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Developing School Heads As Instructional Leaders In School-Based Assessment: Challenges And Next Steps

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Abstract: The study explored challenges faced by school leaders in the Pacific nation of Solomon Islands in school-based assessment, and the adequacy of an assessment course to prepare them. A questionnaire including both open and closed-ended questions elicited relevant data from the school leaders. Modelling best practices in school-based assessment was recognised as a major challenge for them. Their responses indicate their feeling that the limitations of their knowledge and skills lie at the heart of their difficulties in effective use of this assessment method. They trace the origin of their problems to an initial teacher training programme that included little on assessment, which adversely affected their ability to work as instructional leaders in assessment for learning and teaching in schools. Their critical reflection on the assessment course they completed as part of a current leadership programme suggests the preparation has been adequate in giving them new knowledge and skills in applying best practices in school-based assessment. Though only on a small scale, this study implies that greater attention to this area to promote children's learning is warranted. The value of best practices in assessment is applicable not only in Solomon Islands but also in other education systems within and beyond the Pacific region, to ensure meaningful progress and development in education.

Key Terms: instructional leaders, assessment, Solomon Islands, learning and teaching, learning outcomes

Introduction

In the field of education, assessment of learners' progress serves important purposes for all who have a vested interest in the enterprise. Generally speaking, assessment can help provide vital information on which to base sound and apposite educational decisions (Black et al., 2003; Croft & Singh, 1994; Linn & Gronlund, 2000; Sangster & Overall, 2006). In particular, assessments serve specific purposes for school professionals, students, parents, governments, and employers. For school professionals, assessment provides them with information about the effectiveness of their pedagogy and the curriculum materials used for learning. For those who have most at stake in the enterprise of education, such as parents and governments, assessment

results provide them with vital information about the rate of return on investment, and whether it is bearing fruit or not. This calls for school professionals, particularly school heads, to be more accountable to various stakeholders, such as governments and parents, and for best assessment practices to be applied to gain useful insights into how well schools are doing their job. In this regard, assessments need to be carried out well to ensure they serve their intended functions. Although assessment plays a significant part in learning and teaching, school leaders and teachers appear to have limited knowledge and skills in this area. From this standpoint it is vital to explore assessment practices, especially in schools in the Pacific region. As a preliminary investigation, this study focuses on challenges school leaders find they face in the area of school-based assessment and on the perceived adequacy of the preparation they underwent in an assessment course they completed as part of their leadership and management training programme.

The Existing Literature

One of the aims of assessment practices is to determine the effectiveness of the teaching and learning processes going on in the classroom and, in turn, to find ways to enrich children's learning outcomes (Croft & Singh, 1994). To succeed in reaching these goals in Solomon Islands and other Pacific Islands nations, it is imperative that school leaders be well equipped in their crucial role as instructional leaders, particularly in the area of school-based assessment, which is a relative newcomer on the regional stage. School leaders need deeper knowledge and skills to enable them to demonstrate and model sound assessment practices. Superficial understanding of school-based assessment may hinder their judgement, adversely affecting decisions they make. Through applying best practices in assessment, school leaders can contribute towards improving children's performance in their school work (Donaldson, 2001; William et al., 2004).

In Solomon Islands as in most Pacific Islands nations, school leaders are also classroom instructors and this role and expectation warrants lifting their competence in undertaking quality assessment in schools. Assessment-literate school leaders are vital for success in school-based assessment. They can then continually make instructional decisions whilst in the process of teaching, calling their shots on the basis of oral feedback from students and through numerous informal means. One such means is observation, which is indispensable in the effective teaching process. These informal methods of assessment are intended to complement and supplement formal methods. Sangster and Overall (2006, p. 16) make this point:

Assessment will be viewed as a process which can be applied to many situations and the types of assessment are just the tools that you can use to gather the data to inform your practice. For too long assessment has been seen as something that can be attached to the rest of teaching: almost an optional after-thought.

Likewise, Linn and Gronlund (2000, pp. 31–32) characterise assessment as “a general term that includes the full range of procedures used to gain information about student learning ... and the formation of value judgements concerning learning process ...”. These authors indicate that assessment is a process, and school leaders need to be proficient in the process to ensure that sound decisions are made about children's performance and progress (Linn & Gronlund, 2000; Sangster & Overall, 2006). The expectation that schools will report on students' progress not

only to parents but also to other stakeholders means it is vital that school leaders are well prepared to carry out assessment on an on-going basis, making numerous well informed decisions, for which it is assumed they have the relevant knowledge and skills to be able to undertake both informal and formal assessments more responsibly and professionally (Linn & Gronlund, 2000; Popham, 2003; Stiggins, 2002). Thus, in its broadest sense, assessment covers both formal and informal procedures of collecting information about students' progress in their school work, not for the purpose of measuring and ranking them against each other, but as a means of understanding where the students are and where they need more help and guidance.

Besides more formal assessments such as tests and examinations, school leaders and teachers should realise that they need to pay also more attention to informal procedures of assessment, which are generally known as formative assessment, that is, assessment for learning. As far back as the 1990s, Croft and Singh (1994, p. 7) mentioned that "Teachers need little convincing that teaching and assessment go together and that there are many ways of using assessment as a teaching and learning aid". All school professionals including school heads need to take heed of this advice. In the same vein, Black and his colleagues (2003, p.9) is emphatic:

Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils' learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability; or of ranking or certifying competence.

Muralidhar (2009, p. 81) echoed similar sentiments: "Assessment for learning should be the central focus of Ministries of Education for raising educational standards in all our Pacific countries". For example, teachers can ask questions during the lesson, respond to students' questions, move around in the classroom giving advice to students and marking students' exercises. Even though these interactions are unplanned, they provide valuable information to the teacher on a daily basis about students' progress in learning. This argument is in favour of informal assessments and the importance of continuing to emphasise them in all learning and teaching sessions (Commonwealth of Learning, 2005; Croft & Singh, 1994; Waugh & Gronlund, 2013; William et al., 2004). However, studies have also shown the distressing absence of assessment for learning, primarily because school leaders lack the knowledge and skills in school-based assessment (Noonan & Renihan, 2006; Stiggins, 2002). Pongi (2004, p. 19) alludes to this when he writes:

A key issue that contributes to the persistence of stereotype teaching and learning in both primary and secondary is teachers' limited expertise in the use of assessment to gather information that would help improve their teaching as well as student learning,

This should be of concern to all stakeholders, particularly the principal one, which in this case is the education ministry. Since school leaders serve as instructional leaders, they should be professionally prepared so that they can support and monitor teachers in employing good assessment practices. Should teachers have difficulties, they must be able to rely on school leaders for guidance and support: as instructional leaders, school leaders need to be well versed in the processes and purposes of assessment. Otherwise they will not be able to provide advice and guidance to their teachers on various aspects of assessment, such as those characteristics associated with the two fundamental principles of assessment – validity and reliability

(Commonwealth of Learning, 2005). With adequate and suitable training on assessment, school leaders can also help teachers to design deeper and more effective assessment tasks. However, limited knowledge and skills regarding the basic principles of good practice in assessment will naturally limit what they can do in this very important area.

One of the most important parts of the planning process for any formal assessment is preparing the test blueprint (Barry & King, 2004). To do this, teachers need relevant knowledge and skills. The assessment plan or the test blueprint will help guide them to construct the test items. In this regard, school heads' familiarity with the two concepts of validity and reliability is important in offering guidance to teachers in the construction of test items (Barry & King, 2004; Croft & Singh, 1994). Knowledge and skills in these are essential in order to have well-constructed test questions and, above all, to have confidence in the assessment outcomes. Special care is necessary when preparing summative tests, for example, as these may contribute towards important decisions about a child's future, such as employment or further education choices.

In Pacific schools, summative assessment is used for promoting children to the next level of study, for awarding annual prizes, and even for preparing school reports that are provided to the parents. Unfortunately, a supposedly objective score of X out of Y proves whether an individual is a success, a near miss or a failure. Because of the weight of these functions, it is the professional responsibility of school heads to ensure that all tests for the purpose of reporting are valid and reliable, and measure the important learning outcomes of schooling (Croft & Singh, 1994). Another important assessment skill school heads need to possess is the interpretation of the test scores. To make sense of the scores, school professionals, particularly the school heads, need to analyse the scores. Having some mathematical knowledge and skills will facilitate this. In most cases, basic calculations relating to measures of variability and measures of central tendency such as mean, standard deviation, and range are necessary to get an authentic picture about students' performance and progress in school work.

The preceding review of literature clearly demonstrates the need for school leaders as instructional leaders to possess relevant knowledge and skills to be able to implement best practices in school-based assessment. This demands the devotion of adequate attention to improving school leaders' skills in all aspects relating to best assessment practices, during all pre-service and future professional development programmes. Only then will the educational practitioners – both school leaders and teachers – be in a better position to carry out assessment more professionally for the benefit of children's education.

Preparation on School-Based Assessment

Recognising the significance and urgency of preparing school leaders adequately in all aspects of assessment, various educational reforms have led the Ministry of Education in Solomon Islands to seek funding assistance from NZAID to help in this area (Lingam et al., 2014). To this end, Solomon Islands school leaders undertook a course on educational assessment as part of the package of courses towards the Diploma in Education and Change programme offered by the University of the South Pacific (USP). Topics included an overview of educational assessment; planning of assessment; constructing teacher-made tests; making sense of test scores; validity, reliability, and item analysis; the theory of formative assessment; formative assessment in the classroom; portfolios; and assessment perspectives in the Pacific Islands Nations (PINs). The course was run at the Solomon Islands Campus of USP in Honiara,

for 4 weeks during the month of July 2014. Such off-season offerings – replacing USP summer schools – are generally known as flexi-schools. Course materials consisted of two course books that included relevant readings and activities on each topic; and continuous assessment complemented a three-hour end-of-course examination, each component worth 50 per cent. Because at the end of the day school leaders are responsible overall for the instruction going on in their schools, this was deemed a relevant offering as the final course towards the Diploma in Educational Leadership and Change programme these school leader enrollees were pursuing.

Significance of the Study

Local literature on various aspects of education, including leadership and assessment issues, is still extremely limited in the small island states of the Pacific (Sanga, 2012). This creates difficulties for informing or influencing policy and practice in almost all areas of education, including educational assessment. Although some tangible contributions have been made such as the teachers' guide book on assessment that was prepared by Croft and Singh (1994), the area of assessment has been untouched for many years. In particular, since none of the locally generated studies so far has addressed the area of leadership in instructional matters with a focus on assessment, this study, though small in scale, should contribute valuable information and insights about educational assessment practices in Solomon Islands schools.

The findings of such a study would help various stakeholders, school leaders and teachers to subject their position on educational assessment issues and practices at the school level to critical re-examination. In addition, the findings could be useful to both teacher training institutions and the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MoEHRD). For the teacher education institutions, future training in assessment could thus be strengthened and improved to ensure that it aligns more constructively with the professional needs of school leaders and classroom teachers. MoEHRD, the key player responsible for the education sector, would thus clearly be the prime beneficiary in the improved quality of the education they could provide. Based on the findings it could lead to better informed education ministry practice, especially in monitoring performance and mounting suitable in-service assessment training programmes, would benefit all school leaders and teachers, and raise the quality of the education provided for the nation's children.

One final hope is that what comes to light may influence other local practitioners to undertake further research in various dimensions of educational assessment within and beyond Solomon Islands, especially in the other small island developing states of the Pacific and overseas. Understanding the present situation opens the door for letting improvements in. Improvements in education today are the firm foundation for the structures of our future.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was a preliminary exploration of assessment practices, focusing specifically on the challenges school-based assessment poses for school leaders, and their preparation for their instructional leadership role through the educational assessment course they had just completed. The underlying research question was: *What challenges do school*

leaders face in school-based assessment and how well did the course equip them for coping with assessment of this type?

Method

Participants

For this study, the researchers considered it professionally sound to target a specific group – in this case, those school leaders who were enrolled in USP's assessment course offered during the flexi-school in July 2014, the final in the series in the integrated package of courses in the Diploma in Educational Leadership programme for the cohort. The resultant purposive sample of 38 school heads was invited to participate in the study. Seven were females and the rest were males. These leaders shared an average of eight years of leadership experience.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected by means of a questionnaire consisting of both open and closed-ended questions to determine challenges school leaders faced in the area of school-based assessment and the adequacy of preparation the assessment course gave them. The questionnaire was designed on the basis of a synthesis of the literature reviewed, and the choice and construction of items reflected the author's numerous years of work experience in the Pacific region. With regard to closed-ended questions, the questionnaire listed a set of statements relating to the assessment course taught and the school leaders were asked to reflect on the course critically and rate each of the statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Inadequate preparation; 5 = Adequate preparation), according to the adequacy of the preparation it gave them. This provided the quantitative data. In addition, the participants were asked to choose and comment on two aspects of the course they considered would have benefited them more in terms of their professional preparation and their instructional leadership work. Apart from this, the participants were asked to list and explain some challenges faced by them in school-based assessment prior to studying the course on assessment which they completed in the diploma programme. These responses provided the qualitative data (Creswell, 2013).

Analysis of the quantitative data used the common measures of central tendency – statistical mean and standard deviation (Muijs, 2011). The statements having means of below 3.0 were categorised as having a lower level of preparation and those above the mean of 3.0 were rated as having a higher level of preparation. A thematic approach was utilised for the qualitative data analysis (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). One crucial theme that emerged from the analysis of the data on the challenges faced by school leaders in school-based assessment was modelling best practices in assessment leadership. Some relevant quotations from the qualitative data are presented to provide further insights into school leaders' views on the challenges they experienced before the assessment course. This is done on the advice of Ruddock (1993, p. 19) with reference to qualitative data: "some statements carry a rich density of meaning in a few words".

Ethic

At the end of the flexi-school in July 2014, the principal researcher, armed with MoEHRD approval, introduced the questionnaire by explaining its purpose and how the findings

could assist educational personnel within the central and provincial education authorities. The personal distribution and collection of the questionnaires assured a 100 per cent return rate, one of the few pay-offs for the small scale of the study. Confidentiality of the details of the volunteer participants was, as promised, ensured by the protection of their anonymity at every stage (Creswell, 2013).

Study Findings

The findings are presented in two parts, the first covering the challenges the school leaders felt they faced in school-based assessment, and the second dealing with the adequacy of the assessment course they had just completed in preparing them to cope.

Challenges Faced By School Leaders in Assessment

The most significant challenge the school leaders felt they faced was that they were not able to model and facilitate best practices in assessment. Such best practices included providing constructive feedback to stakeholders, offering guidance and support to teachers, preparing good-quality assessment tasks, and undertaking assessment for learning. Typical responses from the school leaders on providing constructive feedback were:

Sometimes I am not sure whether I am giving the right feedback to parents and others.

We just fill in the report forms for the children and they take them home ... I have difficulties making appropriate comments.

I am not sure if I am analysing the data correctly and this affects my message to the students and parents.

I have been facing difficulties in the area of interpreting the results ... communicating children's performance is not easy.

Many of the school leaders indicated that they did not feel able to offer guidance and support to teachers confidently and professionally. As one commented, 'I graduated many years ago and do not have much knowledge on school-based assessment ... I cannot help'. Another mentioned, 'I do not feel comfortable staff coming to see me for help on preparing test blueprint ... I have little knowledge in this area'. With respect to assessment *for* learning, the emphasis was very little as many school leaders reported that they focused on assessment *of* learning. They relied on the major internal assessments and did not place much emphasis on assessment for learning. These are some of the typical comments from the school leaders illustrating this:

*I concentrate on end of term test and Mid-Year and Annual Examinations.
The usual assessment I am familiar with is the end of term test and not the informal ones.
We were only teaching but not measuring how much learning was taking place.*

Most of them reported that they had limited knowledge of best practices or principles in assessment and, as a result, were not able to apply good assessment practices such as in preparing assessment tools of any quality; this was recognized as challenging for them. Some representative statements are:

When I used to write test questions, I did not consider the learning outcomes ... I just write the questions I think should be included and the marks to be allocated. I did not know about test plan, test blueprint. There were repetition of questions, more questions from some topics, and even some answers were in the test itself.

[In the past] test papers were not edited and they were [just] printed as they were given in ... [We did not regard the] quality of the test paper as a big deal, but just to have a test paper [of some sort completed on time] was a deal.

My teachers including myself just concentrated on teaching with the aim of completing the required units per term or year. I did not know much about the different levels of cognitive skills ... When recalling on examinations and tests I have prepared, I may have only covered the three lowest levels.

I did not understand the importance of assessment and measurement ... being in the field for over 10 years I [still] did not understand why assessment must be done properly and carefully. What was practised was just to follow the designed teaching program, prepare homework activities, unit tests ... enter raw marks in the score sheet ... locate positions for each pupil. Apart from this I had no other knowledge of why the mean, median, mode and standard deviation to list a few [might be useful].

Apart from the challenges faced in engaging effectively in school-based assessment responsibilities, school leaders also made mention of factors that compounded these challenges. These included inadequate training in assessment during their initial teacher training, and lack of subsequent in-service training on assessment. Due to their lack of knowledge and skills, their assessment practices did not follow the basic principles of assessment. In relation to initial professional preparation, there was virtually unanimous agreement that they did not do enough work on assessment whilst at the training college. Typical comments include:

When on training from 1997 to 1999 for the certificate in primary teaching, the programme did not include much on assessment. We were given a book on assessment, Pacific Islands Classroom Assessment (PICA) but no one really taught us about all the important aspects of assessment. When one of the writers of the book came he was invited to the College to discuss briefly the basics to assessment, for only two days.

Not having enough information or knowledge on assessment such as assessment strategies. We just covered a little bit in our training. Practically at the College we were only introduced to some basic things about assessment. There was not much emphasis placed on assessment. The teacher training institution has failed to equip us with knowledge and skills on assessment. The course on assessment needs to be upgraded.

Also, all of them indicated that there had been no later in-service training programmes on assessment. Some of the school leaders put it thus:

We were not provided any other in-service training on assessment. What I know about assessment is by asking others teachers in the school.

I have not attended any training on assessment since I graduated from the teachers college in 1994.

Teachers who graduated over 15 years ago were never up-skilled on this crucial area. The Ministry of Education through the National Examination Standards Unit has never done anything to improve the situation. Ignorance on this vital component of learning and teaching has been an outstanding issue which requires immediate attention by all stakeholders.

Another reason for the challenges they faced was the lack of support from the education authority. This was articulated by one of the school leaders as follows:

There was no monitoring from the education authority concerning student assessment or how to carry out student assessment properly, maybe because they too have limited understanding on assessment.

Adequacy of the in-Course Preparation on School-Based Assessment

In this section the quantitative results are presented first, followed by the qualitative data. The analysis of the quantitative data is presented in Table 1 showing the school leaders' ratings for each statement. Almost all of the statements received a favourable rating and a perusal shows that out of the total of 11 factors, 10 were rated positively and only one received a rating just slightly below the mean of 3.0. The result indicates that the school leaders felt the course on assessment adequately prepared them for school-based assessment responsibilities.

STATEMENTS	Mean (on 5-point scale)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Gained adequate knowledge about educational assessment practices in the PINs	4.5	0.26
Acquired relevant information about other assessment tools such as portfolios	4.2	0.29
Made me aware of a variety of formative assessment tools, which I can now use	4.0	0.32
Gained sufficient information about the significance of assessment in schools	4.0	0.34
Have acquired knowledge and skills for planning assessments using test blueprint	3.9	0.51
Understand the importance of learning outcomes in assessment	3.8	0.45
Able to apply effectively the key concepts such as of validity and reliability in assessment practices	3.4	0.38
Have acquired knowledge about the need for assessment to be part of teaching/learning process, assessment <i>for</i> learning.	3.4	0.33
Have gained useful knowledge to interpret different derived scores	3.1	0.39
Have acquired knowledge and skills to construct a variety of assessment tools	3.0	0.36
Can confidently analyse the scores using both measures of variability and measures of central tendency	2.4	0.47

Table 1: Preparation for school-based assessment (N = 38)

When asked about which two aspects of the assessment course they consider they need more education and training in, the majority of the school leaders stated that they had problems with analysing assessment scores, and needed sharpened skills for planning the test blueprint. Also, a few of them mentioned interpretation of scores. With regard to analysing the scores, approximately 60 per cent were requesting more education and training, in typical comments such as:

Have to practise calculating the derived scores using the formula ... I am not good at mathematics but I know what to do.

I still have some difficulties with calculations. However, I know the formula. Therefore I need more time with calculations, especially finding the standard deviation and drawing the distribution curve.

I do not have much trouble with the course. I have a bit of a problem when it comes to the correlation coefficient especially the formula. I think I should be okay with some practice.

Not really confident in doing the calculations relating to measures of variability and central tendency.

In planning for tests it is always good practice to prepare a test blueprint. However, about 53 per cent of the school leaders indicated that they need more practice, and this was best captured by the following comments:

To prepare the test blueprint requires more practice. But I know what it is.

I have difficulties with deciding what types of questions to use to test the different learning outcomes.

I need more time to be able to prepare a good test blueprint.

Another area they indicate as needing attention is the interpretation of scores. About 10 per cent of the participants indicated that they still have some difficulties in accurately interpreting the scores. This is voiced well by one of the teachers:

There is a need for me to gain more knowledge and skills about interpretation of derived scores.

Discussion of the Findings

The purpose of the study was to garner insights from the school leaders about assessment practices in Solomon Islands schools. Specifically, their views were sought on the challenges they face in school-based assessment and the preparation they were given in an assessment course that they had just completed. The findings of the study illustrate modelling best practices in assessment as a major challenge for the school leaders. They faced difficulties in providing comprehensive feedback on children's learning outcomes to parents, guide and support teachers, prepare high quality assessment tasks and in carrying out effectively assessment *for learning*. These are important assessment responsibilities of all instructional leaders and competence in each one is critical in enhancing children's learning outcomes. The findings of the study has also demonstrated that, in the absence of relevant knowledge and skills on assessment, difficulties abound relating to the application of the basic principles of best practices in assessment in everyday learning and teaching activity. Almost all school leaders pointed out the challenges they experienced due to their limited knowledge and skills in assessment, and this may have adversely affected children's school experience and learning outcomes. As reported by the school leaders, the provider of initial teacher education did not prepare them well on assessment. Also, hardly any in-service education and training was provided to the school leaders by the principal stakeholder, who in turn actually expects them to guide other teachers on instruction and assessment.

Given the grave challenges faced by school leaders in their professional work, the authorities concerned should try to take constructive steps to improve school leaders' professional knowledge and skills in assessment. Doubtless other teachers who graduated around the same time as these school leaders are also likely to possess little knowledge and skills in school-based assessment. We have seen that assessment provides useful information about the effectiveness and efficiency of the school system. Bearing this in mind, the lack of ideas on best assessment practices makes it difficult to make informed decisions on how well schools are

delivering educational services. This viewpoint is supported by various scholars (Croft & Singh, 1994; Linn & Gronlund, 2000; Sangster & Overall, 2006; Waugh & Gronlund, 2013). Since school leaders are a critical input to the success of an educational organisation, they need to be well versed in all aspects of school work, including assessment. However, in this study the findings show that teacher education and training has been inadequate in developing assessment knowledge and skills, leaving school leaders appearing to have a narrow conception of the nature and potential of assessment. They may perceive that assessment is exclusive from instruction and that testing and examinations are an end in themselves (Black et al., 2003; Popham, 2003; William et al., 2004).

Without having better knowledge and skills in assessment, preparation of good-quality assessment tasks and undertaking of assessment for learning is bound to be difficult and ultimately children are likely to suffer the most. They are likely to face difficulties in grasping in concrete and understandable terms the idea of what they are capable of achieving; nor will they be learning to extend themselves to learn more of the wonderful world and life in which they live and move and have their being. Since the fundamental aim of any assessment should be to show what the students have proved themselves capable of doing, application of best practices in assessment can help achieve this (Black et al., 2003; Linn & Gronlund, 2000). In Solomon Islands as well as in other Pacific Islands states, the school leader, apart from bearing the leadership role, is invariably a classroom teacher. Therefore, school leaders' lack of knowledge and skills relating to assessment is likely to have had serious effects on their professional judgement about learning and teaching and, in turn, children's progress in school work. It will have provided their colleagues a somewhat deformed role model of how and why to use class-based assessment well. Additionally, the reports they have provided to parents and significant others who invest so much in children's education may not have been holistic and usefully meaningful.

The assessment course conducted for the cohort was therefore timely. The analysis of the quantitative data (Table 1) shows that this course had given the school leaders a sound preparation in instructional leadership practices. Mean ratings awarded by participants, with the exception of one at 2.4, are above, and many of them significantly above, the mean rating of 3.0 (Table 1). The associated standard deviation (Table 1) for each statement illustrates that there were no significant variations in the ratings. Familiarity with and competence in the best practices associated with school-based assessment can contribute significantly towards improving instruction. Accordingly, school leaders who participated in this course now understand and have the ability to apply the two key concepts associated with assessment, namely, validity and reliability. Literature demonstrates the significance of not only knowing the two concepts but also their application in all classroom assessment work (Commonwealth of Learning, 2005). School leaders have now also acquired sufficient knowledge about embedding assessment in the learning and teaching processes, and this is encouraging. The available literature advocates this as a good assessment practice (Black et al., 2003; Muralidhar, 2009). However, it needs to be acknowledged here that at times, what is learnt is not actually transferred into practice, so there does remain a gap between theory and practice. The aspects relating to the course that school leaders suggested need more practice include preparing analysis of scores and the devising of test blueprints. With respect to the first, the school leaders may, depending on their own educational history, be weak or lacking confidence in mathematical computation and this could be a hindrance in carrying out effective analysis of scores. However, in school-based assessment, simple and basic measures of central tendency,

chiefly the mean, median, range and standard deviation, are computed. The course has helped school leaders to acquire a basis in relevant knowledge and skills. Prior to the course the school leaders were not well prepared to undertake classroom assessment effectively and efficiently; now they are in a position to practise and refine new knowledge and skills that will expand their understanding of the potential of the analysis to shed new light on students' learning achievement. As mentioned, school leaders reported that the course they had undertaken at the training college did not equip them well for the work now required of them in measuring students' performance authentically. Since assessment has a profound impact on what is regarded as being students' learning and achievement – although no doubt they have also learnt a great deal else that assessment tools know and care nothing about – these school leaders may not have engaged meaningfully in school-based assessment. It can be argued that school leaders would have done a better job in school-based assessment in the many years of their teaching experience if the initial teacher training programme had adequately prepared them for school-based assessment. This, to a large extent, may have had an unfortunate negative influence on their instructional leadership role as well, since it is assumed that they are to be role models in instruction and assessment.

Implications

The findings from this study warrant the attention of all stakeholders and in particular, the education ministry as principal stakeholder, in the best interests of children's education. Even though this study sampled only 38 school leaders, it has produced valuable insights into challenges relating to practitioners' knowledge and skills in school-based assessment. From this perspective, the next step calls for the provision of suitable opportunities for the up-skilling of school professionals, particularly school leaders, in matters pertaining to improving the practices of assessment, which would ultimately provide the benefit of a higher quality of education to the children and provide authentic reporting on children's performance.

In future, replication of the study with a larger number of school leaders and teachers could be undertaken in light of the current findings. This study could also be a springboard for other similar studies in the small island states of the Pacific region. Future research should also delve into the impact of the assessment course in developing the capacity of the current cohort of school leaders in handling school-based assessment. With these school leaders it remains to be seen how much of the learning is retained, consolidated and deepened with the passage of time. This empirical study therefore, would show how much of what they acquired is actually transferred into their daily professional practice. The dearth of research literature on educational assessment in the Pacific region spotlights the need for more in-depth and large-scale research, instead of 'one shot' small-scale studies that may not have sufficient weight to inform and influence policy and practice.

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