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# An investigation into authentic assessment practices of social studies teachers in the senior high schools (SHSs) in Ghana

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## Abstract

Influences of teachers' authentic assessment on their classroom practices will be paramount to both teachers' students if implemented effectively in the Social Studies classroom. The study used a descriptive case study design. Both the schools and teachers' were simple randomly selected from fifty seven (57) government assisted Senior High Schools (SHSs) in the Central Region of Ghana. The study used ten (10) senior high schools and twenty (20) teachers'. Semi structured interview was the main instruments used for data collection. The research found out that for improvements to be made on teacher knowledge and ability and the policies and practices of authentic assessment in schools, teachers, students, parents and policymakers value and see the potential for authentic assessment to improve teaching and learning, it will continue to be under-emphasized, undervalued and poorly used.. It recommended that the teaching universities in Ghana should broaden their scope on the teaching of assessment to incorporate authentic assessment.

## 1. Introduction

Assessment is central to teaching and learning. Assessment information is needed to make informed decisions regarding students' learning abilities, their placement in appropriate levels and their achievement. According to Sadler (2009), "assessment refers to the making of evaluation on students' overall performance and generating assumptions regarding their learning and production education-wise, which include the quality or achievement in tasks such as tests, projects, reports and examinations". The success of any assessment depends on the effective selection and use of appropriate procedures as well as on the proper interpretation of students' performance. Thus, assessment procedures also help in evaluating the suitability and effectiveness of the curriculum, instruction and teaching methodology.

It has become common more recently among educational reformers to criticize traditional testing for its emphasis on outcomes that will not serve the students beyond the classroom. Authentic Assessment has emerged out of this criticism with the promise that assessment can be constructed so as to further both learning and teaching. The criticism has substance. For example Social Studies assessment in Ghana is dominated by traditional testing from the classroom to the national level. Analysis has been largely uncritical, however, and the emphasis on authentic outcomes poses problems as well as solutions. Assessment continues to be at the center of a lively debate taking place in educational reform. The measure of student learning, whether the assessment is standardized or alternative, inevitably includes theories,

techniques, practices, applications and outcomes (McMillan, 2001; Rudner & Schafer, 2002). The argument for assessment, as a measure of educational outcomes, is that it is expected to improve teaching and learning, and contribute to overall school improvement (Shepard, 2000; McMillan, 2001).

According to Bekoe, Eshun and Bordoh (2013) assessment helps the teacher to know the level of understanding of the students and their ability level. Wiggins (1998) argued that the aim or purpose of assessment is primarily to educate and improve student performance, not to audit it. Schools tend to focus on teaching students to pass simplistic, multiple-choice tests that neither assesses what we neither value nor provide feedback about how to teach and how to learn. The tendency is to sacrifice what we truly want to assess and settle for score accuracy and efficiency.

He contended that assessment reform is not easy and is not achieved by simply throwing out the conventional tests. In order to promote excellence, Wiggins (1998) argued that we must change our way of thinking that assessment is not germane to learning and therefore best done expediently. He stated that "assessment is of no value unless it is educative; that is, instructive to students, teachers, and school clients and overseers" (p. 8). Assessment signals to teachers and students what is important in learning. Assessment tasks need to reflect actual teaching and learning processes and not the mechanistic approach that if you improve the test, you improve the teaching (Cumming & Maxwell, 1999; Torrance, 1995).

The assessment controversy or dilemma takes front and center stage in education as the increasingly growing controversy of traditional and authentic assessment evolves. Wiggins (1998) argued that if there is agreement among educators that assessment reform is necessary, then we must imagine an educative assessment system that is designed to improve student performance. Shepard (2000) suggested that we must develop a framework for understanding a reformed view of assessment, where assessment is viewed as an integral part of teaching and learning. Assessment in the classroom must be transformed in two fundamental ways: (a) the content and the character of the assessments must be significantly improved; and (b) the gathering and use of assessment information and insights must become part of the ongoing learning process.

The discussion about assessment reform continues to include a discussion about authentic assessment. Finding a definition of authentic assessment in the literature revealed a more perplexing and challenging task because it produced a myriad of meanings (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2008). Authentic assessment is used interchangeably with authenticity, alternative assessment, performance assessment, portfolio assessment, as well as classroom-based assessment. Authentic assessment is the use of activities which resembles, as closely as possible, activities performed by adults in the real world. The activities would challenge students to produce or perform at high standards and instruction with assessment seamlessly integrated in order to foster a mastery-type learning environment (Warman, 2002). It appears that authentic assessment would include authenticity, alternative assessment, performance assessment, portfolio, authentic pedagogy, authentic learning and classroom-based assessment, which includes assessment of learning, assessment for learning and assessment as learning.

Furthermore, Boud and Falchikov (2005) suggest that educators need to move from traditional (paper and pencil) assessment that focuses on specifics, standards and immediate outcomes to more sustainable assessment that can aid students to become more active learners not only in managing their own learning but also assessing themselves to life beyond the end of the course. They added that there has been considerable critique of both the inadequacy of current assessment practices by classroom teachers and external examination.

Boud and Falchikov (2005) further highlight that most of the critique has focused on the effect on learning within courses not on learning following graduation. They noted that balancing this however, has been the flourishing of an array of authentic assessment procedures designed to overcome the limitations of traditional unseen summative and norm-referenced standardized tests. Pellegrino, Chudowsky and Glaser (2001) assert that authentic assessments provide multiple paths to demonstration of learning in comparison to traditional assessments like answering multiple-choice questions that lack variability, owing to students' ability to demonstrate knowledge and skills they possess. Authentic tasks tend to provide more freedom to demonstrate their competencies, for example, business proposals, projects, portfolios, artwork and videos, among other tangible products, (Craddock & Mathias, 2009).

According to the CRDD (2010) the general aims of Social Studies syllabus for Senior High Schools are to help students to develop:

1 the ability to adapt to the developing and ever-changing Ghanaian society
2 positive attitudes and values towards individual and societal issues
3 critical and analytical skills in assessing issues for objective decision-making
4 national consciousness and unity
5 enquiry and problem-solving skills for solving personal and societal problems and
6 become responsible citizens capable and willing to contribute to societal advancement.

The primary purpose is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. An outcome-based approach requires that we test in authentic ways what is considered to be most important in terms of knowledge, skill, values, and attitudes. Thus, if critical thinking, problem solving, positive attitudes and values, analytical skills and civic competence are highly valued, and then students should be able to demonstrate mastery of these through worthwhile activities which meet the demands and expectations of the

society, hence the need to employ authentic assessment in our various classroom (CRDD, 2010).

The traditional classroom paper and pencil assessment offers a quick and simple method of learning about students' subject knowledge. These tests have a standard delivery and response format, typically one correct answer using a forced choice response format, mainly that of multiple choice, matching, or true/false. The benefits of these tests are that they are relatively quick to score, easy to administer and reliable, and may be given to small and/or large groups of students simultaneously. In addition, they are appealing to teachers already burdened by constraints of time and standards, but unable to measure learners' attitudes and values, which is the hallmark of Social Studies education. Social Studies educators should embrace authentic assessment for its ability to assess critical and analytical thinking skills, problem solving, positive attitudes and values. Using multiple-choice tests consistently tends to benefit some students and not others (Sternberg, 2007). This made Bekoe et al., (2013) asserted that assessment can take place in any manner but it does not mean that authentic assessment must merely happens in non-traditional ways…it must always be conducted in a formal way under the tutelage of the Social Studies teacher.

Relevant literature suggests that there are not much formal authentic assessment training programmes for Social Studies teachers in the Ghanaian educational context. The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which social studies teachers apply authentic assessment in their assessment procedure. The study sought answer the research question: To what extent do SHS Social Studies teachers apply authentic assessment in their assessment procedure?

# 2. Literature Review on Influence of Teachers' Authentic Assessment on Their Classroom Practices

Many factors influence which assessment practices teachers use (McMillan, 2001:18): philosophy; personality; training; experience; lesson objective(s); perceptions of student abilities; parental expectations; and school, district, or state policies may influence a teacher's preference for one practice over another during the school year and over her career.

Assessment policy is an area about which classroom teachers appear to be relatively uninformed and about which they concern themselves very little. Even where district or school assessment and assessment-related policies exist, teachers are largely unaware of them. When they are aware of certain policies, they appear to have the autonomy to ignore them by and large. Teachers very broadly control the conduct of their own classrooms, including assessment aspects (Stiggins, 2005).

Additionally, Herman and Golan (1991) found that teachers not only report feeling community pressure to raise test scores but also respond to that pressure by increasing test

preparation activities and time spent on testing in their classrooms. In their interviews with teachers in Maine and Maryland, Firestone and Mayrowetz (2000) report that 15 of 20 Maryland teachers interviewed report changing their teaching in response to state testing as compared to five of 25 teachers in Maine. Such changes include increasing instruction in areas covered on the state test as well as increased practice in the state test format. Such policies have a positive effect on traditional assessment practices (i.e., multiple-choice and short answer) and a negative effect on alternative practices. Beside responses to assessment policies, other factors might explain a teacher's choice of assessment practice. Teachers' training may play a role: teachers who are trained using specific assessment practices are more likely to use them (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992). Historically, pre-service teachers who have taken assessment courses have focused on statistics and standardized testing (Gullickson & Hopkins, 1987), topics more inclined to the multiple-choice format. Thus, new teachers typically have been exposed to a limited range of assessment practices. This may be changing though. Some have found (Riley & Stern, 1998) that teacher-education programs are not incorporating product and performance assessment techniques as part of their curricula. It is unclear however, as to whether this training leads teachers not to use those techniques (White & Zidon, 1996). Campbell and Collins (2007) reviewed textbook topics to determine whether teachers in special education and general education are receiving the necessary information in their coursework in order to conduct appropriate assessments and to engage in valid grading practices in their respective classrooms once they completed their education. They discovered that several topics that they determined to be essential in ensuring assessment literacy among teachers are not included in the top-selling textbooks for teachers. "Moreover, topics appearing inconsistently or missing from textbooks altogether may suggest that such content is optional or not important for teacher's preparation" (Campbell & Collins, 2007: 17).

Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) state that "we weren't given the opportunity to learn to apply principles of assessment for learning during our preparation for teaching practice". It remains the case that colleges of education often fail to include this kind of assessment training in their programs". Campbell and Collins (2007) and Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) and Lukin, Gardalos, Eckout and Mickelson (2004) believe that consistency in teacher training with regard to assessment practices is important to student learning. Harlen (2005) and Lukin et al. (2004) maintain that planning and implementing a variety of assessment practices be part of teacher training in colleges of education. Given these findings, having an undergraduate degree in education is expected to have a positive effect on traditional practices and a negative effect on alternative practices. It is plausible that teachers who pursue further education (e.g., a master's degree) are more likely to use alternative techniques (Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Ro, 2000). Perhaps they are tired of the multiple-choice test or maybe they have

been exposed to alternative assessments either through their mentoring at their local schools and/or through professional conferences. Additionally, graduate education may provide teachers not so much with the hands-on skills they need to teach but with a critical perspective regarding the practices they use. Given this possibility, having a graduate degree in education and more experience (each individually) is expected to have a negative effect on traditional practices and a positive effect on alternative practices.

However, assessment techniques are used to improve teaching practice (Eshun et al., 2014). If a student has difficulty with complex subject matter, traditional assessments provide that student with the opportunity to demonstrate learning. Ecclestone and Pryor (2003) believe that pupils construct their identity as learners based on their interactions with teachers and other students. Assessment practices have profound implications for either aiding or damaging the developing scholarly identity of learners. This, in turn, will shape future learning and, ultimately, future life opportunities. Torrance and Pryor (2001) also add that children be guided early on and carefully through learning and assessment processes because their perceptions about learning and assessment start early. Individual personality differences will shape the way in which learners respond to assessment and grading practices. For example, Yorke (2003) cautions against the development of learned dependence where students rely only on feedback from teachers and rarely go beyond what a teacher suggests. Teachers need to be concerned with whether or not assessment is actually constructive or inhibitory towards higher learning. A teacher sensitive to these concerns might be more inclined to use traditional assessments in classes with less-able students. Thus, having a class with higher-ability students is expected to have a negative effect on traditional practices and a positive effect on alternative practices.

Another influence of authentic assessment is inadequate resources. The process of implementation is complex. Reflection time is needed. Information collected into a large knowledge base will serve teachers in implementation. Adequate professional development and more technological resources assist its usage (Campbell & Collins, 2007; Bordoh, Eshun & Bassaw, 2013). Teachers in schools with resource constraints will be more inclined to use less resource-intensive (i.e., traditional) means of assessment. Traditional means of assessment are less resource-intensive because of the relative ease of implementation and grading and the fewer materials required to produce them (i.e., at the extreme end, a teacher could conceivably use a multiple-choice test that the publisher includes with the reading material). Thus, the resource constraints of being in a) an urban school, b) a school with a higher pupil-teacher ratio, and c) a school with a higher proportion of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, are expected to have a positive effect on traditional practices and a negative effect on alternative practices.

A study conducted by Eshun et al., (2014) asserted that classroom assessment techniques is an integral part of teaching and learning; for teaching and learning to be worthwhile there is the need to incorporate classroom assessment techniques. However, most of the teachers observed were not using assessment techniques that involve students in teaching and learning process. With this there were having in mind that they will be delayed in completing their course outline given them when they tend to involve their students often in lesson delivery. Marking good use of assessment strategies in assessing students helps them to examine their strength and weakness and this result in improving teaching practice. Students understand lessons better when they are brought on board during teaching and process.

Furthermore, the NCSS (1995) perceives that assessment has the potential to enhance Social Studies learning and to promote students' interest in social studies. This is too general a statement considering the fact that in most schools assessment means testing and grading (van de Wallen, 2001). Bekoe et al., (2013) studied formative assessment techniques tutors use to assess teacher-trainees' learning in social studies in colleges of education in Ghana. Their study revealed that the content knowledge of some college of education Social Studies tutors on assessment technique was found not to be adequate to handle some topics in the social studies curriculum effectively. This was evidence as the strength of some interview item were weakened and negated by the complementary instrument (observation) used. It was revealed that most of the tutors were not using scoring rubrics, concept mapping, scaffolding and portfolio as tools in formative assessment for teaching and learning of Social Studies in colleges of Ghana. As a result of this, they teach with the formative assessment tools they are used to thereby neglecting those that help build and change corrupt attitudes of students.

Morgan and Watson (2002) also reported that most middle and high school teachers use teacher-constructed tests to assess students' achievement. In addition, Morgan and Watson found that most teachers view classroom assessment as an added requirement to their teaching job and not as a tool to improve their teaching and so should not be time consuming.

Eshun et al., (2014:46) also revealed in their study about nine (9) College of Education Social Studies tutors in central region of Ghana that, effective use of formative classroom techniques by teachers motives students to take part in classroom activities. Teachers failed to use formative strategies with the fear of not completing their course outline on time. (Eshun et al., 2014:47). Tindal and Fuchs (1999) identified four reasons why teachers do not use multiple assessment or authentic assessment methods. First, some teachers had limited knowledge of different forms of assessment. Second, teachers felt they had no time to create different forms of assessment. Third, teachers felt there was little or no professional guidance; therefore, they (teachers) were not confident enough to try out other forms of assessments. Fourth, it is usually not part of the demands of the state or nation. Cooney reported a strong link between

assessment and grading in the minds of high school teachers.

There is enough evidence suggesting that in schools assessment mainly refers to tests, examinations and grading (Lissitz and Schafer, 2002). School leaders have reached a point of believing that one cannot assess without using the traditional paper and pencil and therefore assign grades (Lissitz & Schafer, 2002). Lissitz and Schafer (2002) Suggest that specific training is necessary for teachers to learn to assess children's thinking by analyzing students' discourse. Dean (1999) contends that most teacher education programs skim over classroom assessment, leaving teachers to assess in the way they were assessed when they were in school.

## 3. Methodology

A descriptive case study was suitable for this study as it allows for the gathering of data in a real context, and it takes into account the political and ideological context within which the research is situated (Lunn, 2006). It is an intensive description and analysis of a bounded system (Bassey, 1999) used to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. As the study was carried out in ten SHSs in the central region of Ghana, the data were used together to form one case. Several research scholars including Bassey (1999), Yin (2003) consider that case studies are particularistic, descriptive and heuristic and are particular to a certain context and have a more human face than other research methods, as it is strong on reality and context which enables 'thick' description.

The Population in this study comprised all the Senior High School Social Studies teachers in the Central Region of Ghana. Simple random sampling technique was used to select Twenty (20) Social Studies teachers and ten (10) SHSs out of Social Studies teachers fifty seven (57) and the two hundred and eighty five (285) SHSs in the Central Region of Ghana.

The study used both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data was made up of interview schedules. In each of the study schools two Social Studies teachers were interviewed. The interview guide was made up of fourteen semi-structured questions. Secondary data was obtained from existing documents on assessment practices in general, and policies on assessment in the schools. The main instrument for data collection was the interview schedule. Both the interview and document analysis solicited for qualitative information. The qualitative data analysis was done by the use of descriptive based on the themes arrived at the data collection. This was based on questions on the semi-structured interviews.

## 4. Influence of Teachers' Authentic Assessment on Their Classroom Practices

Authentic assessment practices at the SHS Social Studies teachers use in assessing students learning are presented under this section. When asked- *which authentic assessment practices do you usually use in your social studies classroom?* Fifteen (15) teachers stated that they have been using class test, quizzes, and project work. They went ahead to say that, that is what the syllabus requires of them. Two (2) indicated that they sometimes organize group discussions in the social studies classroom. After the discussion, they usually would ask each group to choose a leader to present a summary of their discussion and allow other groups to comment on what they have presented then we award marks.  Another two (2) stated in addition to the above that, they involve their students in debates and award marks. Again only one (1) of the respondents said she has been using observation, interviews and project work in her class. It was easy to discern that these teachers were only using or involving their students in traditional assessment.

In the school practice, assessments are mostly formative and summative in the form of standardized tests and examinations which measure student learning outcomes for the purpose of holding schools accountable for their student performance (Vandeyar & Killen, 2003:122). Classroom assessment and grading practices are meant to enhance the learning process, facilitate instruction, and encourage opportunities for new knowledge to be gained (Allen, 2005; McMillan, 2007).

When this question was asked- *how often do you involve your students in authentic assessment?* Commenting on whether they support the inclusion of authentic assessment in social studies classroom assessment, this is what the teachers involved in the study had to say: one (1) indicated very often. Three stated quite often and eleven indicated not at all. Six of the respondents stated that they do not remember how often they had used authentic assessment in their classroom.

When these teachers were asked- *what barriers do you have in the use of authentic assessment in your social studies classroom?* Six (6) of these teachers indicated that they had problem with time, twelve (12) stated that they were not very conversant with the concept but are aware it is used in the universities, whiles the rest four (4) said even if they decided to use it, they were constrained by resources. For example, a respondent retorted that "*I cannot manage authentic assessment effectively as traditional assessment with a class size of 50 – 70 students. Because we have a large number of students in the classroom (50 and above) students per a class, and teachers are teaching eight and ten classes, I find it challenging to observe, interview and to use portfolios. Not only that, but it also restrict my teaching styles and student's involvement in the learning process*". Firestone & Mayrowetz, (1998) came out that authentic assessments are very labor intensive for both teachers and students. A good authentic assessment must be carefully planned and orchestrated to measure the desired student learning. Additionally, a rubric listing the characteristics by which the performance will be judged must be written prior to beginning the assessment. Since authentic assessments typically require several administrations to smooth out the rough spots, teachers will spend a lot of time developing the

assessment as well as reflecting about and refining the assessment after it is initially created. This cycle is necessary to the process of developing quality assessments, but it does require a lot of teacher time. It is far easier to grade a selected response exam (e. g. true/false, multiple choices) than it is to read 150 journals or portfolios. Teachers must be careful not to create an overwhelming burden for themselves when using authentic assessment.

For teachers to be able to implement effectively and efficiently authentic assessment in the social studies classroom, they need to have some understanding of what constitutes this concept. Sixteen (16) out of twenty (20) of them *added that pressures from internal tests/exams, together with school wide national external examinations, can restrict both their teaching styles and students' engagement and enjoyment in the learning process, and about the best ways to develop assessment for their students. Although these tests/exams have an important role to play in securing public confidence in local schools, they pointed out that their undue influence on the development of effective authentic assessment is a significant constraining factor with respect to sound teaching and learning.* This is of great concern especially to teachers who are teaching Forms 2 and 3, as one of them explained: *Pressures from national examinations restricted my assessment approaches and students' involvement and enjoyment and hence my teaching is targeted only at what is to be tested or examined externally.*

Another common barrier raised by these teachers is school facilities/equipment and teacher's attitudes and commitment to authentic assessment. Seventeen (17) out of twenty (20) teachers submitted that *the lack of proper school facilities and equipment and teacher's knowledge, attitudes and commitment to authentic assessment could impede its implementation in SHSs.* Three (3) teachers stated *that each school should have its own assessment policy as well as the social studies department. Without this authentic assessment practices would be difficult in social studies assessment.* Moving away from traditional assessment procedures toward authentic assessment is a major theoretical change and change takes time. It is important for instructors to move slowly and communicate to students the social studies goals and rational behind the authentic assessment practices. In moving toward authentic assessment instructors should listen to students, negotiate with them and ask for their feedback. This enables instructors to gain insight into what is working and what is not working during the transition from traditional to authentic assessment. Embracing a constructivism and authentic assessment does not answer the question, "how students should be assessed?" It is not a solution to the assessment dilemma. An alternative assessment paradigm does, however, contribute greatly to evaluation. It connects teaching, learning and assessment. It is a teaching tool that promotes students learning and is a significant and powerful tool that assists instructors in being fair, thoughtful and creative when assessing students' work.

# 5. Conclusions and Implications

The findings of this present study indicated that authentic assessment, as a classroom assessment strategy, does have a place in the SHSs in Ghana. The teachers in this study perceived that the form of authentic assessment used in their classrooms was limited by policies, time, resources and assessment methods employed by their schools. These policies affect their use of this assessment method because the subject is a core in the SHS.

This study suggests that if classroom teachers are to become effective practitioners of authentic assessment then they must have a better theoretical understanding of it, otherwise assessment will always be set outside what is taught and learnt. Social Studies classroom teachers will rather resort to the traditional assessment (teaching to test) than the contemporary roles that might result in problem solving in the teaching and learning process.

It was evidenced that all the schools visited did not have an assessment policy. The assessment policy found was that of the West African Examination Council. SHSs should be encouraged to develop problem-oriented assessment policies in Social Studies. This will guard against teachers not assessing the salient areas that are the pith and core of the subject as they will emphasize on classroom based test that are issue-oriented and not the mere standardized test.

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