

Public Examinations: a Fair Deal or a Burden? The Zimbabwean Experience

Mashoko Dominic¹

Lecturer, Department of Curriculum Studies

Mateveke Phillip²

Lecturer, Dept of Teacher Education

Kufakunesu Moses³

Lecturer, Dept of Educational Foundations
^{1, 2, 3}Great Zimbabwe University, ZIMBABWE

Mashoko Eunice⁴

Senior Teacher, Ministry of Education

Abstract: *The study investigated the views by stakeholders in the conduct of public examinations and its policy implications in Zimbabwe. Qualitative data was obtained from 143 participants from Masvingo Province using questionnaires and interviews. These included students, headmasters, deputy heads and examiners who participated in London, Cambridge or ZIMSEC boards. The results indicated that there were challenges facing the examination system that included poor remuneration for examiners, transport problems for carriage of scripts, leakages and storage facilities. However, efforts were being made to inform candidates, publish necessary information and ethics were highly observed by the examining boards. The article concluded that the education system needs to integrate the formal and non-formal systems for credibility of systems. There is need also for the examination system to offer any necessary assistance to centres for the smooth running of examinations. On this basis, we recommend that the examination boards need to take full responsibility for the smooth running of examinations in the country.*

Key terms: *assessment, test, norm referenced testing, reliability, validity curriculum, grading, Grade review and benchmarking.*

Introduction and background to the study

Public examinations are a common practice in the education system both developed and underdeveloped countries worldwide. Cohen and Swerdlik (2010) consider public examination as processes or activities of an external administrator formally examining various parties involved in the assessment of individuals. According to Kempa and Odinga (1984) public examinations like those administered by the General Certificate of Education Boards tend to be norm-referenced, which are standardized tests. This means that, for the award of grades, these examinations rely extensively on the distribution of performance within an examination population and the performance of candidates relative to one another rather than on an evaluation of candidate's absolute attainment and abilities.

Public examinations in form of tests interviews, portfolios case history data, behavioral observation, been regarded by some candidates as unfair practices. There is a general outcry, especially for tests in Mathematics at 'O' level syllabus (4028) in that it is taken by both those who need to proceed with the subject at higher levels and by those who regard it as terminal. They suggest that the subject have options for candidates to take like what science does.

In many subjects the exam papers are too heavy for candidates especially those who do not want to proceed with them at higher levels. The Zimbabwean situation is different for other African countries like South Africa. Public media is awash with reports on the conduct of Public Examinations, especially after their localization in the 1990s, especially with regards to poor storage facilities in many schools or centers, theft of examinations papers, leakages at some centers, markers failing to meet deadlines, markers losing exam papers in transit to their stations, careless marking and marking in public places like beer halls and bus terminus. For example, geography, mathematics (paper 1) and shone exam papers were stolen from a school in Chivi in 2010 (The Herald, 3/11/10). Hence, there is need for all stakeholders to have a concerted effort to bring sanity to public examinations systems in Zimbabwe. In some cases, the paper is withdrawn, if suspected to have leaked as the case for a Mashonaland West School in 2009, resulting in serious financial burden to reprint new sets of papers. In Zimbabwe national examinations are produced, marked, evaluated and supervised and announced by Zimsec. This is done to ensure integrity to the examinations process, as one of the ethical consideration in testing (ZIMSEC, 2011). All examinations boards past and present derive their strategies of testing from the American Psychological Associations (APA)'s ethical principles of psychologist and code of conduct when developing tests, standardization validation and reduction of bias (Gronlund, 1965).

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF TESTING

Cohen and Swerdick (2010) assert that tests and testing programmed for initially came into being as early as 2200 B.C. as a method of selection when used in getting employees for given jobs. In 1859 Charles Darwin used tests in classifying individuals on the basis of hereditary characteristics Galton (1869)'s anthropometric tests, Wundt and Spearman's views of test reliability. Victor Henri (1895) in conjunction with Alfred Binet worked on papers on mental tasks.

Zimbabwean Situation

In 1939, David Wechsler, a clinical psychologist at Bellevue Hospital in New York City, introduced a test designed to measure adult intelligence. Public examinations administered by the General Certificate Examination Board owe their existence to the firm background laid by the psychologist. In Zimbabwe, prior to independence in 1980, the secondary programs 'O' level

and A' level were a direct imports form a number of British Examinations syndicates such as the London, Cambridge and Metric system offered by South African based board.

As independence, the secondary level curriculum had differences between black and white subsystems as reflected on the syllabuses, textbooks and examinations boards (Gatawa, 2003). The black school children had Cambridge and Associated Examination Boards (AEB) running their examinations. While out of school candidates had London General Certificate. According to Gatawa (2003) Zimbabwe inherited an examination system administered by a number of boards, with locally based ministry running examinations system administered by a number of boards, for Junior certificate, grade eleven (11) and technically based post junior certificate programs for whites, Asians and coloureds.

The local input in this galaxy of examinations was limited to mere administration with syllabuses, the setting of examination scripts, the marking and the processing done by these foreign –based boards. The financial considerations boards did not address economic, social and political issues specific to the country. This led to the localization of Zimbabwean examinations as O' level and A' level with Cambridge chosen as a partner in the localization drive. Examinations branch was created in the early 1990s, which later transformed into an examination council, headed by the director. The council is responsible for producing syllabuses for all subjects, training markers, training item with quality center.

According to Mpofu (1994) prior to localization of exams, Zimbabwean school psychologists relied almost exclusively on abilities tests imported from North America and Britain, whose diction, referent objects and expressions are derived from people of a certain socio-cultural background. Thus in 1980, abilities testing in Zimbabwe were crafted taking into consideration the indigenous perspective of a variegated population.

The marking system adopted by the Zimbabwe Schools Examination council (ZIMSEC) completes marking sets of papers and then checked by the subject supervisor to ensure quality of marking. This system has been in place up to November 2010 for O' level and June 2011 for A' level when a new system called the conveyor belt marking (belt marking) was introduced to ensure fair and speedy marking (ZIMSEC report, 2011). In Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) examination papers were marked using the traditional marking system since 1980, and the year 2004, belt marking was introduced for primary leaving examinations up to A' level (Bukenya, 2006).

Bukenya (2006) asserts that in belt marking, each examination scripts are marked by group markers, with each marker marking the same item on all the given scripts. Each group is composed of team leader, a started, markers and checkers. Each market mark only a set of questions and passes the candidates' answer script to the next market who will also just mark the

set of questions allocated to him/her. The marked scripts are passed over to the checkers, who are also examiners, to check through the script for any errors which can be referred to the marker to correct. Finally, the team leader samples ten percent of the scripts in an envelope and remarks to assess the consistency in marking and interpretation of the marking scheme.

In the traditional system of marking, an envelope containing answer scripts of candidates in a paper form a particular school is given to one examiner to mark. The examiner marks the answer to all the questions attempted by the by the candidates. Once the questions attempted by the candidates. One all the scripts in that envelope are marked another envelope of scripts is given to the examiner to mark. The process is continued until all the scripts are marked. After this checkers who are not examiners are employed to check through the marked answer scripts to detect any errors in marking. A team leader normally coordinates ten percent of the scripts marked in each envelope to ascertain the consistency in marking.

At the moment, there is a general disgruntlement by examiners concerning the newly established system of marking. They say there are delays in remunerations after marking, too little time given for the marking process and money is given only after the marking process. A student can request remarking his/her paper upon payment. In the traditional system, both grading and Grade review was administered to sniff out loopholes in the system like when unexpected deviations were discovered, remarking of some scripts would be done. With the advent of the new system, Grade review was removed, as it was regarded as unnecessary since the marking process involved several markers (Zimsec report, 2011)

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the Tyler model of curriculum development. Curriculum is the formal and informal content and process by which learner gain knowledge and understanding, develop skills and alter attitudes, appreciation and valued under the auspices of that school (Doll, 1989) . in the Tyler model, educational objectives the school seeks to attain are stated first, which in turn instructional decision are made after curricular decisions, and then modified after instructional decisions are implemented and evaluated. In decisions are implemented and evaluated. In evaluation, which public examinations boards do involve a process by which one matches initial expectations in the form of behavioral objectives with outcomes. ZIMSEC runs standardized tests which are a summative form of evaluation. This form of evaluation or assessment is done for the purpose of documentation, dissemination of outcomes or certifying the achievement of student (Woolfolk, 1995). Successful candidates are given certificates of competency or pass to go to higher levels, for example, form grade seven to form one.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study sought to establish the general conduct of public examinations in Zimbabwe. The study also intended to shed light on the views by various stakeholders in the practice of public examinations system on its strengths and shortcomings. The major impetus for the research came mainly from media reports, that year in year out, people lament on the general conduct of public examinations by our local board. Thus this investigation would hope to identify policy implications that could be drawn from the sought information given by various register of disgruntlements by trained examiners with reference to both their remunerations and time allocated for marking.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The study was carried out in Chivi and Masvingo district of Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe with a total of 143 participants. Qualitative data was collected using questionnaires and unstructured interviews were used as research instruments. Questionnaire schedules were administered to 111 participants who were selected on the basis of their various roles as stakeholders in examination system and also with respect to where they work (urban or rural). In Masvingo district, data was obtained from 3 boarding schools (1 primary and 2 secondary), 1 day urban primary school and 1 day rural primary school. In Chivi, information was sought from 1 primary school, 1 secondary day school and 1 boarding secondary school. Fifty examination paper workers, items writers (5), grade reviewers (5), subject managers (team leaders) (5), headmasters (8) and deputy headmasters (8) used in this research came from these centers. Also the study used parents (20) with pupils who were writing examinations in November 2011 and individual who has once written examinations previously under London (2), Cambridge (10) and ZIMSEC examination boards. Individuals who had written exams with various boards were treated to structures interviews only, while the rest of the participants responded to both questionnaire schedule and interviews. So and total of 14 interviews were done one from each group of participants. Interviews were used to complement data from the questionnaire thus triangulate sources of data to improve validity of data (Shastri, 2008).

DATA ANALYSIS.

Data was analyzed according to thematic grouping obtained from the given responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

An 80% return rate of questionnaires was registered which managed to capture views by respondents representing various stakeholders. Results from both questionnaire schedules and interview guides were bunched together for analysis.

Most respondents said the marking systems adopted by Zimbabwe were both valid and reliable. However, the examiners all expressed the views that the conveyor belt marking was more reliable and valid than the previous system. Bukenya (2006) stated that belt marking involved more than one marker for a script thus ensured high validity of results. On the other note

examiners felt that belt marking was time consuming, leaves no room for relaxation for examiners, reduces competition among the examiners and confined examiners unnecessarily.

All participants agreed that the Zimbabwean examination board observed strongly the issue of ethics on the conduct of examinations. Even those who mark agreed that divulging information examination is not allowed. Students who wrote examinations in London, Cambridge and ZIMSEC all concurred that results will only be known when announced by the director of examination board. Both the public and the candidate would only talk about examinations after their release. This is clearly spelt out in ZIMSEC examination guideline booklet. Headmasters and even deputy heads agreed that their spouses are not allowed to write examination at their centers so as to avoid cheating cases.

On the nature of testing, examinations are mainly norm-referenced. This to many participants including students both at primary and secondary schools was seen as disadvantaging the high achievers as their final scores would be compared relative to other candidates. This view was in line with what Cohen and Swerdlik (2010) found on norm-referenced tests that they do not cater for individual performance tests that they do not cater for individual performance only but that of a group. Thus from the interviews made by the researcher; the general consensus was that individual abilities should be considered in tests rather than group performances. In with the above view, most students felt that examinations system by being internal was too restrictive and punitive. They argued that those who teach them may not be the test developers (examiners) and thus may focus on areas that would not be tested. All stakeholders expressed appreciation to examination boards, for allowing a student to request for remarking in the event that one is not satisfied with his/her results. However, they said this could only be done by well-informed students.

The present examination system, allows for multiple registration of examinations. Even though a few centers after all boards, but all respondents were happy to say that one is free to register for London, Cambridge to ZIMSEC boards. This view was in the existence of these boards in the Zimbabwean examination system. However, most respondents lament the absence of these boards except ZIMSEC in government schools and pointed that only private institutions are at liberty to offer any examination boards.

In spite of the fact that the examination systems are churning out well ground graduates, most participants expressed disappointment at the way materials in preparation for examinations are made available through various avenues like textbooks, examination questions and answer booklets and examination reports. On textbooks, there is a plethora of publishing houses like that Longman, ZPH, College Press, Mambo Press and others. Candidates argued that it is good to have a variety to these printing houses that takes responsibility of Curriculum Development Unit, but it adds unnecessary burden on them as they would be forced to buy all books from these

publishing houses as they would not be sure of which one is the best. Instead, they suggested that one printing house be given such a task for the benefit of the candidates who would be strained financially.

The study found that candidates expressed disappointment at the way centers are treated by examiners. Through investigations revealed that there is a bias in terms of marking scripts, for example a day secondary school and a boarding school, would be treated differently. Examiners agreed that yes, there are good centers and bad centers but said the issue of marking schemes would solve the issue. Most respondents agreed to the existence of such things in the examination system, a view which Mamwenda (2004) said that teachers have an effect when respond more favorably to candidates from high socio-economic backgrounds.

The researcher found that respondents concurred on the presence of so many challenges facing the examination system. Transport was mentioned particularly by school heads in the rural areas, where the money charged for examinations would not be sufficient to sustain the examination process. This was because, in most cases written scripts would need to be transported to ZIMSEC regional branch which may be too far away from them. The issue of remunerations was mentioned by examiners who said they are often short changed in terms of the moneys agreed would not be done or in some cases get paid after a long time and in bits and pieces.

On test security, all stakeholders expressed disappointment at the way examination papers before writing are handle. Some said there are reports of paper leakages in the year 2006 and 2010, especially in subjects like geography, shone and Mathematics. Headmasters lamented the absence of strong rooms/chubs at their center due to unaffordability by the schools. Most participants said, the issue of leakages kills the spirit as some would get away with it without any action against them done. However, there a security measure, if such things happen, as according to ZIMSEC regional officer (Masvingo), there are questions. Banks to be used to replace those suspected to have leaked without any delay.

On the value of the test (its utility) most respondents felt that the curriculum tested does not give chance for the acquisition of basic skills in a subject but focuses on in-depth knowledge of the subject but focuses on i-depth knowledge of the subject which might a challenge to most candidates. They suggested that in subject like Mathematics at O' level, most courses require it as a precondition, thus it would be better to have a syllabus that tests basic mathematics skills like those needed by secretaries as they said they do not need complex mathematics, as found in 'O' level syllabus 4008/4028. This would match closely to what the South African Examination Boards are doing. This would give candidates the chance to make choices they said.

On practical subjects, most participants said they were not good enough to prepare graduates for employment. As an example students mentioned bidding practical subjects at O' level as it does not result in complete structures. They suggested that candidates be given opportunity to build full structures, thus equips them adequately for future employment. On the same vein some said most practical subjects examined are not suitable for self-taught pupils, yet candidates both external should be given a chances to write these.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on information obtained from the research, the examination system need to seriously take into consideration the demands of the candidates especially on the issue of preparation materials for the examination which in most cases may not be available to the candidates on time. On which subjects to do, there is need for students to have career guidance so that they focus the abilities on what they want to do in life. Students as being adolescence, there is a period of storm and stress, thus need assistance form the adults. There is need for subjects to test basic skills.

There is need for tight security of examination material for them to be credible. The examination boards need to transport these and provide any necessary support for the smooth running of the examinations. Remuneration of markers needs to be looked into with the view to bring sanity to their operations in any future engagements. Thus the examination boards need to shoulder any responsibility for the running of examinations rather than blaming centers that may be incapacitated to run the examinations.

Candidates need to be given options to choose when it comes to registrations of examinations. Thus boards such as London, Cambridge and others need to come on board rather than ZIMSEC monopolizing the system. Thus there is need for integration of both the formal and non-formal education systems to bring excellence in that venture.

REFERENCES

- Bukenya, M (2006) Comparing the Reliability of the Conveyor Belt Marking System with Traditional Marking System. A Paper Presented at the 32nd IAEA annual conference Singapore 22nd – 26th May. Page 1-6
- Cohen, R.J and Swerdlik, M.E (2010) Psychological Testing and Assessment: An Introduction to tests and Measurement 7th Edition. New York, McGraw-Hill
- Doll, R.C (1989) Curriculum Improvement: Decision Making and Process 7th Edition . London. Allyn and Bacon.
- Gronlund, N.E (1965). Measurement and Evaluation in Teaching. New York. McMillan Co.
- Kempa, R.F and L'odiaga, J (1984) Criterion Referenced Interpretation of Examination grades in Educational Research. Volume 26, Number 1, February, page 56 – 62

Mpofu, E. (1994). The British Ability Scales Similarities Subtests' Content and Construct Validity for a Sample of Zimbabwe School Children. A replication and Extension Study. In Zimbabwe Journal of Educational Research Volume No 1. March page 89-113

Shastri, V.K (2008). Research Methodology in Education. New Delhi. Virgo Press.

Woolfork, A. (1995) Educational Measurement. New York. MacMillan Company

Zimsec Examination Reports Paper (2011) 'O' level and A level Examinations.

The Herald (2010) Examination Papers Stolen. Thursday, November 3, page 3.