of struggling students.

Figure 31: One-on-One Tutoring

e) The ways of providing feedback for internal assessment

In the selected school, the following could be observed:

- The students were given proper feedback about their progress and achievement on the basis of assessment results.
- Teachers shared good quality, relevant information about students' achievements and progress with parents, and they were informed of the school's assessment processes also.
- The school had a practice of seeking and valuing SMC members' opinions and ideas when developing and reviewing assessment and reporting processes.

3. Major Findings, Discussion and Recommendations

In the present study, it was aimed to document the innovative Assessment practices related to assessment of learners of selected Secondary School of Sikkim. Hence, the study was focused on the following aspects:

- Assessment of Scholastic Areas (for learning/as learning/of learning).
- Assessment of Co-Scholastic Areas.
- Assessment of the different categories of students' viz., gifted, weak, differently abled.
- Remediation and
- Feedback.

Hence, the major findings and discussion on findings of the study have been categorized under the following headings:

i) Assessment of Scholastic Areas

In this school, it could be seen that to promote learning, they used the assessment information to:

- Provided the foundation for discussions on placement or promotion.
- Provided students with a detail report about their learning.
- Reported fair, accurate, and detailed information that could be used to decide the next steps in the student's learning.

All in all, the findings indicate that the teachers in these schools had been taking right decision on their day-to-day assessment practices on the aspects like- what was going to be learnt in a particular session, clearly defining and communicating the learning goals to the learners, probing the questions wisely, designing tasks to check the learning outcomes, providing right feedback and opportunities for learners to use the feedback provided to further progress. Moreover, it was revealed that a proper assessment system had been developed which helped in strengthening assessment practices and maintaining its sustainability.

ii) Assessment of Co-Scholastic Areas

In the school, the following practices were observed:

- Committees were formed for different aspects.
- Teachers were vigilant to observe the day-to-day activities of students.
- Students were scored for games and sports as well as for music and art.
- Assessment of Co-scholastic Areas was continuously done by collecting information.
- The records of co-scholastic assessment, after interpretation, were found to be reflected in the Report Card of the students in the form of grades.
- Co-scholastic activities were graded on a 5-point grading scale (A to E) for classes IX-X.
- The team of teachers (as these schools were having committees for the same) would make an objective assessment of the level of performance/ participation demonstrated by a student throughout the academic year and finally assign grades.

iii) Assessment of the different categories of students

In the selected school, it was observed that the students were given special assignments depending upon their specific learning needs. Assessment for Learning strategies were implemented in such a way that quality feedback provided to learners help to challenge the gifted learner to reach new levels of achievement and, in doing so, reach their full potential. The individuality of feedback, by its very nature, had the facility to support weaker learners and challenge gifted learners. The differently abled students were helped by giving special assignment, reframing oral questions, ignoring spelling and grammar error and providing alternative questions.

It could be observed that the teachers in these schools try vast array of interventions to ensure that their students learn better in every situation. The key to a good assessment is that it is quick and easy, especially in the daily classroom

situation. Formative assessments can be given during the last few minutes of class, and the best part is that they don't need to be graded every time. Many of the times, they can be used simply to give teachers feedback about how well their students are learning.

iv) Remediation

In the selected school, it was found that teachers always tried to assess students' needs, give them necessary support and ultimately evaluating their level of learning i.e., to ensure whether they have understood the concept or not. The following strategies were found to be followed in these schools:

- Reteaching: Teachers presented the information to the student again. If a student struggled with solving a math equation, for example, the teacher simply showed him/her the method again.
- Alternative Instructional Strategies: Some students may require alternative teaching strategies which are often based on students' individual learning styles. For instance, in one of the classes it was observed that when one student was not found to comprehend material from a lecture on the parts of speech, the teacher made him work with a partner to make a poster on parts of speech using pictures cut from a magazine provided by the teacher. Later it was revealed that the student was a kinaesthetic learner, who could learn concepts better with hands-on activities; muscle memory allows them to remember how to do something after doing it only once.
- One-on-One Tutoring: Teacher in some classes were found doing one-on-one tutoring, which was proving to be a very effective method for struggling students. Though it was an expensive and time-consuming method, it was really inspiring to see some teachers using it for the benefit of struggling students.

v) Feedback

In the selected school, the following could be observed:

- The students were given proper feedback about their progress and achievement on the basis of assessment results.
- Teachers shared good quality, relevant information about students' achievements and progress with parents, and they were informed of the school's assessment processes also.
- The school had a practice of seeking and valuing SMC members' opinions and ideas when developing and reviewing assessment and reporting processes.

4. Recommendations

To increase the effectiveness of assessment practices in schools, schools shall develop and establish a school-wide agreement about the best practices of assessment across all the subject areas. Furthermore, to ensure teachers in secondary school level make maximum use of their assessment capabilities, teachers be given exposure visit of the best practicing schools and encourage them to emulate the innovative practices in assessment being practiced by the innovative teachers.

5. Limitation of the Study

The case study was carried out in only one school due to the time period available being quite short. It would be better if more classrooms could have been observed, more assessment activities could have been covered up.

6. Conclusion

As a result of visiting a school over a period of eight weeks, observing classroom activities and school's modus operandi, informal discussions with number of teachers, and an extensive reviewing of number of literatures on Assessment practices, the following conclusion could be drawn:

With the innovations in Assessment practices, assessment is not confined to the formal term end examinations only, it's in the normal classroom, school assembly, in the laboratory and all such places and instances wherein learning happens; and a teacher needs to be alert to it at all the times. It is worth mentioning that the selected school had developed and implemented an integrated approach to teaching learning and assessment practices.

For the same, the selected school was found to be having the following practices:

- The school had developed a clear road map for the effective assessment practices leading to students' learning and achievement.
- Assessment processes were closely linked to expected learning outcomes.
- Clear instructions with appropriate support systems were predominant across the school system.
- A system had been developed which helped in strengthening assessment practices and maintaining its sustainability.

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