

The Over - Reliance on Standardized Testing in Cameroon: Implications for the Primary School Classroom

Kenneth Ngu Foncha PhD¹, John Teneng Awa PhD¹, Tah Delphine Berka²

¹Cameroon GCE Board, Buea, Cameroon

²University of Buea, Buea, Cameroon

ABSTRACT

Mandated external assessment remains the main framework for the assessment of pupils, teachers and school administrators' effectiveness in Cameroon given that there is no national framework to assess students' learning. This exploratory study set out to examine the high stakes attached to Selection and Exit Certificate Examinations in Primary schools in Cameroon and their implications for the curriculum, instruction, accountability, students' learning and teachers' behavior. The study was carried out in 12 Primary Schools. Data were collected using questionnaires and interviews and analyzed thematically. The results from the study indicated that over testing and the misuse of tests are damaging to primary school learners in Cameroon. Also, high stakes testing in Cameroon ignores the complexity of child development as ten- year -old children are subjected to two public examinations within a month. Similarly a majority of the children can't keep pace with the school curricula. Unfortunately, between 80 and 150 hours of instructional time are lost to test preparation, and a de facto obligatory curriculum reduces instruction as children are compelled to read and answer questions in pamphlet rather than text books. Also, teachers' authority and independence are reduced. Non-cognitive abilities and soft skills are neglected. Meanwhile, results of these public examinations do not correlate with outcomes of recent cross-national assessment involving Cameroon. This study calls to question, the validity and reliability of both examinations. The study recommends that the Common Entrance and First School Leaving Examinations should be abolished and replaced by a portfolio assessment for grade six learners, a nine -year basic education program should substitute the existing system, and an over-hauling of the basic education curriculum.

KEYWORDS: High stakes, public examination, assessment, learning outcomes

Background to the Study

Public examinations are not a novelty having been used in Ancient China to hire civil servants. The first record of standardized testing comes from China, where aspirants for government jobs had to take examinations testing their understanding of Confucian Philosophy and Poetry. In the Western World, examiners usually favored assessment through essays, a tradition stemming from the ancient Greeks' affinity for the Socratic Method. As the Industrial Revolution and the progressive movement of the early 1800s took school-age kids out of the farms and factories and put them behind desks, standardized examinations emerged as an easy way to test large numbers of students quickly.

Public examinations were introduced in Africa during the colonial era, and have continued till date. These examinations are supposed to control the contrasting elements of the educational system, ensuring that all schools teach to the same standard as they provide a specification of clear goals and standards for teachers and students. Public examinations provide leverage to the changes in curriculum and teaching methods, and the maintenance of national standards. They are used for certification and the selection of learners in systems where the numbers of places reduce at

each succeeding level. Public examinations also perform accountability function for teachers and schools.

Up till present, public examinations in Cameroon have not changed in purpose and content even in the context of the problems facing education. Many understand they are relatively fair and impartial and they also legitimate the allocation of scarce educational resources. However, the reality that high-stakes examinations will impact on teacher behavior and student learning means that the nature of the examination and its influence on the classroom merit profound consideration.

Primary School Examinations in Cameroon

Cameroon is a bilingual country with two sub-systems (English and French) of education each upholding the philosophies of education prevalent in the colonial past. This study is limited to the Anglo-Saxon sub-system of education in Cameroon. School systems in Cameroon are in general, obsessed with external high stakes examination. Grade six children who are supposed to be twelve-years- old are expected to take the Common Entrance Examination and the First School Leaving Certificate Examination. The former is

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for selection into secondary schools and the latter for certification. Both examinations are conducted during the third of three terms within a time gap of a month.

Theoretical Framework

The way students' academic progress is measured, is telling about the kind of learning that is cherished. Proponents of high-stakes testing use four theories to make their case:

1. **Motivational Theory:** The extrinsic rewards and sanctions associated with high-stakes testing serve to motivate teachers to improve their performance. The presumption here is that educators require external pressure to improve upon their teaching.
2. **Theory of alignment:** They hold that high-stakes testing spur the alignment of the major components of the education (curriculum, instruction and assessment).
3. **Information Theory:** High-stakes testing will provide information which can be used to guide policy dialogue.
4. **Symbolism:** It holds that such systems signal important values to stakeholders.

Argument for the engagement of children in standardized test

Shepard et al., 1998 provide four primary reasons for the assessment of young children:

- Assessment to support learning,
- Assessment for the identification of special needs,
- Assessment for program evaluation and monitoring trends, and
- Assessment for school accountability.

One of the major advantages of standardized tests is that the results can be used to compare a child to developmental norms or to children in similar circumstances. A norm is an average or series of averages obtained on the sample of children used in developing the test. A second advantage sometimes cited is the predictive validity of such tests. That is, children who perform well on standardized tests in the preschool years tend to also perform well on tests in kindergarten and in the early elementary years (Vacc, Vacc, & Fogleman, 1987).

The Case against Standardized tests for young children

Many researchers argue that the disruption of learning and the stress created by standardized tests is detrimental to young learners' achievement. They warn that the potential for misinterpretation of test results is considerably higher with young children.

Developmental psychologists hold that young children have a restricted ability to comprehend the formal, spoken instructions required for most standardized assessments, thus they fail to pick up the cues that older children use to determine what is expected of them in an assessment environment. They equally hold that younger children also lack the sophistication to interpret situational cues or written instructions. In the same way, questions that necessitate complex information-processing skills, such as giving differential weights to different choices, distinguishing recency from primacy, or responding correctly to multistep directions, may easily cause a child to give the wrong answer to a question. When longitudinal studies of testing were examined to see if the achievement test scores of young children could predict the achievement test scores received by those same children a few years later, the answer was that the tests did not predict well at all.

Meisels (2007) has reported that no single indicator, especially a formal test, can reliably and validly assess a young child's skills, achievements, or personality. James & Tanner (1993) believe that although test results can provide an indication of a young child's developmental stage, they are unreliable indicators of a child's potential for future school success. Many tests used with young children have an error rate in the range of 50 percent. In addition, negative labels acquired from testing can lead to a lack of acceptance and lowered expectancy for a child, factors that can further inhibit achievement. The use of standardized testing for placement in transitional classes or for retention, they argue, cannot be justified since retention has proved to be ineffective in early grades.

They further point out that test-driven instruction for children leads to heightened academic pressure. Young children, they argue, show such stress-related symptoms as unwarranted fear of failure and school avoidance behaviors. Furthermore, standardized testing tends to have a negative impact on the curriculum by narrowing the focus to rote skills. Low-achieving children suffer the most because their poor test performance often places them in groups receiving repetitive, basic-skills training.

The Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA, 2001) has raised serious arguments against the testing of young children. Group administered test, it asserts, are not responsive to the wide range of rates and abilities inherent in every age group of children- a biological fact that is independent of predetermined curricula and attainment goals. More so, it holds that most standardized test practices require rote memorization activities, paper-and-pencil tasks, and skill-and-drill reviews. These activities are clearly at variance with what is known about how children learn, sustain curiosity and interest, and retain information. Group administered tests are not responsive to the attributes and needs of children with difficulties or the wide range of socio-cultural diversity.

SECA (2001) further upholds that most standardized tests do not take into consideration children's limited test-taking ability like sitting for extended periods of time, using language efficiently and effectively, making acute visual discrimination, adhering to time constraints, ignoring distractions etc. The Association concludes that children, compared to a normative group which falls below the norm on a standardized test, are at risk being misdiagnosed and assigned to inappropriate and ineffective interventions and remediation. Parents can easily be misled about the developmental progress of their children when assessment practices are not sufficiently comprehensive to include well-designed observation and performance-based assessment.

Walker (2014) postulates that today's classroom educators are producing future test takers instead of creative, critical thinkers. He highlights the issues of public schools changing into high stakes- events, rewarding and punishing schools and causing the factor of education to no longer be about the child's educational needs, but rather a mere test score.

Criteria for the appropriate assessment of young learners

According to James & Tanner (1993) an assessment must allow children to demonstrate their understanding in real situations. Testing should emphasize their ability to evaluate

and synthesize information and to solve problems, rather than their ability to choose correct answers in a multiple-choice format. They suggest that observation over time provides a more accurate picture of a child's capabilities. They encourage educators to challenge test developers to design instruments that support rather than detract from meaningful instruction.

SECA (2001) has insisted that the effective assessment of young children should emphasize emerging development in all developmental domains: physical/motor, psychosocial, cognitive, language and literacy development. More so, such assessments must focus on the individual strengths and uniqueness, based on sound principles of child growth and development and should emanate from authentic (logical, meaningful, relevant and applicable) curricula. SECA (2001) further upholds that for the assessment of young children to be functional and focused, it should of necessity be intertwined with instruction, be performance, process and product based and should be ongoing and should occur in many contexts. Such assessments, they conclude, must recognize and support different intelligences and learning styles, minimize or alleviate child stress to ensure best (or most successful) outcomes, in terms of being reflective and analytical, honest, accurate instructive and useful. Above all, the effective assessment of young children should be conducted in collaboration with learners, parents, teachers and professional specialists as the case might be.

Statement of the problem

Cameroon has an examination- driven educational system with an obsession for high stakes testing. Primary school children sitting national tests tend to show increased signs of stress and anxiety around exam time, with some suffering sleeplessness and panic attacks. Grade six children of an average age of ten are subjected to two public examinations (Common Entrance Examination and the First School Leaving Certificate Examination) before moving to the next education cycle. Paradoxically, results of these examinations are not predictive of their performance. While results of these high stakes examinations are considered good enough, results of PASEC (Progress Educatif de la Confemen 2014) indicate only 23 percent of children in Cameroon complete primary schools with sufficient proficiency in Mathematics and Reading.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How do the Common Entrance and the First School Leaving Certificate Examinations impact classroom practices in primary schools in Cameroon.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through a questionnaire and interviews and were analyzed by thematically.

RESULTS

A total of 12 schools, 2 being Denominational and 10 Lay Private were involved in the study. 433 grade six pupils are involved. The highest number of students per school was while the lowest had only 8 pupils. No public school was available because of the prevailing socio-political strife in the two English Speaking Regions of the North West and South West. All 12 schools scored 100% in both the Common Entrance and First School Leaving Certificate Examinations in the previous two years. The average age of grade six

children was 10. One school had a pupil who was 13 years old. 24 pupils were only nine years old.

In all the 12 schools classes begin at 7am for grade six as against 8am for the rest of the classes and close at 5pm two hours after regular closing time for the other students. This means grade six children put in 3 extra hours in regular school days. Grade six children in all the schools attend classes on Saturdays from 8pm to 12pm. They spend the midterm holidays (two weeks) in preparation for the end of year examinations. Apart from the statutory end of month test, the pupils take a minimum of three mock examinations. Pupils in all the schools do not take the midterm holidays as they spend the period in school in preparation for end-of-course examination.

Curriculum and school schemes of work do not seem to be harmonized as some schools offered subjects not taught in others. While some schools offer up to eighteen subjects, others offer thirteen. Different text books are used across the schools with the alibi that no one publisher has the capacity to supply all the schools. A common feature among the schools is the use of question and answer booklets and the focus on past examination questions for drilling. The question and answer booklets are written by inspectors of the Ministry of Basic Education.

Content analyses of the two examinations reveal that they test the same learning outcomes and are limited to paper and pencil tests. They ignore many areas of knowledge and skills prescribed in the curricula that cannot be measured by paper and pencil tests. The examinations place much emphasis on cognitive skills and very little attention to practical skills. Both examinations contain very little reference to the everyday life of the learners out of school as they deal with only scholastic topics. The quality of the questions is often poor given the low assessment literacy levels of the teachers.

We also found out that primary school leaving examinations in Cameroon are plagued by high potentials for manipulating results and malpractices especially cheating. Many teachers attested to this. The EFA Monitoring Report of 2013/4 in analyzing the percentage of primary school children who reached grade 4 and achieved minimum learning standards in reading, painted a gloomy picture of Cameroon. According to EFA (2013) calculations based on expected cohort survival rate to grade four, the percentage of primary school children who reached grade four and achieved learning standards in reading is 45%. 25% reached grade four but did not learn the basics. 30% did not reach grade four. However, yearly results of the First School Leaving Certificate have hardly gone below an 80% pass. Results of PASEC 2014 indicate that only 23 percent of children in Cameroon completing primary school with sufficient proficiency in Mathematics and Reading. This opposite picture of the achievement rate is a pointer to the degree of cheating and manipulation of results that characterize these examinations.

CONCLUSION

Desirable learning is not a reality in primary schools in the English Sub System of education in Cameroon. Excessive testing and the misuse of tests are visibly damaging to primary school learners in Cameroon. It has created a de facto curriculum which has pushed many young people out

of school. Primary schools tend to focus on the demands of the tests rather than on the needs of the children. The emphasis on past examination questions and the limitation of questions to recall and the recognition of factual information imply that these elements are translated into the curricular experience of the learners.

The manifest impact of these examinations on the teaching-learning process results in a situation in which the educational needs of children who would not proceed to the next level are inclined to be overlooked. This means that children who leave school at an early stage are provided with too little opportunities to acquire relevant knowledge and skills.

The examinations raised the serious issue of equity. The obligation to pay fees before taking the examinations and the relevance of private tuition outside school in preparing children for the examinations work to the disadvantage of children from poor homes.

Within the context of this prevailing learning crisis, it is evident that public examinations in Cameroon distort or avert desirable learning and so their overbearing role must be revisited with the aim of reducing the negative outcomes linked to these instruments. This assertion supports Zernike (2015), arguing that while test is consuming the learning environment, there has been no evidence to support that more time spend on test improves academic performance.

Recommendations

1. On the basis of the findings of this study, we made the following recommendations: 1- School entry age should be fixed at six and measures should be put in place to ensure that the rule is strictly adhered to. Most Cameroonian children get to primary school at ages where they are cognitively unprepared to learn.
2. Common Entrance Examination and the First School Leaving Certificate Examination should be abolished.
3. An assessment portfolio should be developed for grade six children. Appropriate assessment of young children should involve the children themselves, parents, and teachers. The portfolio method promotes a shared approach to making decisions that will affect children's attitudes toward work and school in general. It liberates

the teacher from the constraints of standardized tests. Using portfolios in assessment allows teachers to expand the classroom horizon and enlarge each child's image.

4. A nine- year- basic education program should be adopted. The program would entail six years in primary school and three years in Lower Secondary. In this context learners would take the first standardized test at the age of 15.
5. Overhauling of the basic education curriculum. A curriculum dominated by examinations will hardly provide adequate educational experiences for learners. A majority of primary school children in Cameroon suffer from cognitive overload, a negative consequence of an overambitious curriculum. A majority of children spend years of instruction with no progress on basics. A greater part of the children cannot keep pace with the present school curricula. The flat learning profiles are in part the result of a fast curricula- paced moving much faster than the pace of learning.
6. There is a dire need to develop an assessment framework to monitor learning levels, support teaching, learning and the effective use of assessment data.

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