

STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACHES IN PRESERVICE TEACHER ASSESSMENT: VOICES AND EXPERIENCES FROM ZIMBABWEAN TEACHER-TRAINING COLLEGES

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Abstract

The concept of educational assessment in the digital age has practitioners grappling with what works for the current era. This paper explores the implementation of student-centered approaches in pre-service teacher assessments, focusing on the experiences and voices of student teachers in Zimbabwean teacher-training colleges. As teacher education evolves towards the demands of 21st-century classrooms, an increasing emphasis on participatory and reflective assessments that align with diverse needs of student teachers is evident globally. This study explores student-centered assessments vis-à-vis its contribution to professional growth and alignment with Zimbabwe's Education 5.0 framework, which emphasizes innovation and competency-based education. A hybrid framework that combined connectivism and transformative learning theory informed the study. Using a qualitative research design, the study gathered data through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis involving preservice teachers and administrators from five teacher training institutions in Zimbabwe. The findings reveal that while student-centered assessments, such as peer reviews, self-assessments, and portfolio-based evaluations, foster critical thinking, self-reflection, and collaborative learning, challenges such as inadequate resources, lack of consistency, and resistance to change, hinder their effective implementation.

Keywords: *Educational assessments, Education 5.0, collaborative learning, self-assessment, pre-service teachers.*

1. Introduction

Assessment is a critical concept in the shaping of learners at all levels of learning. For teacher education, assessment is a tool that affects professional competences of preservice teachers (Alt & Raichel, 2022). From the traditional pedagogical perspective, assessment for teacher education was essentially tutor-driven, based on summative evaluation and standardized tests (Asad & Malik, 2023). These assessment models have lost compatibility with the demands of the 21st century requisite skills for graduates and have lost alignment with global trends in teacher education curricular (Nobutoshi, 2023). Worldwide, higher education in teacher training is calling for models of assessment that focus on competency-based models that have student-centered approaches involving reflection and are participatory in nature (Rodrigues, 2023; Morgan, 2024; Asad & Malik, 2023.). The idea is to make students actively engage in their own development and progress.

Higher education curricular on teacher training is experiencing a paradigm shift globally towards learner driven models of assessments, centered on collaboration, self-regulation, critical thinking and reflection (Rajaram, 2023; Sosibo, 2019; Nobutoshi, M. (2023). Curricular are leaning more towards a constructivist model of teaching and learning for enhanced student-centered pedagogy. Assessment is one of the three pillars of the education system besides curriculum and pedagogy (Coombs et al, 2018), as such it plays a critical role in pedagogical processes. Therefore, arbitrary assessment implementation results in poor products (Alt & Raichel, 2022). This has actuated the modifications of assessment models which are seen around the world and Zimbabwe is no exception (Fahad, 2023; Alt & Raichel, 2022; Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), 2024).

1.1. Philosophy and assessment

Zimbabwe's Education 5.0 built upon the Heritage-based philosophy that explains how the country's total heritage should inform innovation and industrialization for economic growth (Muzira & Muzira, 2020). An educational philosophy is critical in the shaping of assessment even for teacher education as it guides the designing process, implementation and the subsequent evaluation of the

assessment methodologies for desired outcomes (Shakemore et al., 2023). An educational philosophy influences assessment focus, whether its traditional methods of rote learning or its collaborative or technology integrated. The Heritage-based 5.0 Education has constructivist aspects and emphasizes portfolio evaluations, formative assessments and reflective journals (Mwembe & Moyo, 2024). Additionally, it has Afrocentric, student –centered elements running through it which advocate culturally relevant assessment models cognisant of diverse pedagogical contexts (Ndebvudzemene, 2020). Thus, Education 5.0 demands assessment methods that not only test skills and knowledge but prepares student teachers to be competent, responsive and reflective, which skills are 21st century compliant (Mwembe & Moyo, 2024). This study asserts that through the engagement of formative assessment models, trainees are nurtured into self-regulated, adaptable and collaborating tech-survey teachers. Coupled with contextualized practical assessments, it ensures alignment with Zimbabwe’s educational goals that are for innovation and industrialization for economic development as espoused by vision 2030 (Ndebvudzemene, 2020).

2. Theoretical framework

A hybrid framework that combined connectivism and transformative learning theory informed the study. Connectivism was developed by George Siemens and Stephen Downes in 2009 as a theory for digital learning based on the belief that knowledge exists in the world rather than in the head of an individual (Ottestad, 2013). They argued that learning is a process of creating and navigating knowledge networks through social and digital connections (Siemens & Downes, 2009). Transformative learning theory on the other hand is an andragogical theory developed by Jack Mezirow (1923 -2014) in the late 20th century. The theory focused on how learners engage in critical reflection on their experiences to change their perspectives for innovation in both skills and thinking processes (Klein & Wikan, 2019). The emphasis in this theory is on self-examination through deep reflective thinking especially on assumptions that lead to significant changes in understanding and reorientation and new perspective adoption (Klein & Wikan, 2019). Both connectivism and transformative learning align well with the Zimbabwean Heritage –based curriculum and Education 5.0 as they advocate shifting from traditional rote learning models to critical thinking, ICTs, problem solving, innovative education (Downes, 2012; Mabwe & Mabhandu, 2023). In assessing trainee teachers, the theory supports the equipping of future teachers with skills for practical knowledge in diverse classrooms through collaborative learning and real-world application of digital tools for pedagogy.

3. Methodology

The study used a qualitative methodological research design informed by phenomenology as it is ideal for the study aim of exploring the perceptions and lived experiences of preservice teachers vis-à-vis student centered assessment. (Gill, 2020). The study gathered data through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis involving preservice teachers and administrators from five teacher training institutions in Zimbabwe. 10 preservice teachers were purposively selected from each of the purposively selected five colleges. One administrator from each of the colleges under study were also selected.

3.1. Data collection and analysis

The semi-structured interviews were done one-on-one with 10 participants from each college. These were face-to-face and were recorded for accuracy of reporting, transcribed and saved in cloud ready for analysis (Hassan, 2024). From the same participants of 10, five were selected through a volunteering process to participate in focus group discussions. The five administrators, one from each college were all interviewed. Document analysis looked at institutional guidelines, student portfolios and policies as a way of evaluating the implementation of learner-centered assessments in the Zimbabwean preservice teacher training colleges.

For data analysis, we employed a rigorous protocol of coding, inductive analysis, triangulation, external audit and member checking to ensure trustworthiness and credibility (Creswell, 2014). This involved all the data from interviews and focus group discussions emphasizing aspects of what preservice teachers and their educators experienced in assessment protocols in use in their colleges and how they contributed to their professional development. The following outlines the process of data analysis (Hassan, 2024): The data analysis process began with transcription of interview data and coding it for thematic relevance. The whole process of transcription was done by the researchers themselves as it helped to make us understand the data intimately. We began the process of identifying common recurring themes as they emerged using cross-case analysis (Peel, 2020). The two researchers each generated categories individually and then discussed the wording of the categories before we started ascribing core ideas into their categories.

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Reflective practice and professional growth

Assessment of preservice teachers according to the new semesterization program for teacher's colleges has taken a paradigm shift from traditional examination that tested memory only to a two-pronged system that tests the practical aspect of a module in a continuous assessment mode together with examinations (Saleem et al., 2022). The final assessment has a 40% rating for examination and 60% practical rated on a continuous assessment model and they have to be passed separately. Such an assessment model demands student centered approaches in assessment (Yigzaw, 2013). *Self-assessment has made me aware of my strengths as well as those areas needing improvement. Unlike the traditional examination system that just tested memory, this way of assessment forces me to do a reflection every time during practice and work to improve my teaching methods.*

On peer evaluations, participants commented: *My friends have made it very easy to correct and improve my practice especially in activities like peer teaching and reports on peer evaluations of teaching and learning materials development as well as actual teaching and learning activities.* Another student praised the way they are assessed through portfolio-based assessments. *I really appreciate the way portfolio assessment has enhanced my performance as a preservice teacher. It takes away stress and fear when you know that assessment is continuous and you can improve as you listen to your friends evaluate your piece of work or your teaching and learning activity. It is quite enriching and helps one develop a collegial relationship with peers.*

Such findings were in line with what scholars say about how use of e-portfolios tend to improve the process of empowerment for preservice teachers as they acquire technological, pedagogical as well as content knowledge of given learning areas (Yigzaw, 2013; van Wyk, 2017). This enhances self-directed learning for students. Utilizing such complex technological integration in pedagogy as the Eportfolio, documents and demonstrates the preteachers' professional growth and development (Saleem, 2022). Effective student centered assessment that includes technology integration, peer assessment and self-assessment is enabled by necessary conditions especially a supportive institutional environment (Lopes & Cunha, 2017). This innovative pedagogical assessment is gaining prominence in modern education and scholars are in agreement that it has the potential for addressing the constraints of the traditional models of assessment (Zainuddin et al., 2019), one focus group noted: *When we are doing an assessment of each other's work, we are learning from each other. I get to observe different ways of lesson planning and classroom management, this improves my skills*

The records of assessment together with the course syllabi also highlighted the same three main student-centered assessment approaches done in teacher training colleges, portfolio based assessment, project based assessment, the peer and self-assessments. *Portfolio based assessment:* This type was evident across all the five colleges under study. These provided students with opportunities for self-reflection which ultimately led to professional growth (Rodrigues, 2023). However, there were variations in the way each college implemented it. Sad to note was the evidence of reliance on traditional grading systems by some lecturers in several of the colleges that were the undermining self-directed nature of portfolio evaluation. *Self and peer Assessment:* Policy documents analyzed indicated that self and peer assessments support self-regulated and collaborative learning. This is what happens when effectively done as espoused by research (Alt & Raichel, 2022). However, findings of the study through an analysis of assessment rubric showed inconsistencies in grading criteria and they lacked structured peer assessment training. *Project based assessment:* This was evident across all five colleges. Preservice teachers were exposed to project based assessment. The rubric was clear as to the assessment process and marks allocation. However, there was a lack of comprehensive digital integration which tended to limit the effect of this assessment type especially for 21st century requisite skills for assessment.

4.2. Implementation challenges

There were several challenges that participants, the students, sighted as hindering the effective implementation of the student centered assessment. A recurring theme among administrators was that of the need for a strict standardization for all teachers' colleges which led to discrepancies in the assessments applied. One of the interviewees, an administrator highlighted that: *While there is an attempt at enforcing student-centered assessment across all teacher training colleges, there remains gaps limiting uniformity in the assessment framework. Other lecturers are still more inclined towards traditional examinations models. It is required that final assessment should comprise 60% of continuous assessment that houses student centered assessment but there is no clarity or uniformity on what is to be done. However, the 60% demands that educators implement some form of student centered approaches to assessment which is a giant step towards the right way of assessment.*

4.3. Education 5.0 alignment

The findings of this study indicated that while student centered assessments are well aligned with Education 5.0 framework of Zimbabwe, full integration must get policy reinforcement and systemic support. Administrators generally acknowledged the approach promotes competency-based learning and innovation, core tenets of Education 5.0. However, they also underscored the need for enhanced structured institutional backing. One of the administrators observed: *The nature of Education 5.0 is pushing us to embrace competency-based assessment, but there is need for increased workshops and support systems that help lecturers transition fully to student centered models of assessment.*

Upon examining the five colleges documents including course guidelines and assessment policies, it was evident that student centered assessment approaches were clearly acknowledged and stated as part of the Zimbabwe's Education 5.0 requisites for a competency-based innovation and industrialization education model. Document analysis revealed an emphasis on portfolio evaluations, peer assessment and self-assessment as a way of fostering reflective practice and critical thinking. However, practical application of these documented approaches was clearly inconsistent.

4.4. Benefits of student centered assessment

This study findings highlighted the potential transformative features of student-centered assessments for Zimbabwean teacher-training colleges. Participants overwhelmingly supported this assessment framework that is premised on self-assessment, portfolio-based evaluations and peer reviews as fostering critical thinking, collaborative learning and self-reflection. One student teacher remarked: *Assessing myself helps me take responsibility of my learning, making me more aware of my strengths and weaknesses. I can go on to take charge and work towards my own improvement in my profession.* The same sentiments were echoed by administrators. One of them stated: *The student centered assessment model helps create a new breed of teachers who are reflective practitioners. This is a critical component for positive progressive professional growth.*

A very significant and important contribution came from a participant in a focus group discussion about how student centered assessment fosters student agency, autonomy and ownership of learning. They all agreed that they develop autonomy and a thorough preparation for real world practice in the teaching field. One of them explained: *Feedback from colleagues coupled with the opportunity to reflect on one's teaching and learning experiences make me grow in confidence and become more effective and efficient in my profession and teaching skills. The idea of self-directed work ethic becomes a reality in such settings.* However, findings from the study showed that a lot of institutional support and nurturing is much more needed in this framework as compared to the traditional model (Walker et al., 2023). There is much more continuous assessment and mentoring to direct students towards intended goals and avoid wondering.

4.5. Policy and institutional support

The study revealed the need for more focused institutional support and policy frameworks to sustain this new way of assessment that is student centered (Driscoll & Wood, 2023). A recurring theme from administrators was that of standardizing student centered assessment across all colleges. *We need capacity building programs for both educators and students to ensure proper execution of the framework and uniform at that.* The issue of digital infrastructure in institutions was repeated by both administrators and students. An administrator suggested: *The framework needs support in terms of comprehensive digital infrastructures for enhanced accessibility and efficiency of carrying out such assessments as portfolio-based evaluations.*

4.6. Implications for teacher training institutes

The study findings indicated that preservice teacher training institutions in Zimbabwe need improved assessment frameworks that align with Education 5.0 policies of student centered approaches and not only on paper but through actual practice. To achieve this, findings indicated the need to invest in digital tools and infrastructures that support peer and self-assessment, formal training of lecturers on how to implement student centered assessment models. There should be well defined alignment between college policies and their practical implementation for consistency across colleges.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the implementation of student-centered approaches in pre-service teacher assessments, focusing on the experiences and voices of student teachers in Zimbabwean teacher-training colleges. The findings showed that there is transformative potentials of student-centered assessments in teacher education for Zimbabwean teacher-training colleges. By fostering self-reflection, critical thinking and collaborative learning, assessment becomes aligned to the goals of Zimbabwe's

Education 5.0 whose priority is competency-based education and innovation that leads to industrialization. With peer reviews, eportfolio evaluation and self-assessments, it demonstrates how assessment can transcend rote memorization and develop reflective adaptable educators instead. However, the study also highlights persistent challenges, which include inconsistencies in implementation, resistance to change and resource constraints which need to be addressed for effective implementation of these assessment strategies.

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