The flow of learning assessment methodologies; lessons from the citizen-led assessment approach in Africa

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Abstract

Measuring learning outcomes has long been associated with the global North and flow linearly to the Global South. According to Brookings Institute (2016), assessment methodologies, approaches, and tools in the global south have borrowed mainly from the global North, where systems are presumably developed. In other cases, national systems are relied upon to measure learning and determine program effectiveness where learning interventions happen. The citizen-led approach started in 2005 in South Asia when India's largest non-governmental organisation (Pratham) conducted an assessment of learning in 600 plus districts in rural India. The study was later christened the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). This Citizen Led approach involving citizens' use to assess children in basic reading and numeracy later spread across the global South in Africa, South Asia, and Central America. A Network of organizations and programs implementing these assessments was formed in 2015 named the PAL Network. The horizontal flow by adapting and adopting this methodology has been evident in Africa. However, questions arise on the extent of this flow, patterns, and the motivations for adopting and adapting the Citizen led approaches (for assessment and in some cases interventions) in Africa among countries and organizations that are non-members of the PAL Network.

Furthermore, there is limited knowledge of these approaches' utility in responding to the local assessment needs and program delivery is worth interrogating. Besides, the enabler and the barriers to this horizontal flow of assessment approaches are another glaring knowledge gap. In an attempt to respond to these questions, PAL Network conducted a global mapping study on the spread and utilisation of the citizen led approaches in non-member organisations in both PAL Network countries and non-network member countries. This paper presents the findings of the global mapping study and the utility of Citizen-led assessments in non-PAL Network member organizations in Africa. The paper reveals that global south methodologies for learning assessment, such as the citizen-led approaches, flow horizontally. Furthermore, the approaches flow for different purposes and take different forms of adoption and adaptation.

Keywords: learning assessment, methodologies, and citizen led assessment

1.0 Introduction

Since the turn of the century, the world endorsed the Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All (EFA), the focus on the assessment for all picked up. Previously, education measurement in developing economies was focused on assessment of learning characterized by high stake series of examinations for placement and certification. The over dominant learning assessments have long been associated with reduced retention rate heavily present with grade repetition, reduced retention rates, and overall system wastage. In some countries such as Kenya, as of 2012, the transition to secondary stood at a paltry 56%, wasting off over 400,000 children who could not transit in secondary schools. In Nigeria, a leading country in the proportion of the out-of-school children, transition into secondary school, stood at 60%. However, assessments play a significant role in placement and eligibility for access to secondary schools. Arguments against these assessments of learning that are summative and high stakes have been on the educational radar for close to decades, with criticisms leveled against the systems' lateness to detect the learning crisis as projected by the World Bank (2018) christened as the learning poverty. Efforts towards formative assessments either as alternatives or complementary to improving instructional pedagogy, system improvement and reduction of wastage have gained traction. Evidence now abounds on the methodologies, place, designs, approaches, and the utility of

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the assessments for learning to improve the EFA outcomes. This evidence points to the role formative assessments (classroom-based) play in providing targeted instruction, increasing motivation for learning, and optimizing the learning resources.

2.0 The assessment for learning practice

Even as the policy landscape sees an increased uptake for assessments for learning, the definition and the implication on practice continue to receive mixed reactions. Swaffield (2011) argues that the policy definition still portrays glaring gaps in confusing practice. Borrowing from the example of England, evidence reveals the difficulties in the definitions of the timescale, protagonists, beneficiaries, students' role, the relationship between student and teacher, and the centrality of learning to the process. This reveals the difficulty instructors face in designing appropriate assessments for learning, diving their utility further.

Bennett (2011) had a similar view of the complexities in using assessment scores for learning. Arguing that evidence points to the unidirectional relationship, the practice revealed otherwise, complicating the utility and leaving learning instructors always in a dilemma on using the test scores for their work. However, this study provides a possible cure, one embedded in the design of the assessments. To realize maximum benefit from formative assessment, new development should focus on conceptualising well-specified approaches built around process and methodology rooted within specific content domains. Those conceptualisations should incorporate fundamental measurement principles that encourage teachers and students to recognise the assessment's inferential nature. The conceptualisations should also allow for the substantial time and professional support needed if the vast majority of teachers become proficient users of formative assessment. Finally, formative approaches should be conceptualised as part of a comprehensive system in which all components work together to facilitate learning for the most significant benefit.

The missing link in the assessment and learning practice has elicited similar interest in the last decade. Baird, Andrich, Hopfenbeck and Stobart (2017) argue that the theoretical frameworks for the two are worlds apart, often developed in isolation resulting in the reduced utility of the assessment scores in improving learning outcomes. This assertion can, however, be contested considering the non-linear nature of using the assessment scores. Secondly, the entire design of teacher preparation is based on the assessment and the learning praxis.

Borrowing on developed economies development pathway, Wei Shin Leong & Kelvin Tan (2014) look at Singapore's developments around assessment for learning for the entrenchment of 'assessment' becoming an institutional authority of standards, teaching (performativity) and classroom learning. Therefore, the education system's stability and functionality would be premised on vigorous internal checks made possible through continuous feedback loops and checks such as formative assessment.

The CLAs focus on the reading domain with benchmarks on reading for fluency and comprehension, which has received global recognition. Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp and Jenkins (2001) argue for the space of fluency in reading as a foundational skill in its dual purpose as a utility skill and as a base for beyond basic skills. It follows that pseudo indicators of measurement would have to be replaced with hard indicators of learning through rigourous generation of that evidence.

Good III, Simmons and Kame'enui (2001) argue that the assessments' liberalization plays a critical role in deepening education accountability. To this study, the formative assessments must balance between prevention-oriented assessment and intervention system designed. This raises a fundamental question on the inherent risk occasioned in the conflict arising from the assessor and the implementer of the intervention.

Monroy and González-Geraldo (2018) establish the difficulty in using test scores alone to describe the children's learning. Arguing that test results without context mean little if the teachers need to utilise the results, they argue for a co-creation model where results are as good as the process. This echoes Oxfam's

(2018) findings, who argue that data outcomes are as important as the data generation process. This, therefore, explains the reason for a co-creation model in determining the constructs, measures, indicators, and types of data to collect and the disaggregation of the same data.

Observing the classroom practices where benchmarks lack and teachers struggle to meaningfully use the assessment for learning frameworks and scores in improving instruction compounds the challenge. Marshall and Drummond (2006) establish that teachers' beliefs are even more central than skills in adopting the assessments for action. This would help explain the low uptake of the assessments for learning, even where literature is bountiful on the case for their use.

In Cyprus's case, the blend of the formative and summative assessments is well articulated in policy and practice. According to Karagiorgi and Petridou (2019), this blend of the longitudinal national Programme for Functional Literacy (PfL) in Cyprus resembles a primarily formative testing process, oriented towards 'assessment for learning' makes it possible to identify the learners at risk and therefore build of remedial strategies to help children acquire required skills and navigate complex skills later on. This evidence is missing in many jurisdictions where the formative and the summative assessments are parallel in design, implementation and utility of the data.

The socio-cultural contexts of jurisdiction have also opened another frontier of challenges facing the utility of the formative assessments in the school setting. This challenge traverses geographies. For instance, Crossouard (2009) argues that the designs of policy around formative assessments fail to ensure the contexts and, in return failing to pay more explicit attention to the social positioning of teachers and learners, as well as amongst learners themselves, and ensuring that power relations are not glossed over in discussions of assessment regimes. This could explain the need to rethink the complexities of designing classroom activities that support students' critical engagement and participation in different practice communities.

Tobin, Nugroho and Lietz (2016) also argue for the duality of purpose for the large-scale assessments, monitoring education quality and equity purposes followed by accountability purposes. This duality brings a design and implementation challenge where it is hard to strike a balance. Indeed, whereas the quality of assessment programmes facilitate impact, financial constraints and uncertainty, and weak assessment bodies, hinder the impact of LSAs on education policy. This could help explain the difficulties in applying the LSAs in the classroom setting where individual estimates are difficult to obtain, reducing utility to the policy level.

However, the utility of these LSAs in influencing public policy in education cannot be understated. Evidence across the globe points to the increased role that LSAs play in policy spaces. Schmidt and Burroughs (2016) argue that assessment in themselves should not be seen as the policy model but rather the policy informing process, especially when they complement policy effort. This is critical considering that policy space may be guarded closely.

Across the global south such as Chile, this utility of LSAs informing policy has been underscored. Cox and Meckes (2016) establish that LSAs findings are leveraged for purposes in law-making, and how the concepts and frameworks of specific ILSAs were integrated into crucial normative policy instruments, particularly curriculum standards and the national assessment framework and instruments. This is important considering that the use of data and criteria from international assessments varies in ambits and depth of impact, according to the more extensive features of the political context in which educational policies are embedded.

It is also evident that ILSAs have unintended consequences. Their design and implementation and the data they yield. However, the influences on educational policy are complex and interwoven. Johansson (2016 argues that it is not clear-cut whether effects such as converging curricular are, necessarily, direct consequences of large-scale assessments. Further, it is suggested that a beneficial consequence of large-scale assessment is the infrastructure they provide for studies in the social sciences, although caution must be applied to causal claims, in

particular, because of the cross-sectional design of the assessments.

The uptake of large-scale assessment in the last two decades shows the prominence of measurements in designing and implementing the education policy landscape. The large scale assessments targeting masses and taking a transnational assessment have seen diffusion of the approaches characterized by adoption and adaptation of the frameworks, purposes, designs, implementation protocols, and the interpretation of the assessment scores. Lietz and Tobin (2016) argue that the evolution of the assessments in almost half a century reflects horizontal diffusion reaching more than 70% of the countries and influencing education policy and practice in the countries and on a transnational scale. This corresponds to the innovation and information flow models that see horizontal movements as occasioned by proximity and, therefore contextually relevant, cheaper in adoption even where modifications are needed owing to the similarities in the issues and educational problems.

3.0 Evolution and uptake of the Citizen Led Assessments

Non-state actors since 2005 have repackaged the social accountability frameworks in

4.0 Findings from the global mapping study

An analysis of the mapping reveals three distinct uses for the CLAs in Africa.

1) Assessment for accountability

The citizen led assessment was tried in the Republic of Guinea Bissau in West Africa. There was no program attached to this assessment. However, this was a one-off assessment that followed through all the assessment protocols and adapted the assessment from Mali and Senegal who are members of the PAL Network. The assessment was aligned with the national curriculum.

2) Assessment for action (Program Design)

In several jurisdictions, the assessments were tied to specific interventions. In these contexts, adopting the level-based learning interventions such as Teaching at the Right Level meant that the assessment component was taken up by default. Usually, assessment is the first step in the level based remedial teaching. This helps to

education by deepening participation in measuring learning outcomes. Moving from the extreme continuum of pseudo indicators of learning to an active participation arena, civil society organizations in the global south have increased their participation in monitoring EFA goals and now the SDGs.

The Citizen–Led Assessment (CLA) approach was born in India in 2005 when Pratham, one of India's largest NGOs, designed an innovative approach to assessing all children's foundational reading and numeracy abilities, regardless of their schooling status. This assessment is the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) in India. Over the past 15 years, the ASER tools and approaches have been borrowed and adapted by many countries across the Global South. CLAs evolved organically from this approach, spurred by the interest of citizens who understood the importance of obtaining reliable data on children's foundational learning that could build awareness and inform policy and practice. After more than four years of anecdotal conversations about the spread of the CLA approach, PAL Network undertook a mapping study in 2018 to establish where the 'ASER' testing tools are being used, by whom and for what purpose.

group children before the selection of the appropriate activities for instruction and learning. Among the countries that adopted this approach were Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia. Although the countries adopted the Teaching at the Right Level method from India, the assessments were adapted from the neighbouring PAL Network countries. Furthermore, crisis contexts such as Niger and Nigeria also adopted the teaching at the Right Level and adapted the assessments fir the same purpose as above.

3) Program Evaluation

Assessment for evaluation of the existing intervention was the most common use across the continent. With the increased demand for specific metrics of determining the program effectiveness for classroom-based intervention, the use of CLAs was seen as timely. The programs utilised CLAs at the periodic points of baseline, midline and program endlines.

The flow of the CLAs was both through adoption and adaptation

The findings reveal a two-pathway flow of the citizen led assessments in Africa. The assessments were taken on the "as was basis"- adoption and adjustment – adaptation to the design, and frameworks.

1) Adoption pathway

Adaptation follows where the off-shelf learning assessments are not suitable for the curriculum as well as the language in focus. This was common in the first instance when CLAs first reached Africa in late 2000s. The assessments used in the action programs have largely been adopted where there is language similarity such as French-speaking in West Africa and in-country assessments existed such as Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria and Mozambique. It was the commonest pathway of citizen led assessments across Africa.

2) A case of adaptation

The adaptation pattern involves adjusting the tests to suit the contexts in most cases aligning with the national curricula. It is also common in countries where the tools did not originally exist. In the case of Guinea Bissau, the assessments had to be adapted, meaning a long process of developing the frameworks, setting up test development teams, trialing and field pilots before the assessments could be implemented. In other countries where programs used CLAs for program evaluations, adjustments to the assessments were carried out that increased the number of assessment items and increased difficulty. However, the domains were not adjusted. Similarly, the assessments did not go beyond literacy and numeracy. For instance, the Girls Education Challenge that used the CLAs in Kenya developed versions that were pegged on grade five, yet they retained the tests' framework where the domains of reading for fluency and comprehension were the focus.

Factors that accounted for the Adoption/Adaptation decision

1) Context

The flow of the methodologies shows a horizontal move around geographies and languages. Countries and programs near the existing CLAs are more likely to adopt the existing assessments without any modification. Adoption is more evident in countries where education systems are similar and languages of instruction monolingual in foundational learning. The adaptation was more across borders where similarity of systems and languages of instruction were different.

2) CLAS were adopted and adapted where there was an immediate need

The flow of the assessment was needs based. For instance, assessments for accountability got less traction only happening in Guinea Bissau. However, the uptake of the CLAs was more prominent where programs were to be initiated or required evaluation. In fact, CLAs were more populations among programs that targeted learning outcomes as program focus. This was evident in programs such as Girls Education Challenge that had specific learning outcome parameters. In this case, the need drove the users to use the CLAs. In some cases, program designers and grants provided leads for the CLAs increasing the users' uptake. This can explain why the CLAs did not flow into other programs

3) CLAS were considered cost-effective

The users cited costs as one reason for the adoption of the existing CLAs. This was evident in in-country uptake, where users felt that the over ten steps needed in designing and implementing CLAs made it difficult for them. For small programs that did not need the program, it was not cost-effective to set up test development teams, develop frameworks and pilot the assessments before using them. The infrastructure for such was seen to be a considerable investment that would never be a program priority.

4) CLAs were considered time-efficient Time at hand

In both adoption and adaptation, time was of the essence. For both program design and evaluation, users felt that the use of the CLAs as ready-made protocols coincided with the short times available. Indeed the experience of designing and implementing assessments is one that requires time and effort to go through the over ten steps. This would not suffice for programs with limited time to design interventions and whose focus was not assessments only.

5.0 Conclusion

The utility of the CLAs took two pathways of adoption and adaptation. This was made possible through the flexible design of the CLAs that make it possible for CLAs to be applied in other contexts and are designed for large age groups (6-16 years). This made it possible for users to quickly adopt without making significant adjustments even where adaptation was required. This explains the need for designing for large scale, as was the case in the design of CLAs. CLAs benefitted from this broad and large-scale design that makes transferability of the approach in different contexts.

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