

# Continuous assessment in Expressive Arts in Malawian primary schools

*Grames Wellington Chirwa, University of Johannesburg, South Africa*  
*Devika Naidoo, University of Johannesburg, South Africa*

## ABSTRACT

*The new Curriculum in Malawi: the Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR) designed on the principles of integrated learning areas; outcomes; learner-centred pedagogies and continuous assessment (CA) was implemented in 2007. The purpose of this study was to investigate Expressive Arts teachers' understandings, experiences and practices of continuous assessment in a selection of six state primary schools. Within a qualitative research design, and using the concepts of 'instructional system' and 'learning milieu' of Illuminative evaluation as postulated by Parlett and Hamilton (1976), data were collected through observations, interviews and document analyses. Teachers' practices were characterised by an informal, technical form of assessment that privileged rote recall of facts and meeting bureaucratic requirements. The teachers cited large classes, lack of material resources and insufficient time as constraints. This study recommends that attention be given towards developing teachers' understanding of CA principles and practice both at pre-service and in-service levels.*

**Keywords:** Illuminative evaluation, Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform; formative assessment, continuous assessment and summative assessment

## CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Let us first reflect on a typical scenario related to assessment in an average primary classroom in Malawi:

**Teacher:** 'Today, we will continue learning about mirroring. What did we say mirroring is?'

**Children (collectively):** 'It is imitating someone.'

The teacher continues to ask questions on previous concepts taught. All correct answers are acknowledged with 'good', 'well done', 'excellent' or 'a hand clap for him/her'. For a wrong response, the teacher says, 'no', 'wrong', 'incorrect', or 'keep standing on your feet until you give a correct answer'. Next, the teacher verbally introduces the day's topic and writes it on the chalkboard. S/he then proceeds to develop the lesson. Once in a while s/he pauses to countercheck on learners' attention and understanding or gives an illustration or example. Next, the teacher gives pupils a task to work on. A few minutes later, red pen in hand, the teacher walks around and monitors the written work. S/he checks if the answers are right and

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crosses off all wrong answers. If time allows, s/he or the pupils revise the work. If it was a written task, pupils write corrections. This is the main form of continuous assessment (CA) in primary schools in Malawi.

It is against this background of the prevalence of technical forms of CA practices by teachers that the government in Malawi introduced 'continuous assessment' in the new curriculum in Malawi. Continuous assessment in the new curriculum is a form of formative assessment to be integrated in the teaching and learning process.

The Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform explains that the importance of integrating continuous assessment in the teaching and learning process is: it provides feedback on what learners have achieved and so builds up a record of each learner's progress against the primary outcomes for each learning area; it helps teachers to identify a learner's strengths and weaknesses so that they can help learners to learn and improve through remediation or enrichment support; it gives a chance to learners to assess their own performances and setting their own goals for improvement; it provides teachers with feedback about the methods and assessment techniques they use for teaching so that they can make decisions to improve their teaching; it encourages more and better communication between teachers and learners; it monitors the learners' performances to assist them to perform at their best and at their own pace rather than to pass or fail them all after a test on a specific day; it enables teachers to report regularly, through the year, to parents, officials and other interested people on the learners' performances and it provides valid indicators on the quality, relevance and effectiveness of the whole curriculum for ongoing renewal and improvement (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2009: 24).

The PCAR further explains that there are four types of tools which are to be used for continuous assessment in the new curriculum. These tools are: firstly, tools for generating achievement levels. These tools include scoring rubrics, checklists, task sheets and marking schemes. Secondly, there are recording tools. These tools include Attendance /Assessment Register; thirdly, reporting tools include Report Cards; finally, storage tools of learners' performance records include the Learner's Portfolio and the Teacher's Portfolio.

In Expressive Arts, the teacher's guide suggests strategies for presenting the lessons and assessing the learners in the classrooms. The suggested learners' assessment tasks in the Expressive Arts teacher's guides are in the form of written work or teachers observing the students as they perform the assigned tasks. Each outcome has corresponding exercises in the learners' book. All exercises in the learners' books should be attempted by all pupils so that teachers can have a clear understanding of the level of performance and hence the achievement of outcomes. Teachers are asked to ensure that learners attempt all questions in any particular exercise in order to get some degree of accuracy in the assessment. For example, the Standard 8 assessment task on the topic, 'General and personal space' reads as follows: give meanings of personal and general space; draw personal space and draw general space.

Although literature in Malawi indicates that teachers in the primary school sector face enormous constraints, Mhango (2008) observed that there are not many studies that investigated, in a crucial way, how such constraints impact on teachers' classroom practices. In this connection, Croft (2002), who studied the use of songs in English lessons of lower classes in primary schools in Malawi, argued that most of donor-funded research in the country focused on factors affecting the quality of education rather than classroom practices. She, therefore, recommended a more critical investigation of how teachers implement the school curricula. For example, she recommended that observations and discussions with teachers were critical avenues in the exploration of teachers' classroom practices. Given that to date, there are no documented studies of teachers' implementation of continuous assessment in the PCAR this study attempts to provide an ethnographic description of how CA is implemented in a selection of classrooms.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theory of Illuminative evaluation (Parlett and Hamilton, 1976) provided a promising macro-framework for comparing theory and practice in continuous assessment. Two key components of Illuminative Evaluation are the Instructional System and the Learning Milieu. The Instructional System refers to what has been planned and written up in documents to guide teaching and learning and assessment. These documents include syllabuses, teachers' and pupils' books, and all other relevant teaching and learning and assessment guidelines materials. The 'learning milieu', refers to what teachers and learners actually do in classrooms.

Illuminative evaluation thus enables understanding of the 'gap' or 'fit' between the Instructional System and the Learning Milieu. In using Illuminative evaluation in the study, the conceptual difference between the 'instructional system' and the 'learning milieu' made it possible to compare the teachers' assessment practices in the classroom to the specifications of the instructional system.

## **CONCEPTUALISATION OF CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT**

The prevailing definitions of assessment by various scholars, for example, Withers (1994: 13), McMillan (1997: 8) and Ward (1980: 3), are that assessment is a process that encompasses testing, measurement and evaluation and assessment leads to decision making. More recent definitions of assessment also focus on the idea that assessment is a continuous process. For example, Salvia and Yeseldyke (1995: 26) state that 'assessment is a continuous process, performed to gain an understanding of an individual's strength and weakness in order to make appropriate educational decisions'.

A distinction is made between formative and summative assessment. The two assessments are distinguished according to their educational purposes. According to McMillan (1997: 106-107),

Formative assessment occurs during a lesson or unit to provide ongoing feedback to the teacher and student. The purpose of formative assessment is to provide correct actions as instruction occurs to enhance student learning. Formative assessment is usually integrated into the normal course of teaching and its purpose is to identify particular learners' difficulties with a view to providing appropriate subsequent opportunities for learners to develop their understandings.

This definition of formative assessment conceives of assessment as an integral part of the teaching/learning process on which the learner and the teachers' decisions about the effectiveness of the educational process can be based. Formative assessment is also referred to, by many a scholar, for example, Du Plessis, Conley & Du Plessis (2007: 66) as assessment for learning. Summative assessment on the other hand occurs at the end of a block, or period, of teaching. It aims to quantify the extent to which the learner has mastered the material that has been taught and the success of the course (Gipps, 1994). Summative assessment is also referred to, by many a scholar, for example, Du Plessis et al. (2007: 66) as assessment of learning.

The PCAR refers to McMillan's (1997) formal formative assessment as continuous assessment. Malawi Ministry of Education (2005: 3) defines continuous assessment as 'assessment in which learners have to be assessed in what they are able to do and display in each learning activity rather than assessing them at the end of the term or the year'. Continuous assessment thus differs from summative assessment in that it is conducted as the learning process takes place and is used to influence or inform the learning process. The assessment approach also involves more than one assessor. It includes teacher assessment, self-assessment and peer assessment. Some of the challenges of continuous assessment as cited by Le Grange and Reddy include:

Possible increase in both teacher and learner workload for teachers because extensive record keeping and monitoring of individual learners are required, and for learners because they are required to consciously assess their own work. When school work is done at home, the possibility of collusion among learners and assistance from experienced persons may occur and the assessment is then not an accurate reflection of the learner's abilities. Continuous assessment may be difficult to apply with large classes because it takes time to assess individual learners authentically (1998: 11).

Studies have been conducted in South Africa to explore teachers' practices of continuous assessment. For example, Van der Berg and Shepherd (2008) conducted a study on the continuous assessment practices of Grade 12 teachers in different subjects in the schools of the Western Cape.

The study found that there were inaccurate assessments mainly due to teachers' poor subject matter knowledge of the subjects they were teaching. Students were being given inflated continuous assessment marks. This gave students a false sense of security that they were well-prepared for the matric exams, thereby leading to unrealistic expectations and diminished effort. The study concludes that continuous assessment has poor reliability to contribute to decision making about selection of students to universities as well as for judging students' mastery of the national curriculum.

Adebowale (2008), conducted a study on continuous assessment practices in the Ondo state of Nigeria. The results of the study were that there is no agreement amongst teachers in terms of how regularly continuous assessment should be conducted. The researchers saw confusion amongst teachers in four areas: how often the pupils were assessed; how many of such assessment should be graded and weighted; and the lack of other assessment tools apart from cognitive tests, assignment, and examinations; and where it is practised, it is not included when the pupils' assessments are combined. The researcher recommended that simplified and concise manuals, leaflets, and handbooks be developed for distribution to teachers.

## DATA COLLECTION

This article arose from a larger doctoral research project focused on studying the pedagogic and assessment practices of Expressive Arts teachers in Standards 7 and 8 classrooms. The data was collected in six schools in a period of five months, from January, 2010 to May, 2010. In all, 12 Expressive Arts teachers drawn from the six state schools in Zomba were studied. The teachers represented Standards 7 and 8 in a school. All the teachers in the study were qualified. Their teaching experiences ranged from five to 20 years. Their ages ranged from 34 to 52 years. Seven of the teachers in the study were females and five were males. All the teachers studied were trained in the normal training programme of the teaching of Expressive Arts. The school and teacher samples used in the study are summarised in Table 1 below:

*Table 1:  
Summary of study schools*

School	A	B	C	D	E	F
<b>Type</b>	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
<b>Roll</b>	1333	725	761	1156	604	2743
<b>Teachers</b>	21	25	16	34	8	61
<b>Teacher-pupil ratio</b>	1:63	1:29	1:95	1:34	1:75	1:45
<b>Number of teacher participants</b>	2	2	2	2	2	2

The data collection process involved lesson observation, interviews and document review. Two techniques were used to record data. A digital recorder was used to audio tape the voices of teachers and learners and field notes were made to capture what was done in the classroom. Key pedagogic and assessment practices in the lessons were probed in the interviews. The 71 lesson observations and the interviews were transcribed. The classroom observations generated a huge amount of data, more than three hundred pages of transcripts, and all the lessons were accurately transcribed. The long time spent on transcribing the data had the advantage that the content of the lessons got more familiar.

The 71 lesson transcripts and 71 interview transcripts were analysed inductively. The transcripts were read and coded. This led to the identification of categories and patterns in the data (Merriam, 2002: 25). Evidence from the lesson observations, post-lesson interviews and document review was pooled during analysis according to the themes related to continuous assessment which emerged from the data. Conclusions were then drawn on the continuous assessment practices of the teachers in their teaching of Expressive Arts and the challenges they face in implementing the continuous assessment policy in the classroom.

## **FINDINGS**

### *Teacher preparation*

Interview data revealed that the training courses to prepare teachers to implement the continuous assessment policy in the new curriculum were ineffective because the orientation period was too short and topics for orientation were selected by the trainers and not teachers. Furthermore, the orientation programmes were common to all teachers and rarely addressed individual teacher's needs and concerns. As such, teachers found it difficult to comprehend and understand the philosophy, and methods of continuous assessment in the new curriculum. Although follow up in-service teacher professional development activities were carried out to support teachers, the activities did not address the teachers' needs and concerns.

It is important to ensure that all curriculum implementers are aware of the curriculum changes and their objectives and that they are fully prepared for curriculum implementation through intensive and thorough orientation. Ratsatsi (2005) argued that the introduction of a curriculum change may deskill the teachers if not well-prepared. Hence, teachers only implement those aspects of the curriculum that fit well with their set of beliefs. In view of this, it is important to ensure that rigorous and thorough orientation of teachers to a new curriculum's ideals and materials should be taken seriously in any curriculum change implementation process. If not properly oriented to a curriculum innovation like the continuous assessment policy in the new curriculum, teachers can resort to their old ways of assessing the learners as was ascertained by this study.

It, nevertheless, needs to be recognised that even in cases where teachers have been properly oriented to a curriculum change, as curriculum change is a process, it does take time for the teachers to adopt the change.

### *Teachers' practice of continuous assessment*

#### *Base line assessment in the form of oral questions and written classwork as forms of continuous assessment*

The study found that teachers were conducting technical forms of continuous assessment. Oral questions and written classwork were the main forms of continuous assessment by the teachers. In general, the teachers frequently called on particular children to answer their questions. If the child was correct they offered congratulations, and if incorrect they called on another child 'to help your friend'. This was a way of checking on the comprehension of individuals and giving feedback with correction in a non-threatening way. When they were correcting written work, they simply marked work right or wrong but had little time to help individuals. Later clarification from a teacher was:

When correcting written work, fast learners receive feedback, a tick, meaning they are correct, they have done well. Slow learners are not missed but given (x) or underline where she/he has missed. This shows that he/she has hasn't understood, and needs individual help, needs extra help at the end of the day. It also helps interested parents to monitor the performance of their child.

In this approach to assessment, learners simply learned to distinguish right and wrong without understanding why a response was right or wrong.

#### *Assessment for rote recall*

The study found that assessment activities were based on simple recall of facts that were learned in the lesson and in the previous lessons. The excerpt below, extracted from an Expressive Arts lesson in Standard 7 illustrates some assessment conducted in a lesson, but only of factual recall.

**Teacher:** Now can you take note books and quickly answer these questions.

(Teacher wrote the following questions on the chalkboard.)

1. What is mirroring?
2. Mention two activities which you can copy from friends?

(The teacher went around the classroom marking the learners. She did the marking for about five minutes.)

**Teacher:** Most of you failed to answer the questions correctly. What is mirroring?

**Learner:** Mirroring is an art of copying an action, words or expressions.

**Teacher:** Thank you very much. Mirroring is an art of copying an action, words or expressions. Our lesson ends here for today. Thank you very much for your attention.

This assessment activity, like the other three observed in the lessons, was different from that of the teacher's guide. The Standard 7 teacher's guide suggested the following assessment tasks for students:

1. What are mirroring activities?
2. Why are mirroring activities significant?
3. Describe some mirroring activities that you do at home and at school.
4. How do mirroring activities differ from other ordinary activities?

While the teacher's task only involved students to recall facts, the same task in the teacher's guide goes beyond simple recalling of facts. For example, the third and fourth questions of the task in the teacher's guide makes connections to students' lived experiences. Yet the teacher's assessment task did not make such connections.

Some teachers often asked the class to reward a learner's answer. Teachers also often gave feedback to learners such as: 'I like that – beautiful – clap hands for her.' This was followed by all children joining in a rhythmic clapping pattern. Unfortunately, the teachers never explained why the answer was 'beautiful'.

Teachers cited continuous assessment as creating additional workload for them as the main constraint. Teachers explained that time constraints inhibited them to teach and at the same time assess the learners. The following were the comments or remarks of some of teachers:

Comments from Teacher 3

**Researcher:** The teachers' guide says that you are supposed to observe and record each of your learners' performance in every activity of your lesson as part of continuous assessment. Can I have a look at what you have recorded as your learners' performance in the activities of today's lesson?

**Teacher 3:** [laughs]. I have not recorded the learners' performance. I did not have enough time to teach and assess the learners at the same time. The Ministry of Education also promised to give us registers and materials for assessment but they are not giving us. I just memorise the learners' performance and record later.

**Researcher:** Can you explain clearly about materials for assessment?

**Teacher 3:** Rubrics and checklists and registers where to record the learners' performance.

Comments from Teacher 7

**Teacher 7:** The time is also not enough to teach and record learners' performance at the same time.

Comments from Teacher 9

**Teacher 9:** I do Continuous Assessment at the end of every 10 lessons. So I will do the next Continuous Assessment at the end of 10 lessons. Resources such as paper are a problem. I do not have these.

Teachers were not recording the learners' performance as required by policy. Teacher 2 assessed language skills instead of Expressive Arts skills. This is evidenced from Teacher 2's remarks:

**Researcher:** Thanks, did you have any method to assess whether the outcomes of your lesson have been achieved?

**Teacher 2:** Ya, I think I asked learners some questions.

**Researcher:** And then you were marking the learners. What did you get from that marking?

**Teacher:** Sometimes if I say you should write this, I sometimes want to look at something from the learners. Like in that class, sometimes I look at the spellings. Have the learners written correct spellings?

Teacher 2 thus assessed language skills of learners instead of assessing Expressive Arts skills.

The teachers apparently did not understand the policy on continuous assessment which indicates that assessment in the teaching and learning process should be aimed at assessing the achievement of the lesson outcomes the teachers have to fulfil in their lessons.

These findings are consistent with the findings of others on continuous assessment practices of primary school teachers. For example, Adebowale (2008), in his study on continuous assessment policy implementation conducted in the Ondo state of Nigeria, in which he examined the methods adopted by teachers in the implementation of the provisions of a continuous assessment policy, found that there is no agreement amongst the teachers, the implementers of the policy in terms of how regularly continuous assessment should be conducted. The study found that 29% of the respondents claimed that it should be done daily, while 31.6% said it is weekly, 28.1% said it is fortnightly, and 10.5% said it is term based.

*How continuous assessment has changed the assessment approaches which the teachers were previously using*

When asked how the introduction of continuous assessment has changed the teachers' assessment approaches, teachers' responses were varied. Some of them were of the view that the introduction of

continuous assessment in the new curriculum did not affect their assessment approaches which they have been using before. They indicated that the assessment methods they used to assess the learners previously, such as end of the week, month and the term tests were the same methods they were using to assess the learners even after continuous assessment was introduced. The only difference this time around was that the administration of the weekly and monthly tests were being emphasised. Other teachers however looked at the introduction of continuous assessment as having changed their assessment approaches in such a way that the introduction of continuous assessment has made teachers prepare the suitable assessment methods they would use to assess the learners during the teaching and learning process and this has made them plan and prepare lessons more thoroughly than they previously did before teaching in the classroom. In fact one teacher had this to say:

... a lot of preparation is needed for lessons now because now that continuous assessment is part and parcel of the teaching and learning process, means that a lot has to be done in terms of lesson preparation, preparation of teaching, learning and assessment resources so that learners' performance and achievement is evaluated on a regular basis.

It was also reported that in primary schools where there was more than one teacher for Expressive Arts for Standards 7 or 8, these teachers planned together and shared expertise in areas relating to continuous assessment in which they were not confident to use in the classroom. This has apparently brought team work and better relationships amongst teachers. They were willing to consult each other in areas of difficulty implementing or using continuous assessment, learn from each other, share experiences and expertise in continuous assessment, as the new curriculum has brought new approaches to assessment.

#### *Provision and adequacy of assessment materials*

Interviews with teachers indicated that before they were oriented to the new curriculum, assessment materials or resources were distributed throughout the country. These resources included learners' registers and assessment record books for recording learners' performance. However, it was reported that although these assessment resources were distributed to schools, they were not adequate. Assessment resources, just like any other instructional materials are very important to teaching and learning. These findings are consistent with Ratsatsi's argument about the importance of availability of adequate and appropriate resources for successful implementation of an educational innovation.

Ratsatsi (2005) argues that a curriculum change justifies its existence and defines its own delivery strategies embodied in teaching, learning and assessment materials. Therefore, their availability and adequacy are important in a curriculum change implementation. Hence the inadequacy of assessment resources or materials in its first two years of implementation affected the implementation of the continuous assessment policy in the primary schools in Malawi.

#### *Provision of infrastructure and facilities*

School principals were asked about the availability of infrastructure and facilities that could facilitate effective implementation of continuous assessment in the new curriculum. Some of them reported that their schools did not have enough classrooms. The classrooms that were available lacked adequate furniture such as desks and chairs. This made some learners sit on the floor which made it difficult for them to write properly. Due to lack of enough classroom space, some schools bunched learners together in one class causing the problem of overcrowding. In one case, about 132 learners were bunched together in one class in Standard 7. The overcrowding in classes made it difficult for teachers to carry out assessment, let alone offer individual help to learners. Such large teacher-learner ratios posed big challenges to teachers' effective implementation of the continuous assessment policy in the new curriculum. This impacted negatively on the achievement of the continuous assessment policy goals and objectives.

These findings are consistent with Khomani's (2005) argument about the importance of provision of necessary infrastructure and facilities to ensure successful implementation of an educational innovation.

Khomani (2005) contended that implementation of an educational innovation is always capital intensive. As such, for a curriculum reform to be successfully implemented, there is need for infrastructure to be available. Thus curriculum reform implementation fails because the inputs in education are not adequate and as a result, inadequate infrastructure militates against the implementation of a curriculum reform. This study rendered support to this.

Lack of infrastructure and facilities is very common in Malawi. This study found that teachers seldom used teaching and learning resources for engaging students in lesson activities on the few occasions they used such resources. When they did employ resources such as a piece of cloth and a needle for practising sewing stitches, the use of the resources was by the teacher only. The learners did not have an opportunity of hands-on learning of practical skills in Expressive Arts. Such a lack of facilities also affected the implementation of the continuous assessment policy as teachers were not able to assess learners' attainment of practical skills. This impacted negatively on the achievement of the continuous assessment policy, goals and objectives.

These findings on inadequate facilities in the twelve classrooms of this study are consistent with what Kaambankadzanja (2001) and Nsapato (2005) have argued – that lack of resources influence teachers' decisions in the classrooms. The lack of resources also validates the contention of some observers – that the Ministry of Education lacks commitment in the implementation of school curricula. Revelations at the Malawi National Educational Conference in 2005 (Mhango 2008) showed that the Ministry drags its feet in dealing with pertinent issues that affect the quality of education in the country. Kaambankadzanja (2001), argued that the Ministry's sluggish commitment to the planned educational activities reduced the effective implementation of the Malawi Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR). Nsapato (2005) also argued that the Ministry fails to achieve most of its plans because of a lack of aggression in tackling problems affecting the quality of education in the country.

### *Supervision*

Some of the school principals reported that they supervise their teachers in their implementation of continuous assessment. For example, one of the school principals remarked that

I organised an in-service training for the teachers here at the school on Assessment and I taught them how to use portfolios and other assessment tools. We also have a special mission statement on Continuous Assessment at this school.

When the school principal was requested if he could share the schools' mission statement on continuous assessment, he shared the mission statement which had the following as the intentions of the mission statement:

... to encourage teachers gather valid and reliable information about learners' performance; to improve the teaching and learning process through reliable feedback and to ensure that 98% of teachers assess learners through Continuous Assessment (CA) in addition to Summative Assessment (SA).

However, when the teachers were asked about whether they are supervised in their implementation of continuous assessment, the teachers reported that school principals and section heads hardly observed lessons and their assessment practices in their classrooms. The reasons given by the teachers for this were many and varied. Many teachers reported that because of understaffing, section heads and in some

cases school principals had classes of their own to teach. Due to too much workload, they did not have time to observe lessons. Thus, the PCAR was based on the wrong assumption that school principals would supervise teachers which this study has established not to be the case.

#### *Continuing Professional Development for teachers*

The Standards 7 and 8 teachers who participated in the study were asked about the support they got as regards professional development to help them in implementing continuous assessment effectively. From the interviews, it was reported that most of the in-service training that were organised for them focused on teaching in general, and not continuous assessment specifically. For example, one of the teachers remarked:

I was trained in teaching Expressive Arts. I was not trained on how to use Continuous Assessment.

In fact, some teachers complained about the lack of continuing professional development with the implementation of the continuous assessment policy. The teachers felt the need for continuing professional development activities because they reported that it was difficult for them to do or conduct continuous assessment due to lack of sufficient background knowledge of continuous assessment. This shows that there was a need for rigorous continuous professional development of teachers if the teachers were to implement continuous assessment effectively. These findings are consistent with Khomani's argument that implementation of an educational innovation is built around a climate of acceptance for change.

Khomani (2005) argued that an educational change should be facilitated by ensuring that the change meets recognised needs, establishes clear goals, develops support systems and provides in-service training and needed resources for institutional growth. However, the implementation process often overlooks implementers' skills and beliefs that can affect the implementation. Since the focus of the in-service training conducted by the national curriculum development centre, the Malawi Institute of Education on continuous assessment was school-based in-service training of teachers, the primary education teaching methods advisors (PEAs) who are overseers of a number of schools were left-out. This meant that the PEAs who were key in the implementation had not yet conceptualised the change and were not clear about how they could assist the teachers in implementing the continuous assessment policy effectively. Thus they could not perform their roles and responsibilities in relation to the implementation of the continuous assessment policy. Hence, they lacked the skills required to perform their roles as supervisors in the teachers' implementation of continuous assessment.

These findings are consistent with Chimombo's (2001) argument that effective implementation of social interventions require time, personal interactions and contacts and other forms of people-based support, and there is no substitution for the primacy of personal contact among implementers, and between implementers and planners if the difficult process of unlearning old roles and learning new ones is to occur. There was little contact between schools and the primary education advisors. This type of implementation often threatens and deskills the teachers who may resist implementing the proposed change because they feel abandoned and isolated. This points to the fact that curriculum reform implementation in Malawi is based on the wrong assumption that the bureaucratic structures in the education system would facilitate implementation. On the contrary, most of these structures are marred by weak administrative capacity. As a result curriculum innovations end up being ineffectively implemented.

#### *Challenges in the implementation of continuous assessment*

Teachers of Standards 7 and 8 were asked to state the challenges they faced in the implementation of continuous assessment. Some of these problems were reported as follows: inadequate and lack of assessment materials such as record books; the absence of continuous professional development of teachers

was another challenge teachers were facing in the implementation of continuous assessment: the large teacher-learner ratio was posing a big challenge in assessment during instruction and the preparation of assessment tools and assessing learners continuously needed a lot of time. Assessing learners continuously proved to be difficult due to lack of assessment resources and space for storing the portfolios and rubrics. Furthermore, teachers lacked expertise in continuous assessment and found it difficult to cope with the task. The challenges that have been highlighted above indicate that curriculum reform implementation is a multi-dimensional process that requires meeting the required needs of teachers and developing support systems for implementation, providing training and resources for the implementation to be effective. These findings are consistent with Middleton and Verspoor's (1990) arguments about the need for new management strategies for successful implementation of an educational innovation. Middleton and Verspoor argued that innovations seeking to promote change usually require different management strategies. Planners must not only be concerned with the innovation but also with the complex process of introducing and institutionalising change. However, curriculum reforms implementation in Malawi are based on the assumption that since it is centrally developed by the Ministry of Education, whatever changes the curriculum brings would be effectively implemented without taking into account the needs of the implementers as well as the contexts in which the change will take place.

## **DISCUSSION**

The conceptual distinctions of Illuminative evaluation, the 'instructional system' and 'learning milieu', were employed in this study to compare the PCAR with what teachers actually do in conducting continuous assessment.

This study found a 'gap' between the 'instructional system' and the learning milieu. The study found that in the majority of lessons, learners were not assigned any specific tasks to monitor their learning progress in the lessons. Continuous assessment was evident only in 5% of the lessons (four out of 71 lessons of Expressive Arts observed in the study). In addition to the irregular integration of assessment in the teaching and learning process in the lessons, the classroom observations also showed that there was no teacher who administered the end of month tests for purposes of summative assessment, and in cases of written assessment tasks, the tasks were merely aimed at recall of facts. Teachers gave two reasons for their failure to integrate continuous assessment in their lessons. Firstly, they said that integrating assessment in the lessons created additional workload for them. The teachers indicated that combining teaching and assessment required a lot of time and they did not have time to do that within the official allocated time of 35 minutes duration of an Expressive Arts lesson. Secondly, the teachers said that they were not trained on how to do continuous assessment.

The teachers' varied perceptions about continuous assessment observed in the study shows that the process of educational innovation was planned at the centre and fed into the system for implementation. These findings are consistent with Khomani's argument about the challenges of top-down educational reforms.

Khomani (2005) argued that top-down educational reforms are based on the assumption that the process of educational reform is a rational sequence of phases in which an educational innovation is discovered, developed, produced and disseminated to the users to implement. Though stakeholder consultations might have been there in the PCAR process, its implementation strategy might have been ineffective.

These findings are also consistent with Middleton and Verspoor's (1990) argument about the need for educational innovations to involve those to implement them if they are to be successful. Thus Middleton and Verspoor (1990) argued that educational innovations are 'people-centred' activities. They depend for their success on the values, attitudes and behaviour of intended beneficiaries and on their effective participation in the educational innovation's design and management. Hence, the teachers' varied perceptions on continuous assessment might have been influenced by their lack of involvement and participation in

the design and development process of the continuous assessment policy. Furthermore, implementing continuous assessment may have needed an extensive amount of professional development of teachers especially in training them on how continuous assessment differs from continuous testing. However, this was not the case with the Expressive Arts teachers. The kind of training teachers went through did not prepare them enough to implement continuous assessment. This was the reason why teachers were finding it difficult to integrate assessment in the teaching and learning process, thereby making its implementation ineffective.

The findings of this study further confirm what the Commonwealth of Learning (2000) has argued that centre-periphery approach to educational innovation's design and development is often ineffective because it does not bring on board teachers who are the implementers of the proposed innovations during the innovation's development process. Therefore, teachers are less obliged to implement the suggested innovations or changes. This was exactly what was happening in the twelve classrooms that were observed in this study.

### **CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE OF THE STUDY**

The study has established that continuous assessment has inherent challenges of implementation in the country. The contexts of South Africa where continuous assessment may have been conceived are different from those of Malawi. Continuous assessment needs small class sizes as well as adequate resourcing for it to work. As a third world country, Malawi does not have adequate resources for implementing a curriculum innovation whose design is a product of some contextual realities which are different from those where the curriculum design was conceived. This study has confirmed the challenge of implementing continuous assessment in the new curriculum.

The study informs the decision makers; the Malawi Institute of Education, the national curriculum development centre in Malawi and the Ministry of Education on the appropriate strategies to adopt in the implementation of the continuous assessment policy in the country. Other partners in the process of implementation, particularly the teachers who took part in the research may also find the information useful. The study may also be of interest to a wider research community in Malawi as well as in the other countries in the South African Development Community (SADC) region. This study has opened up more areas for further research work that can be carried out or conducted in Malawi and in other countries in the SADC region.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has established that teachers' practices were characterised by an informal, technical form of assessment, which privileged rote recall of facts. This shows that teachers have a restricted understanding of continuous assessment policy in the new curriculum in Malawi.

These findings are consistent with the findings of Susuwele-Banda (2005: 115) in his study of assessment practices of teachers in rural primary schools in Malawi. Susuwele-Banda noted that work done in class was not used as feedback for pupils. The teachers lacked both knowledge and skills to implement feedback effectively. They gave no individual written or verbal feedback to students. There was no written feedback in students' notebooks apart from crossed out work or work marked correct and in some cases marks indicating how many questions the student got correct.

This study thus recommends that teachers be developed in continuous assessment principles and practice both at pre-service and in-service levels including:

- a. how answers to oral questioning in lessons informs teachers' actions in the classrooms can be more carefully spread around the class
- b. how peer and self assessment could be productively used to assist with assessment.

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