

A CASE STUDY ON THE EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN ENHANCING LEARNING CAPACITIES OF STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Muhammad Asim
Lecturer
Department of Education
University of Karachi

ABSTRACT

The educational reform is measured in term of the better students learning and their cognitive outcomes. Majority of the school reforms are the representative of information, interest, and ideology of school administrative hierarchy. Therefore, these reforms or innovations are failed to produce desirable outcome in the implementation phase. The aim of this case-study research is to explore why educational reforms are failed in enhancing of students' learning in the context of Pakistan. This case-study research evaluates the whole reform beginning to the end and identifies the different reasons from the opinions of students, teachers and management.

INTRODUCTION

The ultimate aim of the educational reform is seen and measured in term of the better students learning and their cognitive outcomes. These reforms are brought for the students because, "Students are the producers of school outcomes" (Levin, 2000, p.1). If any reform does not produce the better students' outcomes, then it is perceived that it is not an effective reform, and school management strives for another idea. In the local context of Pakistan, in a private English Medium school, 'Assessment of English language via Portfolio' as reform has been lounged, but unfortunately this idea was failed, and it impacted teachers, students, parents and school management who contributed their role for its success.

The aim of this small-scale research is to highlight those factors which hindered this reform in better assessment practices, and draws some implications for the better practices in the future.

Statement of the Problem

In the context of Pakistan, English, Urdu and Sindhi are taught as subject rather than as languages. In a research context, secondary English coordinator had learnt and introduced "Portfolio Assessment" scheme for the 7th and 8th standards with the permission of school authorities. The aim of this new implementation was to enhance English language skills parallel with changing the traditional practices of assessment. It was implemented by the inspiration from a local school in the same context; therefore, it was expected from this reform to produce good teaching and learning outcomes in this school as well. Few workshops by coordinator on portfolio assessment for the teachers had been conducted with greater stress of immediate implication inside the classroom. The immediate implementation of this innovation without any

pilot study impacted learning practices and few excellent portfolios were prepared by the very few students only. On other hand 20 % weigh of marks were assigned from the total to the teachers to their arbitration while assessing portfolios. This idea was totally new for the students, so their results of first semester were dropped and students and their parents resisted for it. Ultimately, the portfolio assessment has been discarded in second semester and conventional practices were welcome again.

“Change may be described as the adoption of an innovation, where the ultimate goal is to improve outcomes through an alteration of practices” (Credaro, 2000, p.11). It shows that change is a continuous process of practicing an innovation for sustaining it for improvement ultimately, but not as an event to experience it once (Fullan, 2001) and then strive for another. In schools, “Change strategies typically seize upon some dimensions such as teacher attitude or competence to supposedly account for past failure” (Doyle and Ponder 1978, p.1) and success. In this regard playing the change game is an opportunity for the educators to learn about planning, and implementing the change process and how to sustain it for better students’ achievement specifically, and their school improvement broadly.

As Fullan (2001) argues that each innovation has it implementation dip; it means after implementing any innovation it progress initially goes-down and then goes-up. It can be further inferred from the situation above-stated that, “Students may also resist for the effective reform when drastic changes are made in curriculum and assessment...” (WestEd, 2002, p. 24); it was clear that students were not adequately informed and prepared for the portfolio assessment (Dilworth et al., 1995). Moreover, 20 % marks were assigned to the teachers’ own arbitration was a serious question for the fair, valid and reliable assessment (Dufour, 2001). For example, teachers may allocate higher marks in portfolios to the failures or low marks achievers. Since, secondary students, “Have well developed ideas about fairness in classroom about appropriate assessment practices and other important aspects of school life” (Levin, 2000, Pp. 158-159), and teachers may unaware about how to cope this problem effectively.

No doubt it may raise the students learning interest, but teachers may unaware what to do next in this blurred situation? The reform effort may not be sustained unless the clarity and consistent support is missing (Lynn, 1995) to the teachers, and it made teachers discomfited. Fullan (1994) cited Rowley (1992) as “Confusion and heated debate is inevitably result form the lack of clear definition and from the overload of new program” (Para 12), and gradually this reform started to lose its charm among students, teachers and school administration.

Fullan (1994) and Deming (2000) advocate for sustaining the reforming efforts for the long-term of school planning. However, the school management discarded portfolio assessment scheme without analyzing the current picture of teaching and learning. Weiss (1995) argues this reform as the top-to-bottom approach reforms, which are empty from the local interest, ideology and information and are not institutionalized properly. While analyzing the situation it is explicit that this reform was a kind of imposition and could not institutionalized due to lacking of teachers' and students' interest, ideology and information. Hence it was easy to eliminate portfolio assessment for school management due to not having argument from teachers, students and parents.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This small-scale case study research is exploratory in nature and has conducted under the qualitative paradigm of research.” A form of qualitative descriptive research, ... [case] study looks intensively at an individual or small participants' pool, drawing conclusion about the participants or group only in that specific context” (Becker et al, 1997, p.1). A community school with rich of resources had identified as research sample purposively. Out of eight female teachers in English department in a school, three female teachers had identified as purpose research sample, who had teaching responsibilities of English in all 7th and 8th classes, were interviewed and observed. One teacher in the sample had additional responsibility of coordinator for class 8th and was the part of decision making regarding new assessment policy. Additionally, 40 students with equal proportion of gender 20 males and 20 females from 7th and 8th standards were also identified by the researcher on the basis of random sampling from the total of different sections as a sample. Samples students were interviewed and their portfolios were used for the data analysis with the prior consent of parents and principal of the school. The aim of selecting this large sample was to explore the perspective of different stakeholders from management, teachers and students.

The fair agreement has been made with research participants and no part of research have concealed with any research participant. The interviewed data have transcribed and findings are being reported in thematic manners. The focus of interview was exploring the portfolio assessment implication and how this procedure can be better for future practices. There were total six teaching periods of duration of forty minutes were observed with respect to students and teacher interaction about portfolio for language teaching and learning. For the data analysis common and different point of views were analyzed under the major theme. Thus, findings are bearing the point of view of management, students and teachers and their macro analysis.

RESEARCG FINDINGS

Under this major theme the missing elements of implication phase will be reported as:

Top-down reform imposition

“I know what teacher does in the class; she brought the things (Portfolio) which I never learned before. Why we did this? And what is the purpose? I realize Portfolio does not support us in external examination next year. Then why we have done that which was discarded in the second term”

(A boy student of Class 8th)

“Although teacher asks us to prepare portfolio, but I enjoyed making of it and collecting that information which is closed to my interest together was fun. But I could not understand why teacher immediately started it and ended it in second term (A girl student of Class 8th)

“I realize being a part of management we have initiated good practice in our school. We have failed to produce what we have thought in planning phase. It was a good effort from management side but I realize that whole idea could not click” (English Coordinator of Class 8th).

“The whole idea of portfolio assessment is good, but the needs and difficulties faced by the teacher was not given due consideration. Majority of the English teachers were initially amazed that why change in existing assessment policy being introduced” (English teacher of Class 7th)

It can be inferred that clarity of the purpose for utilizing portfolios in foreign language learning process is not properly negotiated at all levels. This reform was planned and implemented according to the apex authorities' interest, and the interest, ideology and information of teachers and students (Weiss, 1995) about the reform were not taken into account at all in implementation phase. Fullan (1994) argues this situation as, “Top-down reforms are restructuring reform” (P.17) in nature, “Because of its imposition and seeming incompatibility with preferred instructional approaches in [classes] ...conflict increased sharply” (P. 19) between management interest at the top level and teaching and learning interest at classroom level. These diverse opinions are concurrent on the fact that the main stakeholders benefiting from the reforms were not adequately prepared for the drastic change made in existing policies. Therefore, it can be concluded that positive change was not observed at large-scale by this reform as it was expected.

Lack of Support and No Follow-up

“To be honest, I realized that we knew little about how to use portfolio. We are not sufficiently prepared for this type of teaching and learning. Feedback after classroom observation was missing” (English teacher of Class 8th)”

“No support for the fresh teacher like me had been provided, except workshops. This was very difficult for me, even now as well. We worked of our own without peer support. (English teacher of Class 7th)

“To promote learning of high intellectual quality [of students], a school must build the capacity of its staff to work well as a unit” (Lynn, 1995, p.1) and should provide continuous support in this regard. It can be inferred that teachers were partially prepared for the long-term program but the aspects of continuous support and follow-up were not taken into consideration seriously by the management. It can be inferred that teachers’ isolation and no peer support was also missing for sustaining this reform in long term policy. Support and evaluation help teachers, students and school management to adapt flexibility of how new changes should be made with respect to teaching and learning needs, and how future practice could be refined upon the basis of current practices (Dilworth et al., 1995). However, in this case portfolio assessment had discarded without any evaluation about missing of required support and follow-up. Therefore, the desired change could not achieve and all efforts were in vein.

Valid and Reliable Assessment Criteria of Portfolio Assessment was Not Negotiated to All

“Portfolio assessment is very difficult from teaching perspective and management did not see What we have done with our students on the name of portfolio assessment (English Coordinator of Class 8th).

“Portfolio was the good strategy of teaching, but it was immediately ended by the school management without understanding of this fact what would be happen to the current portfolio of students” (English teacher of Class 8th)

“Proper coordination among teachers was missing. No one has ever raised question about the assessment of portfolio that is why it become troublesome at the end of first semester (English teacher of Class 7th).

It can be inferred that existing policy of current assessment was not chalk-out prior to the implementation phase of the reform. It is evidenced from the opinions that the whole scenario posed the serious question about valid and reliable assessment of students during the teaching and learning processes. It was observed by the researcher that teacher had assigned higher marks to the low quality portfolios to pass their students with good grades. It can be realized that this type of assessment was totally new in the school. It is also evidence from the opinions that school management did not have any clear policy about how to execute the new assessment scheme along with the old assessment policy. This situation also highlights the aspect that parents would not have any clear understanding about the learning progress of their wards. Therefore, parents did not resist about the abrupt elimination of this innovation.

Immediate Wrap out of Reform produced Trust Deficit About New Innovation

“Portfolio assessment is very innovative idea; however, this initiative has rolled back immediately. Therefore, purpose, aims and objectives of this reform remain vague to the teachers, students, parents and management as well. This situation dissatisfied me to some extent and I felt the same in the students. (English Coordinator of Class 8th).

“From beginning to the end the portfolio assessment remained mystery for the teachers and students. I realize that neither we were prepared for this type of assessment nor we implemented it properly. Once again teacher and students even not informed when the assessment policy was changed. (English teacher of Class 7th).

I could not understand that why we were stopped to prepare portfolios in second semester. I think I can prepare [portfolio] better this time. (A boy student of Class 8th)

It can be inferred from the above responses that immediate roll back of the program left many question behind it. It can further be inferred that immediate wrap out of reform had made whole situation fuzzy for all the stakeholders whether teacher, students or school management. It is also evidence from the responses that particularly students and teachers would not been satisfy from this decision. Moreover, the whole idea is implemented with vague and end with vague. It is evident from responses that this drastic change dissatisfied teachers and students. Finally, it can also be inferred from the responses of teachers that immediate roll-back of this reform was not an appropriate decision from the perspective of the teachers and students. If this innovation continues for the next time better results can be obtained.

DISCUSSION

Being among the first few schools which introduced reform in their existing policy in assessment, things did not function smoothly both in the formulation and in the implementation phase of the policy (Janjua, 2008). Sequencing of the reform created serious problem for current policy of assessment. The positive impact of portfolio assessment was very little visible in the transactional phase. Therefore, the whole idea was immediately roll-back by the school management.

The novel idea of making portfolios by the students with respect to their language interest was completely new in the local context. On the other hand, it was also very difficult for the teachers to assess the creativity of the students in foreign language while understanding the aptitude, interest and desires of every student as unique individual in the classroom. It is very difficult for novice teachers either trained or untrained to measure the learning abilities of all

students without consultation of veteran teachers who had already taught these students in earlier years. Owing to not having the proper coordination among novice and veteran teachers, the whole idea of portfolio assessment could not grasp its roots and expected outcomes were not visible.

Absence of effective evaluation and proper monitoring system could be another reason for the failure of this reform. It can also be inferred that with proper planning and implementing the evaluation phases are not as much visible as it should be in this reforming efforts. Without an effective evaluation and monitoring system, any reform cannot be neither succeeded nor sustained. It is clear that school management did not have any clear policy about how to absorb the new innovation in the existing scheme of assessment. While analyzing the statements it can also be realized that portfolios were eliminated without considering the efforts made by the students, parents and teachers.

This reform was introduced via decentralization where all important stakeholders were not fully prepared about how to benefits from this innovation for the long-term. This virtual neglect of important stakeholders has created the communication gap amid school authorities, departmental heads, subject teachers, students and parents. This research is proposing the model [See appendix] to understand the whole reform procedure in local system while borrowing the idea of Weiss (1995) i.e. interest, ideology and ideology only. This model describes the general situation of top-down reform implementation in a research context. Reforms are generally implemented in Pakistan, in schools from the top to bottom for restructuring (As shown in model, see appendix), so the discrepancy in interest, ideology and information at various levels is highly visible (As shown in model, see appendix). This model clearly shows differences in the hierarchy at various levels. It also shows reforms are introduced and implement for the better teaching and learning practices, but often these reforms do not put the interest, ideology and information of teachers and students in the planning stage; however, top level interests and ideologies are transmitted to their sub-levels (As shown in the model, see appendix). So reform efforts remain at superficial level and do not completely institutionalize by the teachers and students as main implementers or benefactors. Therefore, gap remains between Principal and head of department, expands with teachers, and more widens with students; thus reform cannot practice with sustainability. This model also highlights the issues and concerns of high level and middle management authority and reflects communication gaps from higher order authorities or teachers and students. The situation becomes more critical when teachers report reform differently and it is presented through the filter of department heads to hierarchy of the school.

Once again due to communication gap these reports were often fail to depict the actual situation to hierarchy of the school. The main reason of this gap can be the hierarchy and “Simply paying lip services to the words ... [about Reform] without appropriate action will give a message of superficiality and commitment to the status quo” (. Levin, 2001, p.22). Therefore, the conflict amid interest, ideology and information (Weiss, 1995) of teachers and students with school higher and middle order management remain high. In this situation, teacher and students have the authority either accept or reject the reform efforts.

IMPLICATIONS

“Educational change [reform] is technically simple and socially complex” (Fullan, 2001). Simple reforms are implemented in the social complex situation. Although portfolio assessment got the good momentum at the initial stage due to apex interest, but latter it could not be sustained due to above-mentioned reasons. This research would recommend following points if this innovation is re-implemented:

- Fullan (1994) argued for the consensus of the top and bottom level reformers. Before implementing portfolio assessment again, school Principal, Department heads and teachers collectively should ponder on whether this reform will match with contextual and learners needs or not? How this sophisticated teaching and learning approach can best fit in school system with existing ground realities? This situation can bridge the gaps between the interest, ideology and information (Weiss, 1995) about any reform and identify the differences between school management and the teachers.
- The portfolio assessment program should be run as pilot study program and then at large scale implementation should be made if it caters the students’ needs of English learning.
- Though, teachers previously had worked in isolation, now “Co-Planning, Co-Teaching and Conferencing” are suggested for the teachers involved in the project.
- This research also suggests the mentoring at initial level by the experts to the language teachers for providing necessary support about portfolio assessment and how to cope the challenges in this regard.
- Series of workshops for the teachers about the portfolio assessment is suggested at pre-intervention level, intervention level and post intervention level. The series of workshops should also incorporate teachers’ previous experiences, but also provide follow-up for the further practices and monitor the teacher and student learning progress.

- The relevant books and material about portfolio assessment should also provide to the teachers for further development.
- The issues of tough teaching schedule of teachers, workload and lack of motivation are inevitable. Hence by providing some release time, and appreciation certificates as an incentive of professional learning the motivation of teachers can be raised for this program.
- A workshop for students and parents is also recommended for the motivation, guidance about how portfolios are prepared and developed can be helpful in this regard.

CONCLUSION

The ultimate aim of any reform is seen in term of student cognitive outcomes, because students are the primary producers of school. Reform effort could be devastated if new assessment system is executed in the traditional mode; it strictly demands teachers to follow and sustain their practices. Effective reforms are the sophisticated blend of the Top-Down and Bottom-Up strategies, and continuous monitoring and evaluation are necessary parts of this kind of reforms. Finally,

Effective planning for school-wide change takes time, team working and a strong belief that the goal is achievable. Create momentum early so the process does not lose steam. Build support through constant communication, positive attitude and anticipating problems. Be aware of potential obstacles and think about how to address them (WestEd, 2002, p. 27).

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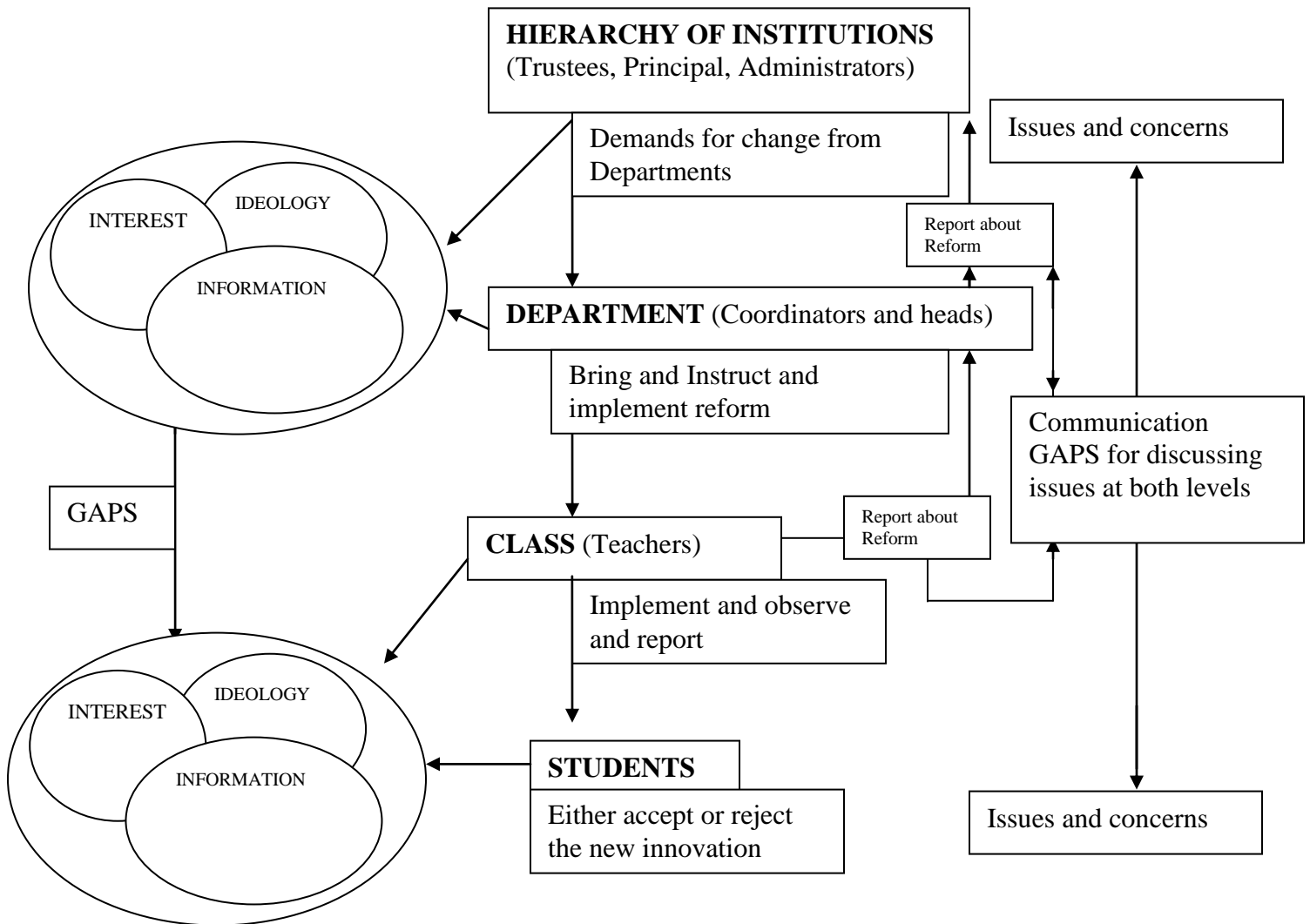
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APPENDIX



This working model has been designed to understand the hierarchy in educational reform. It has been proposed for understanding the complexities involved in reform implementation process.