Research Article

Formative Assessment Conceptions and Practices of Junior High School Social Studies Teachers in the Techiman Municipality of Ghana

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Abstract: The study investigated formative assessment conceptions and practices among the teachers of social studies in the Techiman Municipality of the Bono East Region of Ghana. The research was undertaken with the view of finding answers and making suggestions that could help improve the formative assessment practices specifically in social studies. A census was conducted in the eighty-four (84) public Junior High Schools in the Techiman Municipality in the Bono East Region. All the ninety-five (95) Social Studies teachers in the public Junior High Schools in the Municipality were selected for the study. A 50-item questionnaire including 2 open-ended questions was developed for the teachers. The data collected were analysed by using frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviation. The study revealed that, the teachers had correct conception of formative assessment and saw its relevance in the classroom, however, their assessment practices were not formative enough. The teachers' assessment practices were influenced by external factors. It is recommended that pressures such as demand for continuous assessment marks to grade students ought to be reduced to allow the teachers practice assessment as professionals.

Keywords: Assessment Practices, Conceptions, Formative Assessment, Ghana, Junior High School, Social Studies, Teachers

1. Introduction

It is generally accepted in the Ghanaian context that the fundamental objective of Social Studies is about making learners good citizens in the society [1, 2, 3, 4]. The teacher of Social Studies, by virtue of the primary purpose of the subject, therefore, faces an enormous challenge in appropriately assessing learners in the subject if a meaningful Social Studies instruction would be achieved.

Assessment of students learning is essential in any educational enterprise; as such, teachers cannot avoid assessing their students [5, 6]. This calls for teachers to be well knowledgeable in social studies, content, profile dimensions and the ideal assessment practices to be employed in the teaching and learning. Also, Bordoh et al indicated the importance of effective teaching of social studies concepts in basic schools in Ghana [8]. Teachers knowledge in social studies concepts and profile demension will help facilitate effective classroom teaching and learning. The major issues about classroom assessments that bother teachers have partly been in the approaches and methods. This is so because the Social Studies syllabus for the Junior High School clearly states that, in many cases, a teacher cannot test the students in all the objectives taught in a term or in a year [9, 10]. It is for this reason that the designers of the syllabus have suggested some assessment

procedures such as class tests, homework, quizzes, projects and the like, to be used by the teachers of the subject. Apart from the school-based assessment, teachers are also expected to use class exercises and home work as processes for continually evaluating pupils class performance, and as a means for encouraging improvements in learning performance [9]. By this assertion, it is hoped that the new school-based assessment will improve teaching and learning through consistent feedback and adjustment of instruction.

Unfortunately, however, cursory observations of the teaching learning process of some teachers of the social studies subject coupled with a few studies such as that of Kankam and Tawiah-Dadzie, and Kankam et al seem to suggest that, teachers' assessment practices often neglect some important aspects of the subject such as ability to demonstrate attitudes and beliefs, volunteer for duties, assimilate new and different values to form a new and consistent value system among others [11, 12].

By this assertion, one begins to question the pivotal role that formative assessment plays in social studies, even though, not much research has been conducted to support the fact that teachers have not adopted and complied with what the syllabus demands on how formative assessments should be implemented. This study therefore sought to find out the conceptions of formative assessment and the extent to which teachers practice formative assessment in their day-to-day interaction with students in the classroom.

The purpose of the study sought to determine Social Studies teachers' understanding of formative assessment and assessment practices of junior high school social studies teachers in the Techiman Municipality of Ghana. The following research questions guided the study: (1) How do Social Studies teachers conceptualize formative assessment? and (2) To what extent are Junior High School Social Studies teachers assessment practices formative? The study is therefore delimited to the conceptions and assessment practices of social studies teachers. It is further delimited to junior high school level within the Techiman Municipality.

1.1. Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this study sought to determine Social Studies teachers' knowledge and understanding of formative assessment, and extent to which teachers use formative assessment in their classroom practices. This study identified and grouped such factors into: external control, curriculum based, school based, teacher's personal, student needs and non-institutional factors.

According to Heritage (2007), formative assessment is a systematic process to continuously gather evidence about learning. The data are used to identify a student's current level of learning and to adapt lessons to help the student reach the desired learning goal. In formative assessment, students are active participants with their teachers, sharing learning goals and understanding how their learning is progressing, what next steps they need to take, and how to take them [13]. Heritage and Eshun et al seem to agree that formative assessment after all plays a key function by making sure that teachers identify the difficulties learners face during instruction and to provide remediation so as to overcome such difficulties [13, 14]. By so doing learners partake and remain focus throughout the instruction.

Aleckson opines that, a good formative assessment should have the following characteristics: frequency, instruction and feedback. On the frequency, the activities below were identified:

- It is critical that the teacher assesses students on a daily basis [frequency] (Example; Move about the room and listen to what students are saying when they talk with partners, collect and read their summaries, etc.
- Every day the teacher must ask – (**"**did the students learn the essential understandings from the lesson)?
- On instruction, the activities below were outlined.

- The teacher must use the information from these quick formative assessments to alter instruction and provide feedback to students to help them move forward in their learning.
- In addition to checking for understanding, these strategies are great way to provide closure to lesson. Again, if students feel that the teacher is checking for understanding every day, they will be more concern about their learning.
- On the feedback characteristic, the following activities were identified.
- Good questions on a piece of paper, write three (3) good questions you could ask to learn more about the topic we studied today.
- You have 3 minutes to write everything you learned today, don't worry about the organisation – just write for 3 minutes about what you have learned [15].

Aleckson, reminds us that formative assessment should be based on frequency, instruction and feedback [15]. He failed to realise that formative assessment may only be practiced when the teachers have a good knowledge and understanding of the concept 'formative assessment' and often such practices are influenced by certain factors. These factors could be external controls such as the nature and demand of national examinations, requirement set by institutional bodies [Directors], among others; they could also be curriculum based, (examples include duration of lesson, lesson topic or objective and the like. School based factors include teacher-student ratio, facilities available in the school and the like. Another factor is the teachers' personal factors such as motivating students to learn, his/her philosophy, the teacher's experience with the class, professional development programmes participated in or teacher's undergraduate coursework. Other factors include students' own factors such as students' expectation, their needs and non- institutional factors such as students' parents' expectation as well as influence from the teacher's colleagues.

In the light of the above discussion, the conceptual framework for the study has been shown in figure 1below.
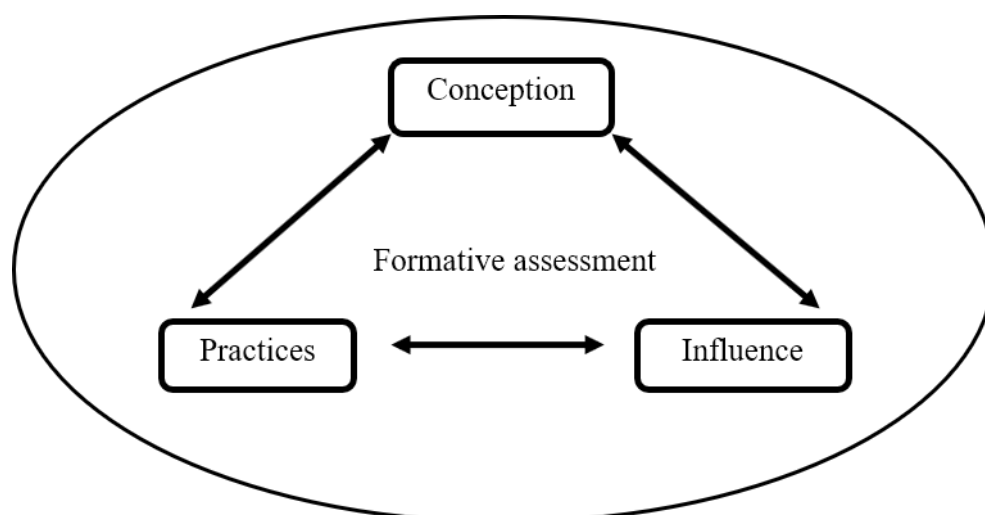

Figure 1. The Relationship among conception, influence and practices of formative assessment.

It can be deduced from figure 1 above that; formative assessment implementation among teachers has a relational process among three concepts. These are understanding, influence and practice. The relation is based on teachers' understanding of the concept. It is undoubted that one cannot apply a concept in its perfect manner when that individual has no idea or even just a little knowledge about it. In the relation it is the understanding

first, upon the understanding one ought to be sparked by certain factors such as demands of external examinations, requirement set by the school district for teachers, the duration of the lesson among others before its effective practice.

1.2. The concept of formative assessment

The concept of formative assessment was first applied in 1971 by Bloom, Hastings and Maddaus. They formally introduced the idea that assessment need not be used solely to make summative evaluations of student performance, arguing that teachers should include episodes of formative assessment following phases of teaching [16]. During these episodes teachers should provide students with feedback and correction as a way to remediate student work. Most experts now consider formative assessment as an ongoing part of the teaching and learning process. Formative assessment thus becomes a central element in teaching and learning.

Formative assessment refers to assessment that is specifically intended to generate feedback to improve and accelerate students learning [17]. Other names for formative assessment are "Continuous Assessment" (Erickson), "interactive formative assessment" (Cowie & Bell), or "dynamic assessment" (Shepard) [18, 19, 20]. Formative assessment occurs when you feed information back to the students in ways that enable the students to learn better, or when students can engage in a similar self-reflective process [21]. Heritage expands the concept by saying that the process involves obtaining evidence about students learning, providing feedback to students, and closing the gap between the learner's current and desired state [13]. Formative assessment is not a specific type of assessment; rather it is a manner in which the assessment is used [22]. Popham emphasises that formative assessment is a process [23]. This is shown in figure 2.
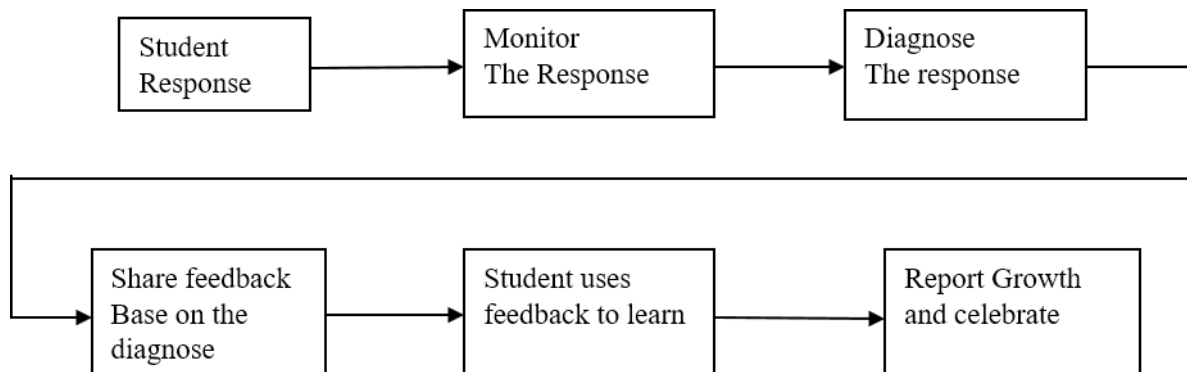

Figure 2. Formative Assessment process

In figure 2 we are reminded that when a teacher gives a task to his/her students, they [students] are expected to react to it, it behooves on the teacher to monitor and offer some level of assistance, when necessary, the intervention by the teacher should push the learners to the right path and then they [students] should be able to produce the expected results. This means that, the development of attitudes and skills in the learner by the teacher are not over until evidence is seen in the learners.

In the lenses of Ainscow and Popham formative assessment is any planned method or strategy used in the classroom to establish the level of students' difficulties or understanding of a particular concept or idea with the purpose of helping students to succeed in learning [23, 24]. The authors continue to say that; formative assessment involves a variety of strategies for evidence gathering. To them, the evidence is how students begin, progress and grasp the concepts they are being taught. This means that formative assessment is supposed to make lessons practical and meaningful and this is what the researchers stand for.

2. Materials and Methods

Quantitatively, this study employs the survey research design. The survey research is an efficient method for gathering data from a large population, and is a common and valuable approach to determine status [25]. "Surveys help to describe the trends in a population or describe the relationship among variables or compare groups" (p. 421) [26].

Survey was considered relevant for this study because the study aimed at investigating the current state of formative assessment in public Junior High Schools [27]. Mitchell and Jolley advised, "Once you use a descriptive design to find out what happens, you can use an experimental design to try to find out why it happens" (p. 395) [28]. The current study and its results could be explored further through experimental research.

For the purpose of the study, the target population was all Social Studies teachers in all 84 public Junior High Schools in the Techiman Municipality of the Bono East Region of Ghana. The accessible population was the same as the target population which included all the Social Studies teachers in all the public Junior High Schools in the Municipality. This was done to ensure that all the needed characteristics of the population will be captured in the study [29].

A census sampling technique was used to select all the Social Studies teachers in the public Junior High Schools in the municipality for the study. This technique involved collecting data on whole population rather than just a sample of it [30]. The census method was used in an attempt to avoid biases and because of the relatively small size of the population. Even more importantly, it ensured that all the needed characteristics of the population were captured in the study [29]. In all, there were ninety-five (95) Social Studies teachers in the municipality and all of them were used for the study. The teachers were distributed in the Municipality as follows: All the fifty-six (56) single stream Schools had one teacher each handling the subject at that level, only five (5) of the double stream schools had two teachers; the remaining twenty (20) had one each and all the three stream Schools had three teachers who handled the subject at that level.

Questionnaire was the instrument used in the data collection. The questionnaire was an adapted instrument from the 1998 - 99 Local Systematic Change [31]. These are instruments developed by Horizon Research Inc. (HRI). HRI is a private research firm located in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, specializing in work related to science and mathematics education.

The questionnaire had two sections. The first section dealt with the biographic data of respondents. The second section was designed to cover the major issues that the research questions addressed. Two types of questionnaire items were used. The first was closed-ended. The responses to these items were designed either on a four-point Likert-type scale or a five-point Likert-type scale. The Likert-type scale items were generally made of positive statements.

The second type of questionnaire items used was the open-ended. This was designed in order to allow room for respondents to come out with their own views on some of the issues investigated [32].

In other to ensure validity and reliability, the questionnaire was pre-tested on twenty junior high social studies teachers at Kwame Danso in the Sene West District. The items on the questionnaire were critically analysed and the results revealed 80% potency. This gave the researchers the confidence in the instrument. In other to ensure that the right information was obtained, the respondents were made to complete the questionnaire in the presence of the researchers and submitted on the same day.

The researchers visited all the 84 Public Junior High Schools and administered the questionnaires. Before the questionnaire was administered, the researchers had visited about 50% of the schools to familiarize himself with the school plant. During these visits some field notes were made.

All responses for each of the items on the questionnaire analysed quantitatively with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The study employed descriptive statistical tools in the analysis of the data. The data were organized into tables of frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviation and were carefully interpreted to answer each research question.

3. Presentation of Results

This section presents the biographic data of the respondents; mainly their qualification and experience, Social Studies teachers' conception on formative assessment, as well as the extent to which the teachers practice formative assessment. The results are presented according to the three sections of the questionnaire.

3.1. Biographic Data of Respondents

3.1.1. Professional qualifications of teachers

Researches tend to support the fact that the competence of a teacher is often associated with professional qualification possessed. It is believed that teachers' level of professional qualification affects their practice. It influences their general decision making, their selection of objectives and teaching procedures to meet the needs of different learners. It also affects their knowledge of subject matter, learning theories, researches in various teaching strategies and techniques for curriculum development [33].

It is therefore imperative to determine the professional qualifications of the teachers, in order to envisage some of the factors that may influence the study.

Table 1. Teachers' professional qualification

S/No.	Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
1	'A'-Year Teachers Certificate	11	11.58
2	'A'- Year(Post-Secondary)	18	18.94
3	Diploma in Basic Education	46	47.5
4	B.Ed	20	20.1
	Total	**95**	**100**

The data collected indicated that, of the 95 respondents, eleven (11.58%) had the 'A' 4-Year Teachers' Certificate. Eighteen (18.94%) had obtained a teacher's certificate 'A' ('A' 3-Year). Also, 46 (47.5%) of the teachers had Diploma in Basic Education, while another twenty (20.1%) had a Bachelor of Education Degree from one of the country's universities or other tertiary institutions.

3.1.2. Teaching Experience of the respondents

In relation to teaching experience, the respondents were asked to indicate the number of years they had taught the subject at the level they were teaching at the time of the research. Twenty-eight (29.75%) of the respondents had taught for 5 years or less, 32 (33.7%) had taught between 6 and 10 years, another 23 (24.21%) had taught between 11 and 15 years, while 12 (12.63%) had taught for sixteen years or more.

Table 2. Teaching experience of the respondents

S/No.	Teaching Experience (Years)	Frequency	Percentage
1	≤5	28	29.75
2	6-10	32	33.7
3	11-15	23	24.21
4	16-above	12	12.63
Total		**95**	**100**

The teachers' experience in teaching per the revelations on Table 2 indicates that sixty-seven of them had taught for six years or more. It can generally be said convincingly and comfortably that majority of the teachers had the right experience as far as interaction and perhaps assessments are concerned.

3.2. Social Studies Teachers Conceptions of Formative Assessment

This section was guided by this research question: *How do social studies teachers conceptualise formative assessment?* This question sought to find out the social studies teachers understanding of the concept "formative assessment". Both open-ended questionnaire item and a 4-point as well as 5-point Likert scale questionnaire items were used to gather data for this particular question. The section of the close-ended question that focused on this question was item three. With this item, the respondents were asked to tick a statement that best meets their definition of formative assessment. In this item, four varying definitions (A-D) were given on assessment the respondents were to tick the one that best describes formative assessment. The item twelve is similar to the three but it sought to find out how the teachers assess their students during instructions, whether individually, in pairs or in groups or even as a whole class. The item six however was open-ended, which sought to know from the respondents the type of feedback they give to their learners based on formative assessment. The remaining section that focused on this research question was items numbered 4, 5 and 7 to11. These items were generally Likert-type scale. The questionnaire items were generally written as positive statement, for each statement, the teachers were expected to select one out of five options provided. Each option had a corresponding code value, ranging between 1 and 5. High level of understanding was represented with "strongly agree' (SA) and a code of 5; and average level of understanding was represented with "agree" (A) and a code of 4: not sure (NS) was considered for uncertainty and a code of 3 was assigned. Disagree (D) was considered a low level of understanding and has a code of 2 and a complete lack of understanding was regarded as "strongly disagree (S.D) with a code of 1. But for items three, six and twelve which were analysed through piling and descriptive manner, the rest were coded and entered into the data base when a corresponding choice was made by a respondent. The individual items relating to the research questions were analysed using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviation. Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6 present the results.

Table 3. Teachers' understanding of formative assessment

Definition	Frequency	Percentage
Formative assessment is a process of administering a test to students in order to assign grades and report to parents and officials.	13	13.68
Formative assessment is a process, which helps teachers to promote students from one class to another.	2	2.1
Formative assessment refers to all tests a teacher gives at the end of a topic or term.	15	15.79
Formative assessment refers to the assessment that is specifically intended to generate feedback to improve instruction and accelerate students learning.	65	68.42
Total	**95**	**100**

Table 3 indicates the findings of the study on teachers understanding of formative assessment. Of the 95 respondents, 65 (68.42%) understood the concept formative assessment clearly.

Table 4. Types of feedback provided for students based on assessment

Feedback	Frequency	Percentage
Motivation	23	24.2
Scoring	20	21.1
Comments/Discussion/ Suggestion	25	26.3
Re-teaching	10	10.5
No feedback	17	17.9
Others	4	4.2
Total	**95**	**100**

The respondents were asked to indicate the type of feedback they provide to their learners based on their formative assessment practices. Of the 95 respondents, 23(24.2%) indicated that the kind of feedback they provide for their students is motivation. With these they emphasised that they provide both tangible and intangible materials to their students. Again, 20(21.1%) indicated that they rather score the assessment items and marks given to students to determine their performance based on the concept learnt.

Another 25 of the respondents, representing (26.3%) indicated that they provide oral comments on students' responses to tasks assigned them during instruction, discussions are done to deliberate on the issue thoroughly and suggestions offered either by the teacher or through the varying feedback techniques or the snowball technique.

Ten of the respondents representing (10.5%) indicated that they rather re-teach the individual students upon realizing that they are unable to meet the performance task assigned to them during the instruction.

With the exception of 4(4.2%) who did not respond to this items, the remaining 17(17.9%) indicated that they do not provide any feedback. This number further indicated that time for instruction is precious and short for any meaningful discussion on the students' responses; rather students should accept such conditions as assignment for them, they could consult colleagues who understood the concept and answered questions correctly and see other persons in the community for further explanation.

Table five below contains seven features of formative assessment which sought to elicit from the respondents on their understanding of formative assessment with regards to those features. Of the 95 teachers eighty-one of them indicated that formative

assessment enables them to remediation. Another eighty-four of the total respondents indicated that formative assessment enables them to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their students. Out of the 95 teachers, eighty-three of them indicated that their teacher preparation provided them with a variety of ways to assess their students. Eighty-five of the teachers out the 95 who responded to the item indicated that formative assessment is an integral part of instruction. Another fifty-nine out of the 95 respondents indicated that formative assessment is more of learning goals than performance goals. Of the 95 teachers, ninety-one of them indicated that formative assessment improves students learning. Eighty-five of the teachers who responded to this item, out of the 95, indicated that formative assessment involves students in the lesson. With regards to the mean, the teacher's conception was classified as disagree with a mean range of **1-2;** uncertainty **2.1-3.0** and agree **3.1-4.5.** It is evident from both the percentages and the mean values that all the teachers had good conception of formative assessment. This is because, the mean values indicate a minimum value of **3.58** and a maximum value of **4.1**, both of which fall under the agree classification.

Table 5. Teachers' conception of formative assessment

Statement	Frequency (Percentage)					Mean	STD
	S.D	D	N.S	A	S.A		
Formative assessment enables a teacher to do remediation	2	4	8	39	42	4.2	0.92
	(2.1%)	(4.21)	(8.42%)	(41.05%)	(44.21%)		
Formative assessment enables students to identify their strengths and weaknesses	01	5	5	30	54	4.38	0.889
	(1.05%)	(5.26%)	(5.26%)	(31.6%)	(56.84%)		
My teacher preparation programme provided me with a variety of ways to assess students.	00	04	8	58	25	4.05	0.83
	(0%)	(4.21%)	(8.42%)	(61.05%)	(26.31%)		
Formative assessment is an integral part of instruction/instruction.	00	5	5	42	43	4.25	0.911
	(0%)	(5.26%)	(5.26%)	(44.21%)	(45.3%)		
Formative assessment is more of learning goals than performance goals	5	13	18	39	20	3.59	1.125
	(5.26%)	(13.7%)	(18.94%)	(41.05%)	(21.05%)		
Formative assessment improves students learning	00	00	4	40	51	4.41	0.869
	(0%)	(0%)	(4.21%)	(42.10%)	(53.68%)		
Formative assessment involves students in lessons	00	5	5	48	37	4.189	0.90
	(0%)	(5.26%)	(5.26%)	(50.52%)	(38.94%)		

Mean classification (Disagree 1-2; Uncertainty 2.1-3.0 and Agree 3.1-4.5)

3.3. How do you assess your students formatively during instruction?

This item sought to elicit from the respondents, how they assess their students formatively when they are teaching. It became clear from the data that 46 (48.42%) teachers assess their students individually. Another 35 of the respondents representing 36.84% indicated that they assess their students as a whole, meaning, the whole class is given the same task and it is performed collectively. Eleven (11.58%) of the respondents indicated that they assess their students in groups. The remaining 3 of the respondents, representing (3.16) indicated that they assess their students in pairs.

Table 6. How students are assessed formatively during instruction

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Individual	46	48.42
In pairs	03	3.16
In groups	11	11.58
Whole class	35	36.84
Total	**95**	**100**

It is evident from Table 6 that greater number of the teachers assessed their students individually and this finding is supported by the National Forum on Assessment, when they wrote that assessment systems include opportunities for both individual and group work [34]. They argue further that listening in on student partners or small-group conversations allows you to quickly identify problems or misconceptions, which you can address immediately. They again confirm the findings of the current study when they stated that: If you choose a group assessment activity, you will frequently want to follow it up with an individual one to more effectively pinpoint what each student needs.

3.4. Social Studies Teachers' Formative Assessment Practices

This section is guided by this research question: *To what extent do social studies teachers practice formative assessment?* The current research question was studied to provide descriptive statistics regarding the rate/extent at which Junior High School Social Studies teachers classroom assessment practices are formative. The items were generally written as positive statements, with each of the items, teachers were expected to select one out of four rating words provided. Each option had a corresponding code value, ranging between 1 and 4. A more regular practice of the identified characteristic was labeled *always* and had an ordinal code of 4, a more less practice of the formative assessment characteristic was labeled *frequently* and was coded 3, an intermitted practice of the characteristic was labeled *sometimes* and was given an ordinal code of 2 and *never* was given to the fourth column which indicated a situation where the characteristic was not practiced at all and was coded as 1.

The items on this particular research question were presented and analysed based on the mean records and the standard deviation which was used to rank the extent to which the teacher's classroom assessment practices were formative. The mean table appeared in the descending order of the rate at which the teachers' classroom assessment were formative. The items were presented and analysed based on group mean ranking.

The group mean ranking was done as follows: **0-1.5** described those who never used the assessment characteristic in their classroom assessment practices. A mean ranging between **1.6-2.5** represented those who indicated that, they sometimes use the assessment characteristic. The mean range of **2.6-3.5** represented those who indicated that they use the assessment characteristic frequently and **3.6-4.5** were those who indicated that they always use the characteristic of the formative assessment.

Table 7. The extent to which social studies teachers practice formative assessment during their day-to-day instruction.

Statement	S.D	M
1. I allow my students to ask any questions about the key ideas.	.95533	3.21
2. I frame my questions to allow me to monitor students' progress.	.88258	3.14
3. I adjust instruction and assessment as needed to re-address the objectives more effectively.	.85355	2.87
4. I move about the room and listen to what students are saying when they talk with partners.	.90203	2.87
5. I assess my students on concepts learnt to separate facts from opinions.	.88258	2.86
6. I collect and read their summaries.	.90265	2.81
7. I provide feedback to the pairs instantly.	1.02	2.67
8. I allow my students to write the big idea for the unit we have studied.	.98795	2.51
9. I follow the pair discussion by a whole class review to reach consensus on the concept under discussion.	.83499	2.45
10. I allow my students to write down any two questions based on the topic we have treated.	.96617	2.29
11. I allow my students to solve problems during lessons in pairs.	.72886	2.25
12. I allow my students to add any important notes that are missing from their partner's notes.	.96373	2.17
13. I allow my students to enhance their partner's notes by underlining key terms or ideas.	.97929	2.09
14. I allow my students to switch notes with their partners.	.98840	1.96

Mean ranking: 0-1.5 (never), 1.6-2.5 (sometimes), 2.6-3.5 (frequently) and 3.6-4.0 (always)

How are your assessment practices formative? Response choices for the 14 items appeared with the characteristics of formative assessment. The four columns are defined with each titled with a word indicating the extent to which the [teachers] respondents assessment practices are formative in nature Table 7 shows these results in descending order of mean ranking.

The findings revealed a mean ranking ranging from 1.9 to 3.21, this is an indication that none of the respondent ever used the assessment characteristic in the items or always used the assessment characteristic of the assessment characteristics which were identified to answer the research question 3.

The questionnaire item 50 asked, "How often do you assess?" This close-ended response option was offered by the survey so that the period at which the teachers carry out the formative assessment characteristics they have identified could be marked. The questionnaire item was analysed separately from the other characteristics that appeared on table eight above.

A close- ended item question 50 under Section D of the questionnaire sought from the respondents, the frequency of the formative assessment practices. Six options were given which they were to mark one which describes the frequency of their formative assessment practices. The responses are presented in Table 8 below.

Table 8. Frequency of teachers' formative assessment practices

Period	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Once a week	15	15.8
Once a month	11	11.57
Every two weeks	18	18.94
Once a term	20	20.05
Twice a week	16	16.84
About every lesson	12	12.63
Others	3	3.2
Total	**95**	**100**

Table 8 shows the rate or the time period at which the teachers assess their students in the classroom. In all 95 teachers answered this item and of this number 15 (15.78%) indicated that they assess their students once in a week formatively. Another 11 of the respondents representing 11.57 percent indicated that they assess their students once in a month in a formative manner. Eighteen (18.94%) also indicated that their formative assessment of their students was every two weeks. Also 20 of the teachers representing 20.05 percent indicated that they assess their students once in a term formatively. Sixteen (16.84%) indicated that they assess their students formatively twice in a term, another 12 of the teachers' representing 12.63 percent indicated that their formative assessment was about every lesson and some three teachers representing 2.85 percent indicated that their formative assessment of their students was done differently other than those conditions stated above. They stated thrice in a week and thrice in a month for two teachers and one person respectively.

The general finding on table nine above is that most of the teachers' classroom assessments are not formative in nature. This is based on the fact that, they [teachers] assessments are mostly done at the end of the teaching term but not about every lesson which is the frequency at which formative assessment should be done.

4. Discussion of the Findings

4.1. Biographic Data of Respondents

4.1.1. Professional Qualification of the respondents

The current study revealed that all the 95 teachers who handle the subject Social Studies in the Municipality have what it takes to call someone a professional teacher in the country. This means that the teachers possess the requisite skills in assessment. The findings here support Sadker and Sadker who stated that the level of professional qualification of teachers affect their practice, it influences their general decision making, their selection of objectives and teaching procedures to meet the needs of different learners [33].

4.1.2. Teaching experience of the respondents

By implication all the respondents were teachers who were deemed to possess at least the minimum professional knowledge and competence and were duly qualified to teach in the Basic school. Approximately 67% comprising those who had taught between six and ten years, those who had taught between eleven and fifteen years and the teachers who had taught for sixteen years and above, had had at least their first promotion, indicating that they have some level of experience in the service and the profession. Also, such teachers would have mentored some other practicing teachers too which is enough by all standards according to the profession to give them the basic things it takes to assess students effectively. This finding confirms Bekoe et al when they indicated that these were considered as very competent to even supervise and provide training in appropriate practices for other teachers. Also, mutual trust creates conditions for self-direction and self-confidence in supervisees [35].

4.1.3. Respondents understanding of formative assessment

The findings of this study indicated that majority of the respondents understood the concept formative assessment. This is an indication that teachers have a fair knowledge of formative assessment since they intermittently check for learners understanding on the unit items, they discuss with them.

The findings of the current study support the study by Heritage who indicated that in formative assessment, students are active participants with their teachers, sharing learning goals and understanding how their [students] learning is progressing, what next steps they need to take, and how to take it [13]. If indeed teachers do these during their

interaction with the class, then they have the conception of formative assessment. The finding is however, contrary to Stiggins who postulated that pre-service programmes continue to neglect classroom assessment in the professional preparation of teachers, and in-service professional development opportunities remain very rare, for both teachers and principals [36]. He is of the view that if teachers are not prepared in classroom assessment, then, they [teachers] cannot understand the concept.

4.1.4. Formative assessment practices among teachers

The formative assessment practiced most by the Junior High School Social Studies teachers involved teachers framing questions and monitoring students' progress with regards to their progress and also allowing students to ask questions in class. Formative assessment is purposefully directed toward the student. It does not emphasise how teachers deliver information but, rather, how students receive that information, how well they understand it, and how they can apply it. With formative assessment, teachers gather information about their students' progress and learning needs and use this information to make instructional adjustments. They also show students how to accurately and honestly use self-assessments to improve their own learning. The findings of the current study support research conducted by Bordoh et al which revealed that, during instruction, teachers assess student understanding and progress toward standards mastery in order to evaluate the effectiveness of their instructional design [37]. Both teachers and students, individually and together, review and reflect on assessment outcomes. As teachers gather information from formative assessment, they adjust their instruction to further student learning. The current study revealed that 89 out of the 95 respondents, representing 93.7% indicated that they frame questions to monitor students' progress and also allow their students to ask questions about the key ideas they have studied.

The study also revealed that teachers adjust instruction and assessment as needed to readdress the objectives of the lesson effectively. Once you have assessed your learners, you must take action. You will be able to help your students achieve success by differentiating your instruction based on the information you have gathered. Ask yourself, "Who needs my attention now? Which students need a different approach? Which students are not learning anything new, because I haven't challenged them?"

The findings of the current study support the suggestion made by Guskey that; 'for assessments to become an integral part of the instructional process, teachers need to change their approach in three important ways.' They must "1) use assessments as sources of information for both students and teachers, 2) follow assessments with high-quality corrective instruction, and 3) give students second chances to demonstrate success" [38]. "Tiering" your activities for two or three levels of learners are usually what is called for after a review of assessment data. We must be prepared to provide both corrective activities and enrichment activities for those who need them. An important caveat to keep in mind, however, is that the follow-up, corrective instruction designed to help students must present concepts in new ways and engage students in different learning experiences that are more appropriate for them [38]. Your challenge will be to find a new and different pathway to understanding. The best corrective activities involve a change in format, organization, or method of presentation [38].

On the frequently used formative assessment characteristics in the classroom, the following assessment characteristics were also indicated by the respondents; moving about the room and listen to what students are saying when they talk with partners, they collect and read [their] summaries, they assess their students on the concepts learnt to separate facts from opinions and also indicated that they frequently provide feedback to the pairs instantly. The findings of the current study seem to suggest that, moving about during lessons is a good formative assessment practice. This is because when the teachers move about they are able to hear what the learners discuss and identify the difficult areas of their students and can use these kinds of responses to check for student understanding,

and also to check the "pulse" of the class in terms of student motivation, confidence levels, and levels of metacognition. For formative assessment the evidence is interpreted in relation to the progress of a pupil towards the goals of a particular section of work. Next steps are decided according to what has been achieved and what problems have been encountered. The interpretation is in terms of what to do to help further learning, not what level or grade a pupil has reached.

The respondents also indicated that they provide feedback to their students frequently. This finding on characteristic of formative assessment implies that, feedback helps students reflect on their own performances against assessment criteria and teachers can also tailor remedial tasks for those who have difficulty. It [the findings] also conforms to international research which revealed that, the idea that tracking a student's progress toward objective learning goals is more effective than comparison of the student with his/her peers' progress [39, 40]. In situations of comparison, weaker students absorb the idea that they lack ability, and thus lose motivation and confidence. Ames noted that teachers' beliefs about the importance of effort, rather than ability, also play an important role in students' beliefs about themselves [41]. Appropriate reference to an individual student's progress and opportunities to improve work based on feedback can help counter the negative impact of social comparisons. Feedback given to students based on their performance is commonly studied as assessment behaviour. Blocher, Greenwood and Shellahamer, and Goolsby investigated the types of feedback given to middle- and high-school band students in rehearsal settings [42, 43]. They found that although specific verbal feedback is rarely offered, the amount of feedback increases among the more experienced teachers. The finding of this study is however parallel to a study by Goolsby on feedback, he stated that over one-third of the student teachers offered no feedback at all [43]. Regarding the current study and placing it side by side, the current study sampled participants from professional teachers who have had some level of teaching experience as against his participants who were student teachers.

It is evident from the [mean ranking] that all the 95 respondents either use the formative assessment characteristics which were identified to answer the research question 3, that they [respondents] either used the formative assessment characteristic sometimes or frequently. Some authors have written about the uniqueness of assessment in the arts and the barriers that can prevent high quality assessments from occurring. Stiggins presented three common barriers to classroom assessment: experiences with assessment, lack of instructional time for assessment, and lack of assessment expertise [36]. Although, some barriers have been identified that can bedevil classroom assessment, the present study seem to be parallel to such studies. This is because the mean ranking of the study indicated that none of the respondents indicated that he/she has never used formative assessment due to any hindrance. The study however revealed that none of the respondents indicated that they always use the formative assessment in their daily instruction in the classroom.

4.1.5. The frequency of teachers' formative assessment practices

The implication of this finding is that most of the teachers' classroom assessments are not formative. This is due to the fact that formative assessment is about every lesson but only 12 out of the 95 respondents indicated that their assessment is about every lesson. The findings of the current study is parallel to Shepard who wrote that assessment "should be moved into the middle of the teaching and learning process instead of being postponed as only the end-point of instruction" (p. 10) [20]. Also, the finding conflicts the teacher's earlier indication of their understanding of the term formative assessment.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Once the teachers were seen as professional and experienced ones, then they [teachers] are competent and equipped with assessment practices. This so because such

teachers had prepared candidates which involve several and regular activities such as projects, quizzes, exercises to check their [students] level of attainment and/or performance. It was however, noticed that their [the teachers] assessment was no formative enough in terms of approach and methodology. Students are not encouraged to take notes and if they do, the teachers do not take the pains to cross check whether the right information was recorded or not. Allowing students to switch notes and adding to what their partners had written would encourage students to grasp the right concept and also identify their immediate problems and readdress them by their teachers but the teachers rarely do this. The conclusion made is that the teachers do not involve their students so much in the assessment process.

There is a clear and complete knowledge and/or conception of the term formative assessment, its practices, however are not so adequate among teachers since their teaching is geared towards performance goals as against learning goals. If teachers score the work of their students as feedback, then students would be made to think more of how to pass such tests rather than making the concept learnt part of their lives. Again, it is important to note that the aim of achieving performance goals tends to please external bodies which would not make learning part of the student's life to learn for life.

It is therefore recommended that schools and school districts should pay attention to aspects that could help them improve the standards of both learning and teaching by organizing seminars and conferences for their teachers especially in the areas of approaches and methods of doing assessment so as to whet the teachers' assessment skills.

It is also recommended that the planners and designers of the teaching syllabus and the writers of the numerous textbooks should see the need to cover assessment of students in detail when developing their materials by including series of the needful activities such as self-assessment exercises, progress test and projects in the documents. In this way, the teachers will be reminded of assessment for learning during their classroom interactions.

Ministry of Education in collaboration with the Ghana Education Service and the school districts as well as the national examination bodies should consider reducing pressures such as the demand for continuous assessment marks from teachers which do not make them to practice classroom assessments as professionals.

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