

Student Teachers' Perceptions of Their Curriculum-Based Assessments

Gloria Racha^{1*}

¹ Centre for Education Programmes, The University of Trinidad and Tobago, Corinth Campus/San Fernando, Trinidad and Tobago

* Gloria Racha, E-mail: gloria.racha@utt.edu.tt

Abstract

This study aims to investigate student teachers' perceptions of their curriculum-based assessments. Specifically, it attempts to identify their perceptions of their four assessment tasks in a first year university course on Human Development. These tasks are a multiple choice test, article review, research paper and a formal written final examination. Data collection is done by means of semi-structured interviews and written comments. The results show broad general agreement among student teachers about both the traditional and the alternative assessment tasks. They had negative perceptions of the multiple choice test and the final examination, especially with respect to authenticity and quality of learning. Their views on the article review and the research paper were more positive as they perceived them to be highly authentic and to promote deep learning. However, they indicated concerns about some aspects of these two tasks.

Keywords

student-teachers' perception, curriculum-based assessment, semi-structured interviews, written comments

1. Introduction

This article focuses on the perceptions that pre-service teachers have about their assessments. Wren et al. (2008) are concerned that while pre-service teachers in Australia expressed high levels of overall student satisfaction, they have much lower levels of satisfaction with assessment practices. This dissatisfaction with some aspects of assessment seems to also be apparent in pre-service teacher education in Trinidad and Tobago. According to Michael (2009, p. 1), "a key component to the Scholarship Of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) is reflection on teaching methodology, and, in particular, assessment practices and how they impact on undergraduate students". Students preoccupation with assessment can override any other aspect of the curriculum in university studies (Boud, 1990; McLaughlin & Simpson, 2004). It is instructive, therefore, for educators to gain an understanding of the ways in which students perceive their assessments so as to make a better impact on their learning. Perception has been known to be far more influential than the most compelling evidence. This gives

credence to the adage that “a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still”. Hattingh and de Kock (2008, p. 321) in their South African study with pre-service teachers found that the beliefs and perceptions that pre-service candidates bring to teacher education usually remain inflexible. Even in the light of incorrect or incomplete knowledge, perceptions, once formed, are difficult to change. Therefore, this study focuses on student teachers perceptions since they are critical to what happens, firstly, in the university classroom, and then in the school system later on.

Struyven et al. (2008, p. 296) posit that the “likes and dislikes of a person concerning a particular context, whether that is a piece of art, a food dish or an educational setting, essentially influence his perceptions and reactions to the context”. For example, if a student likes a particular teaching method or assessment strategy, this may impact positively on his perceptions of the learning environment, his learning and his performance. Similarly, negative perceptions are likely to ensue from dislike of a teaching or assessment strategy. The design of learning environments must therefore consider the relationship between perceptions and learning. To a large extent, the ways in which a course of study is assessed drive how it is delivered and the nature of the teaching-learning process (Struyven et al. , 2005). Gibbs (1992) concurs that “the tail wags the dog” in that student learning is very much guided by the ways in which the learning is assessed”.

It is only when teachers understand the philosophy and theory that drive educational innovations that they are committed to their educational significance and meaningfully implement them in their practice, resulting in effective change. Conversely, innovations can be disastrous if forced on teachers whose beliefs and perceptions are incompatible with the fundamental theoretical underpinnings of the innovation. Therefore, teachers’ perceptions can either add fillip or present obstacles to the changes being mandated by new policy or being suggested by academics in teaching and learning.

The perceptions of teachers and student teachers drive what they do, and so it is problematic if their perceptions of assessment practices are not in sync with those of the advocates and experts in the field. Thus, it is timely and highly relevant to investigate student-teachers’ perceptions about the assessment practices that they experience in their studies and which they will be required to implement in their classrooms upon graduation.

1.1 Aim of Study

The aim of this study is to investigate student-teachers’ perceptions of their curriculum-based assessments in the course Psyc 110E at a tertiary level institution in the Caribbean.

1.2 Objectives

This study seeks:

- 1) to determine student-teachers’ perceptions of the content-validity of their assessments.
- 2) to determine the relevance of their assessments to classroom practice.
- 3) to investigate student-teachers’ perceptions of the various modes of assessment used in their course, Psyc 110E.

1.3 Key Research Questions

Q. 1 What are student teachers' perceptions of the content validity of their assessments.

Q. 2 What are the perceptions of student teachers concerning the relevance of their assessments to classroom practice?

Q. 3 What are the perceptions of student teachers as regards each of the modes of assessment that they experienced in the course.

1.4 Significance of the Study

Sambell et al. (1997) claim that assessment procedures stimulate effective learning when they relate to authentic tasks, emphasize the need to develop a range of skills, reflect breadth and depth in learning and accurately measure complex skills and qualities, as opposed to an over-reliance on memory and regurgitation of facts.

If this claim is true, then the perceptions of students as to whether the assessment process addresses these assessment criteria need to be examined. Teachers, instructors and administrators who alone decide on assessment tasks may perceive that the tasks match the above-mentioned criteria, but it does not necessarily follow that students will have the same perceptions of the tasks. It is now widely acceptable that students should be accountable for and should have a measure of agency in their own learning. Constructivism supports the notion that students should assume greater responsibility for their learning behaviours so as to achieve maximum learning. It follows that it is important for educators to gain an understanding of students' perceptions of the assessment process. This understanding can be very instructive in how educators treat with the assessment of their students.

While there is a plethora of research into the various forms of assessment and comparison of assessment techniques, (Biggs, 1998; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2005) there is very little into student-teacher perceptions of assessment. No research was found on the topic in our local education system in Trinidad and Tobago. Thus, there is little empirical evidence to support the view that student teachers are genuinely involved in having a voice in their assessment. It is hoped that through this research their voice will be heard by the relevant authority. Struyven et al. (2005, p. 325) advanced the cause of "the often forgotten student" and the potential of this kind of research for them to "air their voice". No assessment strategy can provide all the information on student progress and learning. The students' voice, therefore, as they share their perceptions of the assessment process, will add to the existing body of research on student teachers perceptions of assessment and will illuminate our understanding as to how assessment impacts on them. In particular, this study is important in light of the dearth of research on the topic in Trinidad and Tobago. It is possible that our local teacher education programmes can benefit from the findings of this research.

Dhindsa et al. (2007, p. 1263) suggest that "by including students in the teaching-testing-grading cycle, the validity of the assessment process can be enhanced". This inclusion can preclude the occurrence of invalid assessment instruments which usually result in high failure rates. It has been my experience that

when students are presented with their assessment tasks, they are sometimes dissatisfied, they complain, and often offer alternatives that in their view might be more appropriate and relevant to their preparation and practice when they graduate. In fact, this project arose out of listening to student teachers voicing their varied perceptions and expectations of their university assessments during tutorials. Their suggestions are sometimes, in my view, worthy of consideration.

Entwistle (2001) and James et al. (2002) have highlighted many inadequacies of university assessment design. They suggest that the quality of student learning can be improved by broadening assessment approaches. An insight into student teachers' perceptions of their assessments could reveal these inadequacies as well as suggest how the entire assessment process and approach may be reconceptualized and broadened, thus enlarging the space (Osberg, 2009) occupied by assessment in teacher education. Most importantly, educational planners in teacher education programmes will be sensitized to the importance of teacher perceptions and possibly consider reforming assessment procedures. An examination of student teacher perceptions such as this could have far-reaching implications for the general improvement of the crucial dimension of assessment in teacher education. According to Kagan (1992), the more one reads about teacher beliefs and perceptions, the more strongly one suspects that this piebald of personal knowledge lies at the very heart of teaching. It will be foolhardy for educators not to consider the fact that their ideology and aims of the assessments they give their students must compete with the folk theories or simple understandings that guide the students in the way they prepare for their assessments. Manouchehri (1998) concludes that beliefs and perceptions ultimately will prove to be the most valuable psychological construct to teacher education.

1.5 Research Setting

This study was conducted in the authentic setting of teacher education. The course on Human Development for first-year university students served as the research setting. It is a core semester long course aimed at developing an understanding of self and others at different levels of the life-span. Approximately three hundred students were enrolled to do this course. The assessment tasks incorporated a multiple-choice test, article review, a research project and a final examination. The assessment tasks given during the semester were worth 55% while the final examination accounted for 45% of the students' final marks. For each assessment task (See Table 1 below), students received detailed guidelines, information about marking criteria and a list of relevant resources. All assessments were constructed by the course coordinator and assessed by the instructor. The four assessment tasks are described in the following Table:

Table 1. Description of Assessment Tasks

Assessment type and value in overall assessment	Features of assessment	Description of requirements

Multiple-choice test. 30%	Individual assessment.	Questions were designed to assess knowledge and understanding of the process of Human Development from prenatal to early childhood development.
Article review 10%	Oral group assignment.	Groups of four students orally discussed three given articles on Human Development. They were individually assessed with respect to their knowledge of the content, insights, cross-referencing of related articles etc.
Research project 15%	Written group assignment.	Groups of three students were required to select a stage of development and to interview two persons each in that stage of development. They had to produce a written document reporting their individual as well as group findings about the development of the six persons.
Final examination 45%	Individual assessment	Multiple-choice questions were designed to assess knowledge as well as understanding of the content from middle childhood to adolescence under examination conditions.
Multiple-choice test and essay-type questions		Essay questions required students to apply their knowledge of human development from middle childhood to adolescence and to write restricted and extended responses.

The assessments described above will serve as the basis for the kinds of assessments that will be discussed in the literature review.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Students General Perceptions of Assessment

Over the past two decades, assessment practices have undergone great transformation as attempts have been made to “enlarge the space” of traditional assessment to include complexity and expansion of knowledge. The learner is now accepted as an important part of the learning process which suggests that his/her views about the assessment process must be taken into account. Increased acceptance that students should be responsible for their part in the learning process has led to the use of constructivist approaches such as collaborative and peer assessment and self-assessment. This is a very different assessment paradigm for students. But do they view these new assessment modes through the same lenses that they view the traditional ones? Despite this gravitation towards constructivist epistemology, which is essentially rooted in personal construction of knowledge, there is little evidence to support the view that students are genuinely involved in decision-making about their assessment tasks (Dhindsa et al., 2007).

Five major themes were identified in the literature. Firstly, the literature discussed the ways in which students perceived assessment generally. It also discussed how students approach their learning based

on their perceptions of their assessments. The traditional and alternative approaches were also discussed and students voiced their views of these approaches. Finally, the literature reported their opinions of each of the assessment formats they were exposed to.

Assessment has tended to drive students learning to the extent that they lack interest and motivation to learn or participate in any learning experience that is not for a grade. McLaughlin and Simpson (2004, p. 135) note that “for university students, the importance placed upon assessment can become the overriding feature of the subject matter, often to the detriment of other educational experiences contained within the subject”.

Gulikers et al. (2006) found that when students perceive that there is alignment between assessment and instruction, they have better learning outcomes. Moreover, they claim that instruction, assessment and outcomes are closely interconnected. These student preferences demonstrate how much the world of students revolves around their assessments and support Struyven et al. (2005) statement that student learning is related to evaluation practices. The literature reveals that their entire approach to learning is driven by the kinds of assessment tasks they are required to do.

2.2 Assessment and Students' Approaches to Learning

Based on their different perceptions of learning, students adopt three main approaches to learning. Firstly, the surface learning approach is adopted by students if they perceive the strict requirements of a syllabus as the ultimate goal of their learning (Jarvis, 2005). These students perceptions lead them to have little personal engagement with the learning activity, to learn by rote and mindless memorization and with little conceptual understanding of the material under study (Entwistle et al., 2001). Secondly, by contrast, deep learning is characterized by personal engagement and intrinsic motivation in learning tasks. Students who adopt this approach perceive learning as worthwhile and self-satisfying (Jarvis, 2005). High quality learning outcomes result from a deep learning approach. Finally, Entwistle et al. (2001) introduced the strategic and achieving approach in which the learner wants to achieve the highest possible grades and uses well-organised strategies and study methods to achieve them. Students prepare for examinations in ways that reflect how they believe they will be tested. According to Struyven et al. (2005, p. 325), “student learning is related to evaluation practices”. They will attempt to understand the subject according to their perceptions of the assessment and will make a decision on whether to use a deep or surface approach (Struyven et al., 2006, p. 203).

There are numerous assessment formats in use today which include traditional and modern methods. Modern approaches to assessment in tertiary education such as those used by Apple and Shimo (2004), Eilertsen and Valdermo (2000) and McLaughlin and Simpson (2004) include such methods as portfolios, open-book examinations and peer assessment. However, before jumping on the bandwagon of the new assessment paradigm it is important to examine students perceptions of traditional assessment, which according to Struyven et al. (2006) is still the approach most frequently used in education.

2.3 Students' Perceptions of Traditional Assessment

Sambell et al. (1997) described traditional assessment as “unseen examinations” which may be either multiple choice tests or essay questions. They found that traditional assessment methods “had a severely detrimental effect on the learning process” and that they were a “necessary evil” (p. 357). They reported that the students perceived traditional assessment as promoting short-term learning, and had little to do with the more challenging task of trying to make sense of and understand their subject. Students thought that the traditional examinations measure their ability to marshal lists of facts and details. Just before examinations, there would be a last minute rush to revise and learn the material to be assessed. Rice et al. (2003) agree that university assessment has often constrained learning because students focus only on what they need to reproduce to pass. Hargreaves (2007, p. 192) laments the “educational tunnel vision that results from a focus on examinations”.

Research on traditional assessment has shown that students gave a poor rating for its authenticity. Sambell et al. (1997) reported that student teachers in the United Kingdom perceived traditional tasks as arbitrary and irrelevant, and therefore lack authenticity. They felt that the demands were unrealistic and pointless since they were never going to use the kind of information in real life. Sambell et al. (1997) also found that students perceived their examinations as artificial, with too much emphasis on certification, and divorced from the learning they felt they had achieved while studying the subject. These authors claim that the view most widespread among the student population was that examination success depended on whether they had a good memory and could remember facts to regurgitate. James et al. (2002) suggest that many of the issues in assessment at university level can be dealt with by setting aside older essay/examination responses and substituting these with a more diverse, relevant and authentic approach. In my work context, for example, will my students ever be asked to take multiple choice tests or to write essays on the topic Motivation or Learning Environments when they become teachers? Maybe classroom scenarios in which they enact various motivational strategies or displays showing actual productive learning environments might be more meaningful and beneficial to them instead, and will possess the requisite quality of authenticity in assessment.

Sambell et al. (1997) state that students equate the concept of validity with fairness and report that it is a key issue in how they evaluate their assessments. Their perceptions of fairness go beyond the notion of cheating. Students perceived traditional assessments as being an “inaccurate measure of learning” (p. 362), since their summative, one day, snapshot nature reduces the students' performance down to luck rather than accurately assessing performance. Students felt that it was easy to omit large portions of course material and still do well in examinations. What often mattered was whether they happened to revise the right topics. This, they thought was unfair because it was not a true reflection of their ability and was an inaccurate indicator of their conceptual grasp of course material. From the students perspectives, therefore, Sambell et al. (1997) report that traditional methods have low validity.

Since the traditional methods of assessment have been so heavily criticized, educators created alternatives which they thought would fill the gaps and make assessment of student learning more

effective and efficient. A wide range of assessment methods currently enhance the conventional setting of multiple choice and essay type questions. Since they were created to fill the gaps of traditional assessment, these new methods should be able to pass the tests of authenticity and validity that the older methods seemed to fail.

2.4 Students' Perceptions of Alternative Assessment

Alternative assessment methods such as open-book and take-away examinations, projects and investigations, oral assessment, problem-solving tasks, portfolios, group assessment and self and peer-assessment now complement the conventional multiple-choice and essay type examination. These newer approaches are deemed to be more in line with the requirements of today's society and the job market.

Several qualitative studies concluded that students favour assessments that relate to authentic tasks, encourage them to apply knowledge in realistic contexts, have relevance to their lives outside of school, and equip them with knowledge and skills that are needed in professional life (Gulikers et al., 2006; Herrington & Herrington, 1998; McDowell, 1995; Sambell et al., 1997). In particular, Gulikers et al. (2006) found that when students perceived the assessment task as authentic, they reported more use of a deep study approach. Students noted that they had to use course material as they learnt it rather than wait to use it only in an examination. Students had more positive perceptions of the long-term effects of alternative assessment and their greater applicability to real life.

However, a key concern was that of reliability. Sambell et al. (1997) reported that students were concerned about the lack of objectivity in the alternative methods and whether the marks they received accurately represented the quality of their performance or their learning.

The review of literature has revealed that assessment seems to drive student learning. Students want to have a voice in their assessment. They may adopt a surface or a deep approach to their learning depending on whether they perceive the tests as being driven by the syllabus or as being worthwhile.

The traditional approaches to assessment were perceived by students as lacking in authenticity. The focus on examinations tended to promote short-term learning and regurgitation of facts. Validity, also, was reported as low in these assessments since they could only sample a small part of the entire learning process and therefore were not an accurate indicator of their conceptual grasp of course material. Traditional assessment was seen as requiring only a surface approach to learning.

Alternative assessment was generally perceived in a better light than the traditional approaches. Students viewed the alternative approaches as being more authentic and valid and as having more long-term benefits. Students usually adopt a deep approach to learning when faced with the non-conventional methods of assessment. However a key concern among students was reliability. Since alternative assessments do not have a single correct response, a degree of subjectivity exists even with the use of clearly defined scoring criteria.

3. Methods and Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were forty preservice student teachers pursuing a Bachelor in Education degree. There are 90% female and 10% male students. They were selected using the process of purposive sampling which, according to Cohen et al. (2007, p. 115) is a process whereby “knowledgeable people who have in-depth knowledge of the research topic are selected”. They have experienced the four assessment tasks under examination (see Table 1, p. 19) and so were able to discuss the phenomenon under study from the “insiders perspectives” (Langshear & Knoebel, 2006, p. 198), thus providing primary data for this research. The forty student teachers were broken up into four smaller focus groups of ten. Each group gave their perspectives on one of the four assessments given in the course Pyc110E as follows:

Group 1. Assessment One–Multiple Choice Test;

Group 2. Assessment Two–Article Review;

Group 3. Assessment Three–Group Research Project;

Group 4. Assessment Four–Final Examination.

3.2 Research Approach

This study is anti-positivist in its approach and is constructed within the context of the interpretive paradigm. This approach is used when one endeavours to understand the subjective world of human experience. This design is most appropriate for this study since, according to Cohen et al. (2007), it should be used for knowledge that is personal, subjective and unique and requires that researchers be involved with their participants. In order to understand students perceptions, the researcher must attempt to “get inside the person and understand from within” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 21).

The kind of data required by this research will obviously be first-hand explanations of the perceptions of the student teachers themselves. This suggests a qualitative approach which entails exploration and understanding of the research problem by seeking the participants’ experiences and perspectives (McMillan, 2008). The qualitative approach also entails describing information and developing emergent themes which is the way in which the data collected were analyzed.

3.3 Instruments

The methods used to collect data were the semi-structured interviews and written comments since these methods generate the “insiders perspectives” (Langshear & Knoebel, 2006, p. 198). Through the use of open-ended questions in the interviews the participants could voice their experiences freely without being forced to choose options provided by the researcher.

Each group was interviewed on their perceptions of the particular assessment. These interviews were designed to cover key assessment themes such as validity and authenticity, and to allow students to express their issues and perceptions using their own terminology. The aim was to encourage participants to talk freely and openly about their experiences. Much use was made of open-ended questions which allowed me to probe into the issues raised and the meanings participants held about

various aspects of the assessment process. Four interview sessions were held, one on each assessment given.

The semi-structured interviews were complemented and triangulated by another source of evidence, written comments. Participants were given a blank sheet of paper and asked to write anything they thought was not covered about their assessments in the interviews. Also, this method was crucial for capturing data which participants might have been reluctant to openly voice in the interviews. The written comments were done so as to avoid the omission of any relevant information as a result of a predetermined conceptual framework reflecting the researcher's bias. They were more likely to give honest, reliable data in their written comments since it was anonymous. The written comments sometimes gave a deeper insight into the data collected from the interviews.

4. Results

The results of the study revealed unanimity of opinion in most cases, but also some measure of contrast when considering the four forms of assessment that they experienced in the course.

4.1 The Multiple-Choice Examination

4.1.1 Validity

This study showed that students were almost unanimous on some questions but divided in their perceptions of other aspects of this method of assessment. Unlike the findings on multiple-choice tests in the literature, most students felt that the test had content validity because "it adequately covered the content studied". One student claimed: *Sometimes you browse over some stuff in the chapters, thinking that they are not so important, but when you got the exam, there it was staring you in the face.* Another student said that: *you really had to study everything in detail. They (i.e., the test constructors) did not leave out anything.*

Many students felt that the format was not very effective. An almost unanimous preference mentioned by the students was a change in format to structured questions or short answer questions. They felt that they would have performed better in this type of assessment format.

4.1.2 Authenticity

While most students perceived that the content was relevant, they took issue with the relevance of the format itself. In response to the question of whether they will be required to do multiple choice tests outside of the university setting, most students felt that they would not. One such comment was: *That is not how life is...even in the class (room) you must know what to do-the answers will not be there for you to choose one. That is not how it works in real life.*

In the students' minds, therefore, they separated the content tested from the assessment format, and perceived that while the content was authentic, the multiple choice format was not relevant to real life.

4.1.3 Transparency

Students were unanimous in their view that the multiple choice test was transparent in that they were informed about the scope of the content and were given ample notice.

Students commented that: *We knew all about the examination from the earlies (sic). We just did not know the answers (Laugh).*

4.1.4 Fairness and Student Consultation

In terms of fairness, students were divided in their perceptions. While some students viewed the test as fair because they knew all about it well in advance and they were well prepared in class for it, some felt that it was not fair to them because *Some people just do not do multiple choice well so that was not fair to them...and remember that that is thirty marks.*

Most students stated that they were not given a choice in their assessment tasks and responded that they were never consulted on these tasks. They felt that they should have some input in their assessments.

4.1.5 Feedback

Generally, students commented that feedback on the multiple choice test was inadequate:

Student 1. We just did the test and got our marks—that was it. I think we should go back to the questions and see why we got it wrong.

Student 2. I think we should go over the questions because we will understand it better that way. We will go away not knowing why...?

The multiple choice test was, therefore, generally perceived by students as having high content validity and transparency. However, they had negative perceptions of the authenticity of the format. Students were divided in their perceptions of fairness. They expressed a strong desire to be consulted on their assessments and for more detailed feedback on their performance in the test.

4.2 The Article Review

Their comments revealed mixed feelings about this assessment task overall.

4.2.1 Validity

Most students felt that the exercise had content validity because the articles were based on content that was directly related to the course on Human Development.

For example, a typical comment was: *One article was on the early childhood stage, another was on middle childhood and the last one was on adolescence...so they more or less based on the topics taught.*

4.2.2 Authenticity

This assessment was perceived to have a high degree of authenticity. Students' perceptions of the article review were generally that the task was relevant since in the workplace they will be required to discuss issues of a professional nature with their colleagues.

In response to the question: What skills did this assessment require of you? Many students identified skills that they felt were relevant to real life such as...*communication skills, analytical skills, people skills, responsibility to prepare and research articles, listening skills, self-confidence, ability to work in a group.*

4.2.3 Transparency

Students generally viewed the task as being transparent in that they knew well in advance about the

requirements. They were well aware of the percentage it contributed towards their final assessment. They were given scoring criteria which they perceived helped them in preparing for the exercise. One such comment was that: *We knew how we were going to be marked. Everything was clearly stated as to what you were looking for. If we did what was asked for we could get the marks.*

4.2.4 Fairness and Student Consultation

Some students also had negative perceptions of this assessment task, largely in the area of fairness. A concern was with the group work. They indicated that sometimes they had to give way to their group members and would have preferred to make the points themselves for personal credit. However, there was also the opposing view that the group work facilitated peers learning from one another:

Student 1. Sometimes we had to give other students a chance to contribute because it was for marks. But I could have said more...I did not want to dominate, you know...

Student 2. But some people dominated the discussion—some of us did not get enough time to speak.

Student 3. But sometimes we learnt something from what somebody else was saying.

4.2.5 Feedback

Because of the nature of this assessment which assessed process rather than product, immediate feedback could have been given to students. Students generally perceived the feedback on the article review task favourably.

Typical comments were: *The feedback was good. We were given detailed comments. All should be done like that. I think when we have rubrics it's better because you could see what the lecturer is talking about.*

The article review was therefore perceived by most students as having high content validity, authenticity and transparency. They also had positive views on the quality of feedback they received on the task. However, they had concerns about its fairness in terms of catering for student diversity and individual differences.

4.3 Research Project

4.3.1 Validity

It was clear that students saw the connection between their course content and that of the project, confirming a high degree of content validity.

In some cases, they were able to corroborate the content as studied in the course with their own findings in their research, but in other cases they found differences in some aspects of development in some of the subjects they interviewed.

For example, one student commented: *When I was interviewing the children, a lot of what I learnt about their development was true.*

More specifically, one student claimed that the content of the course covered cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development and that that was reflected in the questions they asked their subjects in their interviews.

Another student reflected on the theories of how children play: *I was able to see first hand what we*

learn (*sic*) about solitary play and symbolic play.

4.3.2 Authenticity

With respect to the theme of authenticity, most students revealed that the research project was quite relevant to what they would be required to do in their careers as teachers. This method was highly valued as it was perceived to be relevant to the world of work. Here, for example, is a student's perception of this assessment: *When you are out in the real world you have to work in teams. It is more like a real work situation...I think you need to work in a group to put your ideas together.*

Many students were of the view that this method was better to assess their learning than a written examination because they had to understand and apply the information rather than merely committing facts to memory. For example, one student noted that: *I think it gives you a better chance to express your ideas better. You learn more from a project than an exam. You have to interpret things. It's not just testing your memory.*

Many students related that it was useful in terms of improving their skills in communicating with others and with working in a group. Interestingly no one indicated that they would be required to do research as professionals in their jobs.

4.3.3 Transparency

Students had mixed views on the transparency of this assessment task. About half of the students felt that the instructions were not clear. Some said they were ambiguous. While the scoring rubrics were explicit, some students said that they were given too late in the process. For example, one student said: *When you give us the rubrics so late, it does not help us. We need to have it early so we could use it to do the project from early.*

4.3.4 Fairness and Student Consultation

Some felt that it was a stressful exercise. One student wrote: *This project affected me psychologically, it stressed me a lot. It was the most strenuous project I had to do for the semester.*

Many students complained about their peers' contributions towards the group project. They indicated that some of their peers were not committed to the group and received marks for work they did not do. For example, there were comments such as *there were lazy people in my group, and it was not fair because one person had to do most of the work and everybody got the same mark.* Some of these students would have preferred an individual assignment.

4.3.5 Feedback

Students would like personal interaction with the instructor in discussing their work rather than only written comments in the project. The following comments were made by students:

Student 1. I don't want to wait till the end of the semester to know how I did. It must be quicker than that.

Student 2. Sometimes we don't ever get back our projects—we just get a course mark.

The research project was therefore viewed as having high content validity and authenticity. However, students felt that it could have been more transparent and fair with respect to group work. They would

like feedback that is quick and personal.

4.4 Final Examination

4.4.1 Validity

As with all the previous assessments, the final examination was perceived to have a high degree of content validity.

A typical comment was that *There were no surprises. If you studied what was on the course outline you would be able to do the exam.*

With respect to the extent to which the assessment required them to use higher order thinking skills, students felt that the test was too heavily weighted at the upper levels.

4.4.2 Authenticity

Students believed that they would use the knowledge tested in the final examination in their jobs as teachers. However, they would prefer to be assessed in a different way because the final examination did not reflect the learning they felt they had achieved while studying the topics being tested. As one student said: *When it's an exam there is too much stress...too much cramming. Give us other things to do like presentations or journals or projects instead of the exam. In real life we don't have to learn off all that stuff.*

4.4.3 Transparency

Students indicated that the final examination was transparent in that they knew in advance what was the content to be tested, the format to be used, and the weighting towards their final mark. They had no issues with this aspect of the assessment.

4.4.4 Fairness and Student Consultation

Students felt that the examination was fair in that *you knew that it would be based on chapters 7-13 and if you studied you would pass.*

The final assessment involved both the multiple choice and essay type questions—two conventional modes. Students spontaneously compared these two methods revealing that the former is perceived more favourably than the latter. Some students indicated that if they had to do an examination, they would have preferred an entire multiple choice test with no essay questions as essays were perceived to be difficult and required much more deep thinking and structuring of responses. A few students, however, indicated a preference for the essay questions. As with the three previous assessments, they indicated their desire to be consulted about their assessments.

In summation, student perceptions of their assessments were varied. All four assessment tasks were generally viewed as having high content validity and transparency. However, the traditional multiple choice and essay examinations were seen by most students to be lacking in authenticity and in some cases were viewed as being unfair in some ways. While the students showed a preference for the alternative forms of assessment, they had a major concern about its reliability, and as a result, its fairness.

In summation, student perceptions of their assessments were varied. All four assessment tasks were

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5. Discussion of Findings

The research has revealed that the perceptions of the student teachers about their assessments were in many ways synchronous with the findings of previous research in the field as well as with the claims of assessment experts. Cultural differences in the Caribbean do not seem to have made any significant difference in the way student teachers perceive their assessments.

All four tasks were overwhelmingly perceived as being closely aligned to course material, that is, they seemed to have high content validity. However, students often had negative perceptions of other aspects of validity of the traditional formats. They felt that these formats were unfair because they were difficult and examinations placed unnecessary stress on them. While lecturers may differ in their views about the fairness of these examinations and what they measure, it is important to note that these perceptions that students have about their assessment tasks impact on and influence their learning (Entwistle, 1991; Gulikers et al., 2006; Struyven et al., 2008). It is a difficult task to change these perceptions. The traditional assessments appear to them to emphasize poor learning, are too narrow in their focus and are irrelevant. These assessments are perceived to lack the desired quality of seamlessness as they are given summatively after learning, solely for the purpose of marks and certification. There is a definite separation between learning and assessment in the students' minds with respect to traditional assessment. These assessments therefore lack consequential validity from their point of view which concurs with the findings of Sambell et al. (1997).

It is interesting and instructive to note that seventy five percent of the total marks for the course in this study is allocated for traditional assessment. It may be concluded that students have negative perceptions of about seventy five percent of their assessments. Bearing in mind that perceptions drive actions and behaviours (Entwistle, 1991; Struyven et al., 2002), instructors ought to be aware of how this impacts on and influences their students' learning.

The introduction of alternative assessment, albeit for twenty-five marks, has opened the eyes and minds of students about all their assessments. The research has shown that the student teachers had similar positive perceptions of these alternative approaches, especially in relation to the ways in which these approaches impact on their learning, or their consequential validity. Although alternative assessment does not have all the answers, and in fact, has its own problems, we must acknowledge that it does have the potential to encourage genuine learning achievements. Student teachers' perceptions of traditional assessment as irrelevant and fostering poor learning contrasted sharply with those of alternative assessment which bears out the findings of such authors as Sambell et al. (1997) and Rice et al. (2003).

The positive perceptions of alternative assessment were however tempered with concerns about group work. This concern resonates with Rice et al. (2003) whose studies revealed that students had reservations about the reliability of group assessment. In my view, this is another valid concern of students. It is no secret that there will always be students who do not pull their weight in group work. My concern is not so great when the assessment is low stakes in nature, that is, when it does not contribute towards their final grade or Grade Point Average. However, I always argue for some mechanism to be put in place when group work is for high stakes assessment which contributes to their overall assessment. It could not be good assessment practice to allocate the same marks to members who have made little or no contribution towards group projects. In my opinion, this amounts to academic dishonesty and should be penalized in some way.

In assessing tertiary level students who should have some measure of rationality and agency in their learning, instructors should try to include the voice of their students in their assessments as they will more likely commit to the task if they had a say in its formulation. However, it is also my view that students often see themselves as the eternal victims of bad teaching and poor assessment practices especially when they do not perform well. This claim may sometimes be true, but sometimes they also must be taught to retrain their attributions of their failure to their own lack of effort (Eggen & Kauchak, 2007).

In the eyes of the students, scoring criteria promote transparency and fairness, and serve as points of reference for planning, feedback and evaluation. However, from the perspective of the instructor, the rigidly defined criteria may be seen as contradictory to the goal of student autonomy which we profess to aim for. Also, the predictability of the outcomes begs the question of how much room there is for student creativity. While the assessment culture advocates the provision of transparent and concrete criteria for students (Dierick & Dochy, 2001), it is possible that this could mitigate against learning in a more holistic way and using a deep study approach. Moreover, students clamour for authenticity in assessment, but are performance criteria in real life always that specific and concrete? The inherent dilemma ought to be examined and the assessment practice re-evaluated.

Modern approaches to learning advocate much of what students want implemented in their assessments. For example, students want assessment tasks that are authentic, transparent, fair, and in which they have a voice. It is noteworthy that at the institution of higher education where I work, at least in the courses which I teach, there is not a single opportunity for self- or peer-assessment. Inclusion of this method into students' assessment can address some of the issues and concerns expressed by students. For example, through self and peer assessment they will have the voice they seek, they may have transparency and more long-term benefits from their assessments. Simultaneously, there will be the added value of students becoming reflective learners and having a measure of agency in their learning. The results provide evidence for instructors who wish to enhance the outcomes of students. Assessment usually drives what occurs in classrooms and students respond to what they perceive as being the characteristics of assessment. Students want assessment to be consistent with their learning. When there

is a lack of congruence between assessment and student learning, students lack confidence in successfully performing academic tasks. The added value of the present study is that when student teachers' perceptions of their assessments are made explicit, then the potential validity of those perceptions can be tested and used as a basis for critiquing both current and future assessment practice in Higher Education. This can serve to enhance student outcomes.

6. Recommend Actions

This kind of study should be replicated to examine the stability of the perceptions found in this study with other student teachers and other assessments. Added to this, a larger sample, possibly all first-year students, could be used. This would facilitate both generalizations of results as well as quantitative analysis of data which the present study could not do. Also, it would be informative to pursue a longitudinal study with the same group of student teachers after spending a year or more in Higher Education. They would have been exposed to the gamut of assessment formats and would have done a course in Classroom-Based Assessment. Research should investigate whether their perceptions of their assessments have changed or remained the same.

The merits and demerits of both traditional and alternative assessment were highlighted. Maybe, there is need to re-examine the weightings of these two types of assessment and the impact on students final outcomes. Is there too much emphasis on traditional assessment at the expense of alternative assessment?

Based on students' loud call for a voice in their assessments, self and peer assessment should be built into the assessment process. Also, given the course goals and objectives, students should have a say in the assessment tasks. Feedback practices should be more student-friendly, especially with alternative assessments. Pending the results of further studies, we have learnt from this study that student teachers' perceptions of their curriculum-based assessments are important and instructive. The outcome of this research cannot be described as dramatic, but the results tend to confirm existing opinions about the perceptions student teachers have of their assessments, moreover, the results have contributed a voice on the topic from the Caribbean.

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