

## ASSESSMENT GENERATED CONSTRAINTS TO INSTRUCTION AND LEARNING IN THE NIGERIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM- IMPLICATIONS FOR LIFE-LONG LEARNING AND PRODUCTIVITY

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### Abstract

*The system of assessment in Nigerian schools which places an over-bearing emphasis on successes recorded in external examinations has resulted in syllabus- bound instruction and a total lack of consideration for the psychological characteristics, interests and needs of the learners. The role assessment outcomes are expected to play in curriculum review/ improvement is neglected in favour of the need for learners to meet curriculum objectives rather than the curriculum matching their characteristics and needs. Massive failure rates have resulted in teachers increasingly adopting examination- oriented teaching strategies to meet the demands of external examinations. On their own part, the poorly motivated learners, who are unable to see the relevance of what they are being made to learn, increasingly adopt surface and strategic approaches to learning, sustained by instrumental motives. With professional educationists increasingly losing their influence in deciding the mode of educational provision and good school practices to politicians, the crisis in the school system continues to mount, with increasing examination malpractices, declining quality of output and diminishing productivity. The way out of the problem lies in the effective use of assessment results in curriculum improvement and meeting the psychological needs of learners through enhanced school-based, formative assessment. Addressing Learner competencies and aspirations in curriculum review and implementation should be central in the quest to instill the values of life-long learning, service and productivity in the products of the school.*

### Introduction

The mode of assessments in the school system and the use the results are put to have profound impact on the quality of instruction and learning (Porter, 1995). A school system that places undue emphasis on assessment scores over meaningful learning, runs the risk of making teachers adopt syllabus- bound instruction, and students adopting surface approaches to learning, sustained by instrumental motives for passing examinations and obtaining certificates (Balarabe, 1989). In this kind of situation, meaningful teaching and learning suffers, while assessment scores have low predictive validity (Nwana and Yoloye,

1982; Nwana, 1996; Hassan, 1994). Further evidence on the failure of school assessments in guiding meaningful teaching and learning comes from cognitive development studies which reveal that only a very small percentage of 14- 16 year-old students in Britain were in the early formal operational stage, compared to just 30% of such students in the Nigerian school system (see Ahmed & Bala, 1996). Additional data pointing to the ineffectiveness of school learning in enhancing the intellectual development of students comes from studies by Balarabe (2003 & 2005), which revealed that 18.8% and 24.4%, respectively of university undergraduates were below average in intelligence. These findings clearly point to a failure of the assessment system in sieving out low ability students before they get to higher levels of education. By implication, it is also possible that a good number of bright students were sieved out of the school system in the process. The reason for the low intellectual ability students getting to higher levels in the education ladder is not necessarily due to examination malpractice, since such cases exist in countries like Britain where the assessment system is well controlled and functional. The major reason could lie in the assessment system over-relying on examination items that require the reproduction of facts without properly understanding the concepts. This view finds support from a study by Christie & Afzaal (2005), who investigated the influence of rote memorization in Pakistani examination results. They concluded that (pp.14-15): "The main focus of examination is on simple recall questions not on understanding and application of concept...Ultimately the education system at secondary level...is not contributing to the achievement of diversified educational outcomes but rather focusing on a narrow range of cognitive skills." This reliance on memorization for purposes of coping with assessments is bound to constrain meaningful instruction and learning in the school. Strategies for minimizing such assessment-generated constraints should focus on ensuring that the curriculum and mode of instruction are appropriate to the interests and ability of the learners. In addition, assessment results should be used judiciously for purposes of placements, promotion and graduation, while at the same time, the public should hold schools to account for assessment results. Furthermore, learners should be encouraged to use assessment scores for monitoring their own learning. In this way, assessment results will also serve as motivators for learning. Teachers need to be trained and retrained for improved school-based assessment.

#### **Assessment practices in the schools**

The prevailing mode of teaching at all levels of education in Nigerian public schools is the traditional teacher-centered, talk-chalk method, to mixed-ability groups of students. Within-school assessments combine both continuous

With respect to mathematics, she concluded that:

...there is no significant relationship between continuous assessment scores and terminal assessment scores in mathematics for Senior Secondary Schools in Kaduna metropolis (p.71).

Added to the poor predictive validity of national assessment scores is the problem of a strong mis-match with within- school assessments as shown in the massive failure rates, despite the inclusion of continuous assessment scores in the final grades. These are well- known problems which need little further discussion.

Whatever could be responsible for the low predictive validity of the UME, SSCE, NECO and other external assessment scores, they remain a source of heightened anxiety for the stakeholders. This anxiety has generated varied reactions from pupils, teachers and administrators. They include an overbearing inclination for syllabus-bound instruction by teachers, with little attention paid to teaching for understanding and real-life applications. In addition, the interests and ability of the learners are given little consideration in the design of lessons and assessments. With mixed ability groups of students, many of who have poor academic foundations (as seen from the results of Federal Ministry of Education Monitoring Learning Achievements of 1996 and 2003), the result is the adoption of memorization techniques, with poor comprehension, geared towards passing examinations. Such students have little interest in the contents to be learned and hence adopt the surface approaches to learning (with poor understanding), aimed at passing examinations (Entwistle, 1983). The surface approach to learning is sustained by instrumental motives for passing examinations and obtaining certificates, without proper mastery and interest in the contents. While it is true that no formal school system is free from this problem, there is the need to recognize the heightened and compounding effects in Nigeria. These include instruction being imparted through a second language, inadequate support for learning as a result of parental socio-economic conditions, over-bearing teacher workloads, inadequate teaching and learning aids/ facilities, poor teaching and assessment methods, and poorly trained teachers with low motivation.

In a nutshell, it is fairly accurate to state that the external system of assessment is pursuing excellence in a situation that is far from ideal, while the low correlation with within- school assessment scores may be largely attributable to problems with the within- school assessment results.

### **Constraints to teaching and learning**

As examinations assume greater importance over learning, to the extent that the situation may be likened to the "tail wagging the dog", teachers focus their attention on covering the syllabus and supporting the learners to prepare for examinations, while paying little attention to comprehension and the development of synthetic, analytical and evaluative skills. For this reason, external assessment is increasingly failing to sieve out the low ability students in the selection process to higher education. Evidence for this can be found in the results of studies carried out with university undergraduate students in which as many as 18.8%, were found to be below average in their scores on the AH4 Part II Non-Verbal Reasoning Test (Balarabe, 2003). Such low IQ students are bound to encounter difficulties with learning and are more likely to be withdrawn. This makes them particularly vulnerable to cheating in examinations and engaging in drug abuse as survival and escape measures respectively. A similar on-going survey by the same researcher, with students of another Federal university has found 24.4% to be below average in intelligence. These results support the findings of Shayer and Adey (1981), in Britain, and Okeke (1986), in Nigeria, both using Post-Primary School students aged 14-16 (see Ahmed & Bala, 1996), where they reported respectively that "only a very small percentage of people of this age can reason formally", and "only 30% of the entire pupils are at the early formal stage of reasoning" (p. 109). From Piagetian postulations, individuals should start transiting to the formal operational stage at about the age of eleven (Mukherjee, 2002). Both of these studies on formal reasoning ability and I.Q. show a general inadequacy in the capacity reason, and which impedes learning. In other words, they reveal a failure by the assessment system to sieve out the weak students before getting to higher levels of education. Direct evidence for the failure of the assessment system comes from students' inadequate skills in basic literacy and numeracy at the secondary school level.

Studies on the ways students approach the contents of learning reveal that, the pressure of having to cope with curriculum contents that may be well above students' ability levels, or which they may perceive to be of little relevance to their lives, may lead them to adopt a surface approach in learning. In a study conducted on learning, motivation, academic ability and effort put into learning by Balarabe (1989), the following relationships were found:

Table 1: Correlations between approaches to learning, motivation, academic ability and effort (N= 392)

Variable	Ability	Effort
Surface approach		-11
Instrumental motivation	-18	-19
School irrelevance	-12	-16
Deep approach	13	14
Strategic approach		
Intrinsic motivation	26	32

Note: Decimal points and correlations below .09 ( $p < .05$ ) omitted.

From these results, it is obvious that connections exist between surface approach to learning and instrumental motivation with academic ability and effort put into learning. Of interest also is the result on the perception of school as irrelevant and not likely to lead to the realization of personal aspirations. From the scores of the subjects in the "Motivation and Approaches to Learning Inventories" that yielded these results were developed by Entwistle (1987). They were adapted for use with this Nigerian sample and it was observed that a large number of the secondary school students had high scores in surface approach, instrumental motivation and school irrelevance. The existence of high measures of these traits in the students suggest failure in making them to see the personal relevance of the contents of learning to their lives, which assessment results should have revealed and interventions made to remedy the situation. In other words, it is either assessment was not carried out, or the results were ignored, and which now constrain instruction and learning. Poor attitudes to learning do definitely have an impact on life-long learning, which should be an objective of any worthwhile system of education.

### **Minimizing assessment constraints on instruction and learning**

The objectives of assessment include determining the appropriateness of curriculum and teaching; providing the basis for student placements, promotion and graduation; reporting progress of students to parents, teachers etc; and, possibly holding schools to account to the public (Porter, 1995). Interventions to minimize assessment constraints on learning and instruction should focus on these objectives, as discussed below.

#### **i. The curriculum and its implementation**

It is essential that the curriculum be appropriate for the intended learners. Contents to be learned should match pupil ability, experience, interests.

personality and circumstances. As explained by Holt (1973), many children fail not because they lack the capacity to learn, but as a result of the system of education being inappropriate to their needs. Nigerian school curricula are well drawn up, but problems arise from badly planned and executed instruction. Reasons for this lie mainly in the need to meet the demands of external assessment, teacher's incompetence and poor motivation. Time is always short and the priority has always being to prepare the learners for assessments. Results of assessments have assumed greater importance over learning. For this reason, pupils are given inadequate information on the objectives of instruction, the real-life relevance of learning the contents, and what the expected outcomes are from their learning. With a proper understanding of these, they will be able to monitor and assess their own learning and be intrinsically motivated. As a matter of priority, assessment outcomes should be routinely used in curriculum review to ensure relevance and appropriateness. It is important while selecting students for teacher- training, to ensure that they have good academic aptitude. In addition, they should be given adequate training and supervision while on the job. Retraining opportunities should also be provided for them to improve on the job.

**ii. Student placements, promotion and graduation**

Assessment results should be used adequately in student' placements, promotion and graduation as this will support instruction and learning. The present system of "automatic promotion" in public primary and secondary schools, where learners move on to the next class regardless of performance is a major obstacle to instruction and effective learning.

**iii. Progress reports to parents, teachers and administrators**

There is need to give assessment reports the attention they deserve in planning teaching and other support to the pupils.

**iv. Feedback and motivator to learners**

When properly planned and executed, assessment outcomes should serve as feedback to learners on the progress they are making and where they need to improve. This should serve as a strong motivator for learning.

**V. Accountability by school to public**

This is a major problem area in the educational system in many countries. For instance, with the objective of primary education being to provide training to the learners in basic literacy, numeracy and life-skills, what stops the public from demanding explanations and perhaps resignation from top professionals and

politicians when 50% of the learners could not read, write and carry out the basic arithmetic functions at the end of six years of training?

### **Assessment failure as constraint to life- long learning and productivity**

The tendency among learners to adopt a surface approach in learning, sustained by instrumental motives of passing examinations and acquiring certificates could have a long lasting effect on the desire for life-long learning and engaging in productive activities. Such learning is not likely to be applied in solving real –life problems confronting the individuals since it is not borne out of genuine interest and understanding. Creative impulses are inhibited by the need to conform to rigid procedures such as exist in the formal school setting (Mukherjee, 2002). The interest to explore, discover and reorganize ideas is destroyed while distaste for school and schoolwork is created. For these reasons the conception of learning as a life- long undertaking is poorly developed, and thereby limiting the growth of the intellect.

### **Conclusion**

Scores obtained in assessments have come to be regarded as the sole criteria for judging success in learning. The primary objective has over the years shifted from teaching for learning to teaching for examinations. This has resulted in a lack of consideration for the interests and abilities of learners in planning for education and instruction. Learners have adjusted by concentrating on retaining the contents of learning for reproduction in examinations, for the sake of passing. Hence, assessment results have continued to have low predictive validity. Solutions to the problem, which has profound effects on the learners' commitment to learning and productivity lie in the effective use of assessment results for curriculum planning, taking learner characteristics and interests in planning for instruction, involving learners in planning for instruction, and using assessment results by the learners to monitor their own progress in learning, which incidentally should also serve as a motivator for learning.

To minimize the impact of assessment constraints on learning and instruction in the school, it is recommended that the curriculum be appropriate for the abilities, interests and experiences of the learners; assessment results be used for planning instruction; assessment results be used adequately for student' placements, promotion and graduation; the practice of "automatic promotion" be discontinued in the schools; and, providing assessment feedback to students, which should serve to keep them motivated in learning, and help them to plan and monitor their own progress.

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