Assessing Student Achievement the Right Way: A Study of Practicing Teachers

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INTRODUCTION

Background

One of the most important functions of American public schools is assessment of student achievement (Cankoy & Tut, 2005). From the onset, each new presidential administration unveils its plan of choice to improve public schools. For years many stakeholders have debated the controversial issue of the purpose of public schools. Is it simply to educate and produce good citizens independent of children’s prior learning and social experiences, or do educators take into consideration these prior learning experiences? Should the curriculum be the same for all children or should it reflect their prior learning experiences?

Another issue that has persisted in the K-12 public schools involves accountability. Should the federal government hold states, school districts and schools accountable for student performance? The Clinton administration attempted to establish accountability within the states and schools. In 1994 under Goals 2000, states were required to develop their own accountability systems (Knoll, 2007). The goal was to get all students proficient and the states were allowed to define Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

Challenges arose from the Goals 2000 school improvement plan. “With states defining the adequate yearly progress standard and no real concrete timeline in place, practices varied widely state to state. This led to great differences in results at the state level” (Knoll, 2007, p. 114). The plan was described as being simply too vague in nature.

In George W. Bush’s II presidential campaign, he used his No Child Left Behind (NCLB) school reform plan as a platform to the white house. Under this plan, schools were required to close the academic performance gaps for minority and poor students (Knoll, 2007). The plan was a proposal for the reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary Secondary Education Act and it was signed into place on January 8, 2002 (Guilfoyle, 2006). The objective was to make all students proficient in math and reading content areas by the year 2014 and to increase accountability.

Since the implementation of president’s Bush’s plan, all states have began to test students in grades 3 thru 8 in reading and math contents area and at least one other time during high school (Laitsch, 2003). In K-12 schools, assessment is designed to measure the level of student learning, simply referred to as student achievement. “One of the most important elements of any education system or teaching and learning process is assessment” (Cankoy & Ali Tut, 2005, p. 234).

A discrepancy exists among educators regarding the assessment practices mandated by the government to measure student achievement. In the eyes of many educators, high-stakes standardized tests have replaced the multitude of assessment practices available to teachers for measuring student achievement. High-stakes testing required by NCLB is described as having low-validity of achievement because teachers are teaching to the test and the tests merely measure students’ test-taking skills (Paris et al., 1991). “In this culture, what gets measured is what gets done” (Guilfoyle, 2006, p. 4). As a
result, a system of high-stakes testing has arisen as the principle means of assessing student achievement. High-stakes testing is critical because the outcome ways heavily on the student’s future. Test scores from these high-stakes tests impact variables such as student promotion, school and district funding and teacher employment (Paris et al., 1991).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the opinions of practicing teachers in the state of Georgia regarding the most important assessment practices in K-12 public schools. In addition, the study was conducted to provide findings to enhance assessment of student achievement practices in Georgia’s K-12 public schools. Finally, the study was conducted to provide a basis for further research in the area of determining the most effective assessment of student achievement practices in Georgia’s K-12 public schools.

METHOD

The primary purpose of this study was to determine the opinions of practicing educators regarding the most important methods of assessing student achievement of student performance in K-12 public schools in school districts in Georgia. The study was also designed to promote a basis for conducting further research on the opinions of practicing teachers regarding the most effective measures of student achievement in K-12 public schools.

Procedures

A sample of convenience was the technique used to select the participants of the study. The researcher is a faculty member with Troy University’s Covington Georgia campus. The students were enrolled in the School of Education’s Master of Post-secondary Education program at the time of the study. The study involved K-12 public school teachers from 14 school districts in the state of Georgia. The participants were chosen because of their enrollment in the Troy University’s master’s of science degree program in post-secondary education. Participation in the study was completely voluntary and there were no risks involved for participants. The participants were teachers from Bibb County School System, Cherokee County School System, Dekalb County School System, Gwinnett County School System, Fulton County School System, Henry County School System, Houston County School System, Newton County School System, Pierce County School System, Pike County System, Rockdale County School System, Spaulding County School System, Walton County School System and Ware County School System.

The researcher administered a self-developed questionnaire to each participant. The questionnaire was a Likert type instrument. Once the data was collected, the researcher loaded the data into a Microsoft Access database for electronic storage and future retrieval. The hard copies were stored in a case with a locking mechanism. The coding of responses was as follows: Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Agree = 3, Strongly Agree = 4 and Not Applicable = 0. Unanswered questions received a negative. The data was later converted to a Microsoft Excel database for analysis.

Research Questions

To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the assessment of student achievement phenomena in
the school districts of the teachers who participated in this study, a researcher-developed instrument was created to collect the data. All data collected was used to answer the two research questions:

1. What are the opinions of the participating general education teachers, special education teachers and other teachers regarding the most effective assessment practices of student achievement in K-12 public schools?

2. Are there any differences in the opinions of participating general education teachers, special education teachers and other teachers regarding the most effective assessment practices for measuring student achievement in Public K-12 School?

Instrument

A researcher-developed questionnaire was administered to the participants. A researcher-developed instrument was chosen because there was not an existing instrument that measured the variables of interest to the researcher. The question was given to 10 practicing teachers to comment on its validity and reliability. Appropriate revisions were made after the teaching experts provided feedback.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section I collected demographic information about the teachers. The demographic information included the type of teacher (regular education teacher, special education teacher, gifted & talented teacher, paraprofessional, other) the number of years the teacher has been employed in the current school district and the numbers of years the teacher has taught in public and/or private school and the grade level(s) the participant has taught. Section II consisted of 25 opinion statements regarding the use of assessment practices used to measure student achievement. This section incorporates a Likert-type scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree and Not Applicable) to measure the teachers’ responses. Section III provided respondents with the opportunity to add qualitative data regarding the approach to measuring student achievement.

RESULTS

Teachers from 14 public school districts throughout Georgia participated in the study. There were a total of 106 students enrolled in the courses surveyed during the study and 58.4 percent (n = 62) of the population participated in the study. The participants’ classroom teaching experience ranged from five months to 28 years. The data revealed that 61.3 percent (n = 38) identified themselves as regular education teachers. Twenty-two percent (n = 14) of the respondents identified themselves as special education teachers and 16 percent (n = 10) described themselves as other teachers, indicating they were teachers of gifted and talented students, career and technical students, substitute teachers and paraprofessionals. The data also revealed that 46.7 percent (n = 29) of the participants had 0 – 5 years of teaching experience, 16.1 percent (n = 10) had 6-10 years teaching experience, 11.3 percent (n = 7) had 11-15 years teaching experience, 9.6 percent (n = 6) had 16-20 years teaching experience, 8 percent (n = 5) had 21-25 teaching experience and 6.5 percent had more than 25 years teaching experience.

Section II of the instrument provided participants an opportunity to provide the researcher with qualitative data in an open-ended format. There were a total of 37 percent (n = 23) of the participants provided suggestions for the most effective assessment methods for K-12 public schools. The
researcher identified common assessment types suggested such as multiple assessment types, performance-based and alternative assessment types, computer-based assessment and informal assessment types. Several participants stated under this section that formal assessment, specifically the Georgia CRCT, and other written tests were not effective in measuring student achievement.

**DISCUSSION**

*Findings from Research Question One*

The analysis of Section II data of the survey revealed answers to research question I: What are the opinions of the participating general education educators regarding the most important assessment practices of student achievement in participant’s school district? Using the Measures of Central Tendencies, responses that appear numerically between 3 and 4 and that have smaller standard deviations revealed a unified favorable response to the survey questions participants’ responses to section II of the study. The data showed that all strata agreed that five of the 20 assessment types presented by the researchers were the most effective assessment types: Classroom assessment (Mean = 3.46, Median = 4, Mode = 4, Standard Deviation = .84), student portfolio (Mean = 3.14, Median = 3, Mode = 3, Standard Deviation = .90), oral report (Mean = 3.06, Median = 3, Mode = 3, Standard Deviation = .47), individual report (Mean 3.06, Median = 3, Mode = 3, Standard Deviation = .59), multiple assessment types (Mean 3.62, Median = 4, Mode = 4, Standard Deviation = .87). Those assessment types that were deemed not very effective in measuring student achievement by the participants are as follows: Tasks and projects (Mean = 1.77, Median = 2, Mode = 2, Standard Deviation = .79), Capstone Project (Mean = 1.20, Median = 0, Mode = 0, Standard Deviation = 1.49), Georgia Criterion Referenced Competency Test (Mean = 2.27, Median = 2, Mode = 3, Standard Deviation = 1.18).

*Findings from Research Question Two*

The analysis of Section II data of the survey revealed answers to research question II: Are there any differences in the opinions of participating general education teachers, special education teachers and other teachers regarding the most effective assessment practices for measuring student achievement? An analysis of the mean scores of respondents based on the type of teacher was compared by using a One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to determine if there was any significance difference between the three groups of respondents in the study. No significant difference was found among the three groups and their responses to the second research question (F(3, 61) =3.00, p > .05). The participants were consistent with their responses across the three groups.

**Conclusion**

Based on the findings of this study, this researcher is of the opinion that more research should be conducted to establish more standards for assessment of student achievement in K-12 public schools. In addition, more research should be conducted to include larger and more heterogeneous participants, to include teachers, school administrators and parents. Finally, assessment should be developed locally by educators and other pertinent stakeholders who are familiar with pedagogy and student needs in their local school district.

**REFERENCES**


