

Interview

Jacob Tharu (JT) talks to
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A student of psychology with a special interest in educational assessment, Professor Jacob Tharu retired after thirty years of service in the Department of Evaluation, CIEFL, (now known as EFL University). Post-retirement, he has been working with various NGOs in the education sector, and has also been associated with assessment-linked programmes of the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT), some state SCERTs and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA).

Geetha Durairajan and Lina Mukhopadhyay jointly transcribed and edited the interview.

GD: Good morning. One of the most current ‘topics’ in the area of evaluation is continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE). Could you tell us something about your views on CCE and how important it is for a classroom teacher?

JT: Yes. We have been talking about continuous and comprehensive evaluation for the last two to three years, but we seem to have forgotten that this is a slogan that has been around for nearly 30 years. It was first mentioned in 1985-86 in the new National Policy on Education, and has been slowly taking shape. CCE, for me, is much more than frequent classroom testing. In fact, I regard the current CCE post-National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 as something very different from the older pre-NCF scheme; it has a new philosophy about the nature of knowledge gained by the student. It was in the NCF that a lot of ideas were first put together to form a new vision. Some of these are especially relevant for CCE and are briefly explained as follows:

Firstly, **the child is a co-constructor of knowledge and so a participant in the transaction of the curriculum.** This is not a very new idea, but as a curricular statement it is very important. Secondly, there is an emphasis on going **beyond the textbook**, and relating knowledge to life outside the school. The third

idea of **valuing, even celebrating diversity** is linked with the first two ideas. These ideas were linked creatively in the NCF document to support the assertion that **the learning trajectory of a child is not pre-determined.** The low pedagogic value of conventional achievement is shown up here. Tests such as those conducted at the end of the unit or term or year at any grade level assess **only** learning of what has been pre-specified and nothing beyond it. They are summative, and describe the student’s status after the teaching is over. What pedagogic value can they have? It is only in the NCF’s overall approach, which recognizes unpredictable learning, that the wider scope of CCE becomes relevant, and I would add, possible.

GD: Could you clarify this point?

This is a strong statement, I agree. But take the old fixed syllabus and the fixed question paper and the pre-determined marking guidelines; where was the need for the flexible testing associated with CCE? When the aim is to ensure that learners are learning what they are supposed to learn in a predetermined way, without any space for diversity and openness, teaching becomes like conventional coaching for an exam. Neatly structured, syllabus-based unit tests are best for this purpose. CCE with its

flexibility, which can look messy, is a waste here. But if we believe that children could also be learning different things in different ways, and want to capture such unexpected learning, then the flexibility of CCE is indeed of great value. Another quality of CCE is that it captures the spirit of another old slogan ‘formative assessment’ in a powerful way.

GD: This is an idea about which there is much confusion. Can you shed some light on it?

JT: A test serves a formative purpose when the information it provides is taken as feedback, and changes in ongoing teaching made if needed. Any test early in a term, say, a unit test in July, is initially in a summative position since it comes after the unit. It is only if the results of the test lead to reflection about how the students performed, and how teaching can be modified following the test that it fulfils a formative function. This is where the ‘continuous’ in CCE becomes very important. It creates a space for the teacher during the class, to note what is happening, whether individual learners are doing well or not, and take fairly immediate action. Although this may sometimes be corrective, so-called remediation is not a major concern. The teacher may choose to respond to student performance in an appropriate manner, either in the same lesson or in one of the following lessons. Now that is the space that CCE represents to me.

In contrast, when CCE comes as a set of orders from the SCERT, it is just another set of rules for the teacher to follow, which is what external testing is. So unless we can ensure that CCE is located in the teacher’s space, it is not genuine CCE. If we have a school with parallel sections, A, B and C, we would expect the assessment in each one to be different. This is because the students in each section are different, and we value such diversity and their personal

contribution to curriculum transactions. This is an idealistic statement, but I think that it is a very powerful statement. **It is only the teacher who can do CCE.** However, for this to happen, the teacher has to be helped to become autonomous, empowered and skilled, and for that the teacher has to find the space, the resources and the time. The rich feedback CCE can yield would help her / him to enhance the quality of learning experiences of students with diverse needs.

So, I see CCE essentially as formative. At a practical level, a clear distinction has to be made between recording and reporting performance. In the context of the teaching of writing, let us look at diary-writing. If you take the word ‘diary’, as it is commonly understood, it is something personal. The diary is not for somebody else to look at, except maybe a research scholar who may want to analyze it. Neither is it for some external or higher authority to judge. So, the diary gives the teacher some amount of freedom to record whatever she / he wants or finds meaningful. Now, what the teacher notes during CCE has to be captured in the image of a personal diary. The entries or notes would be meant essentially for her / him to use formatively. But if this same diary is squeezed into a reporting format, it becomes external and standardized because all teachers would be expected to report in the same manner. Between recording and reporting, recording is within the teacher’s own space. Some of her / his observations can be reported, but reporting in itself has no pedagogic value. In most cases reporting is done only to satisfy requirements and regulations, not to share useful information.

In her own records (diary), the teacher needs to build some sort of picture of the child, which may be shared with the parents when required. But it is important to remember that the information does not have to be captured and recorded for posterity. The details that go into

the CCE are simply a record of what is happening in the classroom in a flexible manner, and are for the teacher's internal use. So, this is where the teacher's skill lies—to be able to pay attention to what is going on, make a note, an entry, a tick or a little underlining. By doing so, the teacher fairly quickly, gets a sense of what is happening, and can record it to the extent that it is feasible, and then may be, do something about it.

GD: What according to you is 'comprehensive evaluation' in the context of CCE?

JT: The word 'comprehensive' was also used in the New Policy on Education. We have always said that it is not only the mind but also the affective and psychomotor domains that we are concerned with, and the development of values. These are all part of the objectives of education of a child. Until now, we only looked at the cognitive or the logico-mathematical part, and the formal or scholastic part in evaluation. Everything else was devalued. You got a character certificate, and a certificate saying "active in sports", but those were not part of the formal record of the child. So, the idea was to make the record of the school **comprehensive**—to capture the other dimensions of growth. We have been making statements about these other dimensions of growth, but they have always been neglected as far as evaluation is concerned. Therefore people do not pay much attention to them. So, articulating about the types of development we want in areas other than scholastic was important. I think **CCE represents a response to the need to monitor, assess, pay attention to and thus promote development of these various other qualities.**

GD: How do you capture 'growth' in areas other than the cognitive and scholastic?

JT: Until we encourage teachers to do continuous comprehensive evaluation, and sit with them, with a tape recorder, and record some of the things that they do, growth cannot be captured. Experts from outside do not know. The recordings will give us a sense of what children in class 3 or class 4, in big and small towns and rural areas do, and the different ways in which they develop. In the spirit of CCE, you may say to the teacher, "the child who is very hesitant in class, is unwilling to stand up and give an example, is not answering questions, is also one of your responsibilities; you need to find ways of making this child a little more confident". Now, this is the signal that has to go to the teacher. This is the middle C part of CCE. The other areas are also important.

GD: But if a child remains silent what should a teacher do? How can this confidence-building be made to happen?

JT: This is teaching rather than assessment. What the teacher can do is to gently push/nudge the child in the right direction. The teacher does not have to take any ultimate or final decision and award a grade to the child. Children participating in a language discourse need to have the resources, such as the vocabulary and grammar, so that gradually they use fewer gestures and more vocabulary items. The teacher also has to consider the context in which children interact with each other. For instance, in class 9, we want the students to feel comfortable expressing themselves. For this, a small group is useful because standing up in front of a large class, where the other students may laugh at you, or you may say the wrong thing is difficult. So, the idea of working in small groups is important. Group/pair work has to be used to help students talk to each other. **In the context of CCE, we need to create nurturing conditions where students are able to feel**

free to talk. The skill of participating in a spoken discourse, and more importantly, listening to others is a discipline. Therefore, one needs to look at it more holistically. Here, the **level** is very important: what do class 3 and class 4 students do when they are chatting with each other, what do class 5 and class 6 students do, and what do class 10 and 11 and college students do? Obviously, these levels cannot have the same template; but a model of language resources has exactly the same features, with the same set of grammar items, fillers, honorifics and statements of politeness, and all that is useful. But if you specify them for a particular group or level, then you have a much better picture.

GD: What is this ‘nudging’ and what is its role in evaluation?

JT: All evaluation involves some sort of a value judgment of a gap between what is desired and what is. If a linguist has to observe a student’s language performance in class, he/she can use a recorder and take notes to capture the corpus of the child’s language output and interaction. However, this is only a descriptive statement. The teacher, by contrast, is dealing with expectations—our expectations in class 3 are more than our expectations in class 2; our expectations in class 12 are more than our expectations in class 10. Now this is a fact of life when we are talking about education. It is important to make sure that we understand this notion of an expectation and possibly of discrepancies. So, if a teacher has a sense that this is roughly what a student of a particular class/level should be doing, because other students are doing it, that means he/she knows that it is feasible and possible to achieve. The teacher will nudge the child in that direction. If the student sees that it is possible, and maybe gets the idea, “I can also try” and, “I can also

eventually do that”, or “that is worth trying”—these are the nurturing parts of CCE. Now it is important, that it is not always the toppers in the class who are held up as an example or as a role model. This is really the problem with CCE, that if there is any standard for the teacher to follow, it is the topper, because of the competition and pressure. What I want to say is that, in areas such as social interaction, some children are basically quiet while some are garrulous. Teachers need to find each child’s comfort zone. A sensitive teacher should say for a quiet child that here is a child who would have liked to participate some more, but is held back because of a new concept or because of a social situation that is not conducive and supportive, and then assess how and when to intervene. That is what inclusive education is all about. I think it is inclusion into a context where one can participate not only in physical social terms but also by comprehending and contributing to the ongoing discourse.

GD: How do you link evaluation, which is what CCE is all about, to teaching?

JT: CCE or formative assessment should, in my view, be looked at as an extension of teaching and not an extension of examination reform. When we say teaching and testing should be seamlessly integrated, it means testing and teaching should happen simultaneously and not one after the other. The evaluation part comes in when the teacher notices that there is some sort of a discrepancy between what seems desirable and what the child is doing. Then the teacher may want to do something immediately or take it up later. The teacher may tell herself “this child I’ll let him/her be, and I’ll come back a little later”. The coverage in assessment has to be in small circles. The teacher must gradually move from paying attention to the students who are more

visible, to the students who are less visible, such as the backbenchers. That can only happen over time. We need to look at increasing skills in CCE in the teacher's developmental path as something that happens over 2 or 3 years. But nearly every state in India is thinking of implementing a CCE package in the next 2 months. Orders maybe issued, but there is a big difference between the implementation of plans and realization of CCE. The realization of CCE will happen when the teacher will be able to say, "With all this support I feel I'm paying more attention to more of my students now, and I am becoming aware of more dimensions". If the teacher feels that he/she is reaching out to more children, then CCE is indeed taking shape. The evaluation in CCE does not have to be judgmental or penal. It is more a clarifying and an enabling practice where we see something as possible and we try to bring about a change. That is where CCE brings evaluation into the classroom as a resource.

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