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Knowing the intentions, meaning and context of classroom assessment: A case study of Singaporean teacher's conception and practice

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ABSTRACT

With the articulation of new 'Holistic and Balanced Assessment' initiatives in Singaporean schools, a new standard of conceptualising and enacting classroom assessment is expected of Singaporean teachers. This paper draws on findings from a larger study of 'high-achieving' Singaporean teachers' deliberations and transactions of assessment activities. The use of case studies as a central methodology to investigate a contemporary phenomenon of education assessment extends the studies of conceptions and implementation of new classroom assessment practices in Anglophone and Western European countries. The findings from one of the 'high-achieving' case-study Singaporean teachers reveal that any quality assurance framework or guideline for evaluating teachers' assessment practices needs to be sensitive to their intentions, meaning and context of teaching.

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Several researchers have highlighted that teachers worldwide are facing an unprecedented challenge in grasping and introducing new classroom assessment practices at all stages of the educational system to raise students' academic achievements (Broadfoot et al., 1991; Mok, 2008; Pope, Green, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2009; Price, Rust, O'Donovan, & Handley, 2013). A prioritisation of 'teachers' competency' (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006) in helping teachers acquire a new 'assessment literacy' (DeLuca & Klinger, 2010; Price et al., 2013) is yet another example of the pervasive influence of the performativity agenda in the education system worldwide today (Ball, 2003; Ball et al., 2012). Spotlights on classroom assessment have intensified, particularly in countries in North America and Western Europe in recent years, as national and international test results become part of the political debates surrounding the need to raise the quality of education (Lang, Olson, Hansen, & Bunder, 1999). In countries like the USA and Germany, where the results of international comparative measures of educational achievement were seen as inadequate, policies have been put in place to invest in large-scale comparative research and to institute standardised testing regimes, in the hope of improving teaching and learning. The attempt at implementing any new classroom assessment practices in these countries has to be understood within the context of such issues.

In many Asian countries there are still on-going struggles to improve basic schooling and teaching infrastructures. There are

also contexts like Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan, whose students are already 'top of the class' in international comparative measures of educational achievement (McKinsey, 2007; World Economic Forum, 2009; OECD Newsroom, 2013). The relevant policy question is quite different for these countries than for the rest of Asia and indeed the world; these countries must consider the implications of these consistently 'good' results, and, more specifically, what kind of quality classroom assessment may be needed in the next decades without compromising the high standards that have been maintained so far. Such deep evaluative questions have already been noted by Kennedy et al. (2008); they cannot find their lineage from educational systems in Anglophone and Western European countries, which face their own issues. Yet, in all these different contexts, changes in how teachers conceptualise new classroom assessment seem to be expected and significant shifts between enacting 'old' and 'new' standards (Gardner et al., 2010) of quality classroom assessment practices must ensue.

Singaporean assessment initiatives: 'Holistic and Balanced Assessment'

Following a review of primary-school education in 2009, the Singapore government supported a key recommendation by the Primary School Review Committee (PERI) to address the overemphasis on testing and examination, particularly at lower primary levels. The Committee recommended that 'Holistic Assessment' that supports student learning be progressively introduced in all primary-school classrooms, starting with lower primary in 2011

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(PERI, 2009). At the same time, another Assessment Review Committee within the Ministry of Education (MOE) was convened to review and explore ways to refine the examination and assessment landscape across all other Singaporean schools. The recommendation for changes in assessment beyond primary schools proposed by the Committee involved helping secondary and junior college schools and teachers to consider the possibilities of 'Balanced Assessment', involving the judicious use of both 'Assessment for and of Learning' (AFL/AoL). However, recognising the robust primary and secondary education system, respected for its high standards, both committees concluded that the national standardised examinations, such as the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), should remain a key stage examination, ensuring that the 'national assessment framework continues to maintain high standards and ensure the acquisition of strong foundational knowledge' (PERI, 2009, p. 35). They noted that the national examination system articulates explicit curriculum goals and standards, and sets a defined benchmark for all pupils and teachers to work towards. This has helped students to meet minimum standards at each key stage level, while avoiding the huge disparities in educational standards across schools evident in other countries.

The introduction of education initiatives that support the use of assessment to enhance teaching and learning in the classroom is relatively late-coming considering the output of research and policy documents and research literature on classroom assessment that have emerged worldwide since the 1990s. One might speculate that such an introduction was carefully considered to gradually initiate changes in classroom assessment in Singaporean primary and secondary schools in the coming years. While Singaporean schools have inherited a colonial legacy of the English examination system, which has served the country well for over forty years, policy-makers and educators now have other priorities. The initiatives articulate a different order of worth and value of 'holistic education' that should help students to be more confident, curious and yet still retain the aspiration to succeed academically (MOE, 2005; Ng, 2008; Heng, 2011). An important issue for implementation such a change is whether we adequately understand teachers' negotiations of different goals of education, and enact practices within classrooms that resonate with the intent of the currently espoused student-centric initiatives, while the national examination system is still in place. This paper emphasises the importance of understanding teachers' knowledge within the context of them being the primary agency of change in classroom assessment practices; how their negotiation of different mediating influences determines and perhaps limits the quality of classroom assessment practices.

Conceptual framework: knowing teachers' conceptions and practices

A particular class of research on teachers' knowledge, which has become prominent since the 1990s through to recent years, uses the term *teachers' conceptions* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Eisner, 2002; Tan, 2012) as the focus of study of teachers' knowledge. According to Thompson (1992, p. 130), conceptions are 'general mental structures, encompassing beliefs, meanings and concepts'. I use the word 'conception' as a most inclusive starting point that takes into consideration ways of knowing teachers' beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, values and any other possible constructs that they deem useful to describe their classroom practices. Such an all-encompassing way of defining conception is based in part on a larger body of psychological research on the theory of action, intentions, agency and its extension to the philosophy of the mind (Davidson, 1980; Bratman, 1987; Pacherie, 2008). This suggests that what teachers believe and intend, the amount of control they have or perceive they have, and the norms

Box 1. Categories of questions on classroom assessment practice.

Cultural/societal expectations: What (assessment) practices do I value and believe in?

Political forces: What (assessment) practices do Ministry officials and school leaders advocate/not advocate?

Empirical findings: Which (assessment) practices can be shown to be most effective in promoting teaching and learning?

Pragmatic solutions: What (assessment) practices work best (or do not work) for me?

Conceptual clarities: What is (assessment) practice? What are its essential elements?

of their social environment, interact to shape the types of thinking or actions they carry out in the classroom.

A *practice* is the carrying out of consequences on the basis of judgements of likelihood and predictions about the effects of different courses of action (Schutz, 1970). This suggests that a *classroom practice* requires a frame of reference going beyond identifying action on the part of the observer in the classroom to that of the teachers' intentions. My understanding of 'practice' is thus not a methodical, rule-governed skill that can first be taught 'in theory' and then applied and easily observed in the classroom. Instead, it can only be acquired by an individual who, in the course of being initiated into a particular practice, comes to understand that what he/she is doing is unavoidably directed towards the pursuit of some 'good' that is not related to the satisfaction of his/her own immediate needs and desires, but is internal to the practice itself (MacIntyre, 2007). It is about a *practical reasoning* rooted in a natural human capacity 'to do the right thing in the right place at the right time in the right way' (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 141). Practical reasoning of teachers is thus directed towards taking principled action in their own classrooms (Gauthier, 1963; Atkin, 1992; Eisner, 2002). However, in terms of locating the 'goodness' within classroom practice, it does not necessarily physically reside mainly in the classroom or an observable environment. Alexander (1992) proposed that any 'good' classroom practices actually lie within a complex decision-making space of intersection of considerations for a teacher (see Text Box 1).

Alexander (1992) proposed that these questions discriminate the 'good' in what constitutes 'practices' for different teachers. The fact that there are several categories of question about what classroom assessment practice entails can cause teachers to be confronted by numerous, often conflicting goals. I propose that the diagram (see Fig. 1) is a useful conceptual framework for my research interest in studying what teachers are conceptualising and practising in terms of 'good' classroom assessment:

Such a bifocal framework provides a metaphorical lens for *knowing* through seeing and hearing possibly evolving teachers' conceptions and practices of classroom assessment. Such a lens of research does not attempt to capture everything a teacher does and think in the classroom. Rather it attempts to bring about an understanding of a teacher's practical reasoning or intention of conception and practice. The notion of intention lies at the intersection of teachers' conceptions and practices. It is a central element in the web of possible dialectical relationships of conceptions and practices used to characterise practical decision-making and the various kinds of action that belong to a particular set of conceptions and practices (Pacherie, 2008; Blackler & Regan, 2009; Gherardi, 2009). The methodological goal and challenge is therefore to access how their classroom assessment conceptions and practices are constructed, in relation to their day-to-day classroom teaching.

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