



The Relevance of Internal and External Examinations in Zimbabwean Secondary Schools: The Quality Dilemma

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article No.: 072313743 Type: Research DOI: 10.15580/GJER.2013.7.072313743 Submitted: 23/07/2013 Accepted: 15/09/2013 Published: 22/09/2013 *Corresponding Author Albert Mufanechiya E-mail: mufanechiya@yahoo.com Keywords: <i>Internal and external examinations, curriculum implementation, learner engagement, life skills</i>	The research focused on the relevance of internal and external examinations and quality issues in Zimbabwean secondary schools. Qualitative data was collected from twelve (12) form four teachers, three (3) school heads and one (1) ZimSEC official who responded to interview questions and thirty (30) form four mid- year prize winning students responded to open- ended questionnaires from the three selected secondary schools. The research found that form four teachers abandoned total learner engagement practices and assumed a more authoritative and omniscient role where drilling of examination techniques were the order of the day. The research recommends that curriculum supervision should not be entirely entrusted to school heads and educational inspectors but faculties of education in universities should be romped in to help supervise teaching and hold curriculum implementation workshops so that quality teaching is not sacrificed for examination success. Curriculum Theory should be a compulsory course in all educational settings.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Internal examinations have become a window through which teachers, students and parents gauge the preparedness of students for final external examinations. Success in these examinations is seen as an incentive for learning and a return on investment. The internal evaluation system has come in the form of examinations, tests and exercises, the crowning ceremonies being prize giving and positive external examination results. During prize giving days, schools honour and reward academic excellence but the focus is on achievement in external examinations.

Numerous studies and literature have shown that both internal and external examinations have been used to evaluate curriculum performance, identify problems, propose solutions, provide policy advice and to reward those who would have excelled (Saint, 2005, Leat and Nichols, 2000 and Bishop, 1986). Students who would have excelled in various subject areas in internally set mid – year examinations are rewarded for their diligence and commitment to their academic work. More importantly, parents come to witness the success stories of their children especially when they are among those getting prizes, promising good prospects in external examinations. The day is characterised by celebration on one hand and disappointment on the other especially for parents whose children will not be getting prizes. It also becomes a wake – up call for students and parents about how much needs to be done and that becomes work in progress.

The occasion exerts a lot of pressure on students and parents as success in these internally set examinations are usually seen as a barometer of the final externally set examinations which usually come a few weeks later. This assessment world according to Stiggins (1999) has now become steeped in intimidation, vulnerability, stress and anxiety fuelled by fear of failure. The rating of schools by regional and national educational offices as 0% schools (Muzawazi, 2006), bottom ten schools (Mandiudza, 2006) and the top fifty (50) (Herald, March, 2012) has further put a strain on school administrators and teachers at their school level to ensure that they perform in public examinations. With this pressure, School Development Committees (SDC), school heads, teachers and students have conspired to abandon all learner engagement practices to pursue the examination agenda. In this vein, the 2009 Save the Children Report lamented that students have not obtained important and basic life skills because of the dominance of traditional rote teaching and learning methods, unreflective and teacher - centred pedagogy because of examinations making learning a straight jacket. What has really suffered is the quality of teaching and the quality of the product (student). Nagal (1992) in Save the Children Report (2009) says:

It is in the pedagogical meeting between the teacher, student and content that quality is

constituted. This meeting must have a character that it 'vibrates with energy' to such an extent so that those involved are absorbed in what they are talking about or are doing. (p.3)

Unfortunately that vibrancy is the missing link. The current scenario in Zimbabwean secondary schools show very little learner engagement practices, practices that really put the learner at the centre of every classroom activity, that teach students 'how to fish and not to just get fish' Nagal, 1992 & Mupazviriwo, 2012). The 'O' level classroom now resembles an emergency room, the intensive care unit, where its only the doctor (the teacher) directing proceedings to give life to an unconscious patient (the student). Freire (1972) aptly calls the role of the teacher in the classroom situation as to fill the student with the contents of his narration.

Save the Children Report of 2009 identified three categories of teacher professionalism with the following characteristics; firstly unprofessional characterised by absenteeism, unplanned lessons, hostile, all knowing and does not entertain questions from students, secondly, the restricted teacher, concerned with mastery and exercise of technical skills, a concern with basic competences, teacher centred, rigid, tend to blame students for not learning and finally, the extended professional, uses autonomous and independent judgement to reflect on what they are doing, children centred, variety of methods, collaborative, adaptive and flexible. Because of the pressure of examinations and the need to ensure that students pass, Zimbabwean secondary school teachers have operated at the restricted level of professionalism in an unthankful occupation hampered by lack of resources and low salary levels. In this regard, teachers believe that maximum anxiety on learners is key to maximum learning and achieving desired results. This has militated against effective assessment and sound curriculum implementation practices. As a result for the need for public accountability, where communities and educational fathers and mothers rate school quality based on the narrowest definition of student success in public examinations, all democratic forms of professionalism have been thrown out through the window. Furthermore, this pressure has resulted in some malpractices where both teachers and students cheat and yet students do not realise that they are cheating themselves out of quality and proper education. Our academic life's preponderance towards passing an examination on regurgitated material is harmful for the Zimbabwean students' intellect and an affront to quality education.

Looking at quality from a narrow 'tunnel approach' in terms of examinations has created dysfunctional systems of education where students pass with flying colours but fail to prepare them to participate meaningfully and effectively in their own development and that of the nation as a whole (Chakanyuka et al, 2009). The education they get seems to 'expire' soon after examinations. In this case teachers possess and pass on narrow technical

examination skills (Apple, 1999) with little regard and demonstration of complex reasoning and application of concepts learnt. One of the quality indicators is that learnt concepts should connect learners with their lives and experiences. To ensure that students pass, should not be the ultimate end but the beginning of a life journey where students negotiate many corners. The relevance of examinations to the learner in life is an important indicator of quality and if it fails in this it would have failed in its highest end. All the celebrations and the hype during prize giving days and after 'O' level results become meaningless frustrating both the parents and students. Mupazviriwo (2012: 15) laments; there is even a tendency to adore and even worship paper academics, whose intellectual acumen goes as far as passing an examination without assuming innovation to escape servitude. The need for what Somekh (2006) calls systematic curriculum intervention strategies, going beyond the examinations and describing, analysing and theorising educational practices to engage the learners and work with them in productive partnership to construct and transform practices cannot be overemphasised. Students should not see themselves as powerless victims of a ruthless examination obsessed system which does not prepare them for the future.

The questions are, 'Are examinations synonymous with quality education? Or are examinations relevant given that they have affected rather than enhanced quality?'

It is against this backdrop that the research sought to establish the relevance of both internal and external examination processes and how the relationship has impacted on quality education. Thus, the study aimed at looking at how examinations can unlock value and improve student learning in Zimbabwean secondary schools.

Research questions guiding the study

The study was informed by the following research questions:

- What role do examinations play in Zimbabwean secondary schools?
- How have these examinations impacted on quality education?

METHODOLOGY

The case study setting had an integral and holistic character of qualitative research (Somekh, 2006) establishing a situation in which meaning, interpretation and pattern making (Yin, 2003) would occur concerning the relevance of examination processes and quality issues in Zimbabwe secondary schools. The study was grounded as far as practically possible in the experiences and realities of school heads, teachers and 'O' level students as far as the relationship between examinations and quality education were concerned. The thirty (30) students were conveniently sampled, that is those who got prizes in the four core subjects during prize giving to respond to researcher designed open –

ended questionnaires. Twelve (12) teachers who taught these core subjects, three (3) heads of the participating schools and one (1) ZimSEC official were engaged in an interactive face to face interview without pre-moulded questions (Khanzode, 2004) deliberately leaving a certain degree of openness which allowed thick description (David and Sutton, 2004). This enabled the stakeholders' experiences on examinations to be revealed (Burgess et al, 2010) and triangulating information from these rich data sources enriched the study. To gain access to the research participants, the researcher sought permission from the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture officials to carry out the study and also got informed consent from the participants. The participants were at liberty to withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Examinations have become an indispensable tool in evaluating both curriculum and student performance. The research showed that internally and externally set examinations are bedfellows that have emphasised on techniques influencing each other in a flawed curriculum implementation process. The processes have been achieved with the biggest casualty being quality education as heads; teachers and students defined quality education as passing 'O' level examinations.

The data collected from heads and teachers showed that examination classes are a preserve of those deemed capable of handling them with the following attributes: experienced, committed to duty, a high level of education, previous record of producing good results and whether one is a ZimSEC item writer or an examiner. These teachers were chosen because they had an 'inside story' about ZimSEC operations and were aware of discernible and predictable patterns in examination setting thus would prepare students through the internal examination process to achieve desired external examination results. These teachers would then narrow their focus and teaching to specific areas that were likely to come in external examinations. The preparation of these students for external examination, teachers and students agreed, was examination controlled characterised by testing and retesting, drilling, simple recall, use of past ZimSEC and Cambridge examination papers and concentrating on those salient technical examination skills. The road to the final examinations through internal examinations has been so narrowly conceived to exclude anything that does not contribute to the students' success in external examinations. Teachers have summoned all their experiences with examinations to ensure that the internal preparation process does not fail them at the end. This entailed abandoning the syllabus provisions and any other learner engagement practices as they were deemed an unnecessary distraction to the examination focus. From the students' questionnaires, they seemed happy with this internal examination preparation process as long as it produced positive results for them. They were not worried about what quality 'O' level graduate they were to be.

The research further found the mid- year examinations to be very important in helping teachers assess learner strengths and deficiencies in examination techniques. This is in line with the Kenyan Institute of Education's (2010) observation that educationists particularly emphasised the value of formative evaluation in identifying learners' strengths since there are many tasks that are not evaluated at national level. Admittedly, teachers said they paid little attention to such important functional communication values like spelling, grammar, tenses, punctuation and coherence but looked for a valid point raised by a candidate. Teacher responses showed that the mid-year examination, which was a dress rehearsal of the final, was usually a full paper with typical 'O' level examination questions set using a number of past external examination papers focusing on those areas the teacher may predict to be in the final examinations. In marking these mid – year examinations, teachers used ZimSEC marking guides. Given their experience as examiners and item writers and a lot of networking among examination, class teachers explains the 'bumper harvest' of 'A's at 'O' level. While the ZimSEC official during interviews said that all marking guides were returned to ZimSEC and were security items, teachers had them and used them as evidenced by the teachers' responses. One teacher even said, '*Chero vana vanawo mamarking guides acho*' (Even students have marking guides).

The internal examination system, the research found, had no moderation policy as this was left to the individual teachers' discretion and professional trust that the marking has been thorough. This is in line with Broussard and Golson's (2000) observation that internal examination systems are a loosely defined process which rests purely in the hands of one responsible subject teacher who teaches sets and marks students' examinations. Despite this, the internal examination system has served the Zimbabwean education system to identify students' weaknesses so that teachers assist these students before final examinations. However, what these internal examination system's have failed to do is to improve

teacher efficacy, produce and develop other potential areas of students and to experiment with new innovative methods that expand rather than constrict students' horizon.

The ZimSEC official who was interviewed praised their examination marking system as watertight and full proof and could not be compared to internal school examination systems. He added that the newly introduced Belt Marking System (BMS) was a self checking marking mechanism and had tightened all the loose ends in the marking system with checks and balances at every stage and on the spot moderation. Teachers, during interviews, acknowledged that their grading system was rigid in which 70% and above was an A, 60 – 69 – B, 50 – 59 – C, 40 – 49 – D, 30 – 39 – E and 38 and below was a U. Teachers and students agreed that this stringent system advantaged them when it came to final examinations which were very flexible taking into account a number of national factors resulting in some students condemned by the internal examination system coming up with a positive result. On the other hand, the ZimSEC official revealed a rigorous grading system in which the grade threshold was determined by two factors, firstly the quality of the candidate sitting for the paper that year compared to similar papers of previous sittings and secondly, the level of difficulty of the paper. Both teachers and ZimSEC official agreed that the two processes are different and the external examination system advantages the boarder line cases as ZimSEC would be looking at the national picture and grades depend on the national pass rate.

Following this scenario, the research found that those who would have excelled and got prizes during prize giving ceremonies usually produced almost the same grade in external examinations. These students would have mastered the correct examination techniques early enough to show the kind of performance required in external examinations. Juxta positioning 'O' level students' performance in the four core subjects revealed a strong link although with a few surprises as shown on the table 1:

Table 1: Some sampled students' internal school - based (2010) and external ZimSEC (2011) results juxtaposed

Subjects	Student A		Student B		Student C		Student D		Student E		
	Int.	Ext.	Int.	Ext.	Int.	Ext.	Int.	Ext.	Int.	Ext.	
Maths	A	B	A	C	A	A	A	A	A	A	
English	A	A	A	A	A	B	A	A	A	A	
Shona	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	
Science	A	A	A	A	B	A	A	A	A	A	

*Shona is Zimbabwe's mother language.

There were a few surprises especially in mathematics.

Teachers often requested through their heads for holiday/ extra lessons, cluster and district seminar presentations by students and even hiring some seasoned ZimSEC examiners so that they spend more time and effort focusing these students on those

identified weak areas, the research found. These sessions were aptly described by heads, teachers and students as 'intensive coaching clinics' with no time for any other activities. '*Having an examination class is painful and stressful,*' one teacher lamented. According to teachers, during interviews, those who do not produce results are usually relegated to lower non-

examination classes. Positive external results are seen as a 'return on investment' by schools as they would have 'secured' the student's future. This explains why internal examination systems are regarded as important and special in preparing students for final external examinations and life.

Further, the research found that experienced teachers who are either item writers and/or examiners often helped the 'new' teachers on important and difficult areas. Teachers during interviews reckoned that the current examination practices seem to encourage some kind of inbreeding in which teachers set and mark both internal and external examinations drawing a very thin faint line between the two. From ZimSEC side, the official insisted that the system has not been compromised as ZimSEC uses the banking method and the paper for each examination year was not determined by item writers and examiners.

In response to the question on how they viewed the massive production of 'A's, most students admitted that most of the 'A's produced at 'O' level did not mean that they are geniuses but geniuses in mastering examination techniques drilled during the whole 'O' level academic year. The students said during this period they have no joy of learning anything outside the realm of examinations. The students agreed, in the questionnaire, that whatever success they have and will score is mostly a culmination of their teachers' efforts that after identifying their weaknesses would test and retest them during the course of the year. Students also said that the trend has been to use June external examinations as 'practice sessions' to prepare them for final examinations. Some may produce a positive result.

CONCLUSIONS

Heads, teachers and students have illuminated how the two examination systems have conspired to produce the final 'O' level graduate who cannot effectively operate beyond the examination room. While examinations have been used as an incentive for teaching and learning, the internal formative examination is guilty of producing a 'rough diamond even after processing' pointing to a system that has overrated the product at the expense of the process. The summative evaluation system (external examinations) seem to have taken over the formative internal evaluation processes as the development of skills have been abandoned to give credence to simple concepts recall in examinations. This scenario has unfortunately taken us back to archaic rote teaching and learning methods. The system has produced examination syndrome in students. It is this 'O' level graduate who has failed the quality test. Heads and teachers have also abandoned the education agenda as they see education as synonymous with examinations. The classroom should be a 'cauldron' in which students are exposed to a variety of knowledge and skills promoting the connection between content and real life situations. The two systems have failed to add value to the 'O' level graduate raising the emotive debate about which system has produced the best functional student, the colonial or the post colonial period.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is against this background that the research recommends the full implementation of the Director's Circular 9 of 2007 on guidelines on school – based continuous assessment and internal examinations which aims to develop the whole person as schools are required to have formal and systematic continuous assessment that will lead to their awarding of a continuous assessment grade in a specific subject area or activity. The national discourse should be about how students should be enriched and challenged through the internal examination processes with wider curriculum coverage rather than narrowly focusing on examinations. The other recommendation is that the supervision of the curriculum should not be entirely entrusted to school heads and educational inspectors but outside agencies as faculties of education in universities and colleges of education should also be taken on board to supervise teaching and learning as well as holding curriculum implementation workshops so that quality teaching is not sacrificed for examination success. Further, Curriculum Theory as a course should be compulsory at all education institutions so that those who handle teaching and learning are equipped with knowledge and skills about correct curriculum implementation and assessment values. Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZimSEC) should have full time item writers and examiners so that secondary school teachers are left with the onus of implementing the curriculum. Separating the two would greatly enrich the internal evaluation process and the quality of the student.

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