

The Impact of Examinations on the School Curriculum: A Zimbabwean Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores the effect of the Ordinary level examinations on the school curriculum. It takes cognizance of the fact that the area has been explored by many researchers but the paper situates the topic in a Zimbabwean context in which literature attest to the notion that very little has been written. Data gathered from document analysis and interviews conducted with teachers, pupils and various agencies were used to write this paper. The paper corroborates what has been established by researchers on the same issue albeit in other countries that while examinations may impact positively on other students, motivating them to read more, to some students, and on the school curriculum in general, the impact is negative. It therefore calls for the harmonisation of the two major bodies that is the one which defines what is to be learnt, the Curriculum Development Unit, (CDU) and the body that determines what is to be assessed and the format of assessment, The Zimbabwe Schools examination Council (ZIMSEC) as a way of alleviating the effects of examinations on the students and the school curriculum.

Keywords: Curriculum, Curriculum analysis, Hidden curriculum

Abbreviation: CDU Curriculum Development Unit
ZIMSEC Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council
'O'-Level Or

1. Introduction

Examinations have been a major characteristic of educational systems the world over since time immemorial. They serve a number of functions in the learning process despite the effects they have on the curriculum and all stakeholders in the education system. Although the impact of examinations is similar in many countries, this paper however endeavours to explore the issue from a Zimbabwean perspective. It focuses on the Ordinary level examination ('O' Level) which is the gateway to many opportunities in the future of Zimbabwean students. The ordinary level examination is not a curriculum per se but an integral part of the school curriculum.

In the analysis of the impact of examinations on the school curriculum in Zimbabwe in this paper, focus is on the elements of the curriculum namely curriculum aims, content, methodology and evaluation. Impact on the organization of the school will be assessed as implementation of the curriculum is affected by how the schools are organized. The paper also assesses the effect that examinations have on students as the consumers of the curriculum and teachers as executors of the curriculum.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the theoretical framework of curriculum analysis. Curriculum analysis is a branch of curriculum theory. According to Posner (1995, pp13)

"a curriculum analysis is an attempt to tease a curriculum apart, into its component parts, to examine those parts and the way they fit together to make a whole, to identify the beliefs and ideas to which the developers were committed and which either explicitly or implicitly shaped the curriculum, and to examine the implications of these commitments and beliefs to the quality of educational experience."

Curriculum analysis therefore assesses the validity and suitability of a curriculum to pupils as the target of the curriculum and the wider society as the final beneficiary of the products of the school system. Thus, it is of great importance to analyse the effect of examinations so as to improve the quality of learning as Mavhunga (2008, pp 31) advises that:

"Curriculum planners need constant information feedback in order for them to make important curriculum decisions and as such information is obtained through curriculum analysis."

Curriculum analysis, Maravanyika (1986) contends, is done within the social, economic and political context of a given society and the whole purpose is to make the curriculum relevant. It is important to point out that the term curriculum is fraught with definitional problems because there are many curricula, viz: the documented curriculum, operational, hidden and extra curriculum (Posner 1995), among other curricula. Eraut (1975) suggests that

“We can come close to describing it (curriculum) by collecting evidence about it. Strictly speaking, it is not the curriculum that we analyse but the evidence about it.”

Taking into cognizance the said theoretical framework, this paper analyses how the Ordinary Level examination, which has become an indispensable part of the school system, impacts on the school curriculum.

3. Methodology

This study is not inclined towards a single research paradigm. It employs an eclectic approach whereby it borrows from the two major paradigms, the qualitative and quantitative. To generate data, a document analysis was done on curriculum aims, content, and suggested methodology. The outcome of the analysis was compared to what was obtaining in teacher's schemes of work and lesson observations to ascertain consistency and congruency with syllabus and also to check on syllabus coverage. Interviews were carried out with 'O' Level teachers, pupils and school heads. School time tables before and during examinations were studied to compare how schools are organized and operate during examination time and during the normal instructional time when there are no examinations.

4. The History of Examinations

Kuo cited in Arggarwal (1997) traces the origins of examinations to the Great Shun, emperor of ancient China whose reign ended in 2205 B.C. The emperor is said to have examined his officers every three years after which they were either promoted or had their services terminated depending on how they performed. In India, writes Arggarwal (1997), examinations started when the great grammarian Panini in the 4th century BC graded his students basing on errors made in recitation of texts of scriptures. In England, examinations came into existence around 1770 AD at Cambridge and Oxford. In Zimbabwe, formal examinations came into being with the advent of formal western education during the colonial period. Since then whatever form examinations have taken, they have been dreaded by students and continued to haunt them at various levels of the learning process and in varying degrees.

5. Functions of Examinations

Although examinations have continued to receive trenchant criticisms from within and outside the education, no credible alternative form of assessment has been proffered yet. Arggarwal (1997, pp 7) cites Mathura who underscores the importance of examinations saying,

“Even in the idealised picture of society portrayed in H.G. Wells’ Utopia, examinations find an important place.”

Thus examinations today still stand as the only standard way of assessing students’ work. They are regarded as an authentic way of ensuring teacher accountability.

Like in any other country in the world, public examinations serve many purposes. In Zimbabwe, the ‘O’ level examination is written in the fourth year of secondary schooling. The basic five ‘O’ Level passes are used to select students for advanced level (‘A’ Level) after which successful students may join the university system. The basic passes at ‘O’ Level are also used as minimum entry into tertiary institutions and the world of employment. To that end, the multiplicity of purposes of the examination makes it a decisive factor in a student’s life. Passing the examination is a gate way to many opportunities in one’s life. To many students and parents, the whole purpose of schooling has been trivialized to passing an examination. More so, education in Zimbabwe seems synonymous with passing an examination. With this rather distorted view of the purpose of examinations, a student is put under great psychological pressure to excel in the examination thereby compelling some to use unorthodox ways of passing.

6. The Zimbabwean secondary school curriculum and the ‘O’ level examination

The Zimbabwean school system has a centrally planned curriculum. The Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) is responsible for planning school curricula and drawing up syllabuses. Few teachers representing subject panels are involved in the curriculum development enterprise. The majority of teachers have very little input in the curriculum making process yet they are expected to closely follow the prescribed syllabus as deviation may mean concentrating on non examinable areas. A ‘fit all sizes’ kind of curriculum is made despite different ideographic factors obtaining in the schools. The curriculum package is distributed to the user system in various contexts such as urban, farm, mine, rural and boarding schools. Such schools have different levels of resources. The teachers who implement the syllabuses have different professional and academic qualifications hence their interpretation of the curriculum package is bound to be different.

The ‘O’ level examinations are syllabus based and centrally set. The Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) is responsible for setting examinations, training markers, arranging for centralised marking and processing results. Therefore, two different institutions (ZIMSEC and CDU) administered differently, work towards the production of an ‘O’ Level graduate.

The marking of examinations is done by teachers under supervision of ZIMSEC. A full certificate has five ordinary level passes with grade C or better and should include core subjects namely Mathematics, English language, Science and a vernacular language which at present can be either Shona or Ndebele. The ‘O’ level examination is very significant in the lives of many Zimbabweans that failure to attain the basic passes often leads one to rewrite the examination

when next offered, supplement the failed subjects, repeating Form Four and or even go back to do Form Three thus restarting the ordinary level course.

7. The Impact of the 'O' Level examination on the curriculum

Like elsewhere in the world, examinations in Zimbabwe have had great influence on the school curriculum. Their impact has been negatively felt on the aims, content, organization and evaluation of the curriculum. Teachers and students, sitting the examination and even other pupils in the school system have also felt the impact long before their turn to write is due.

7.1 Curriculum aims

The school curriculum aims at imparting knowledge and skills through various subjects and the examination aims at assessing the level of mastery of the acquired knowledge and skills. Thus, there exists a discrepancy in the examination and the curriculum aims. It is important to note that the examination may not address all the skills and attitudes that the curriculum wants developed in the students. Due to the importance accorded examinations, aims of the curriculum end up becoming aims of the examination. Therefore, the aims of the curriculum are not taken into consideration even though they may be clearly spelt out in the prescribed curriculum documents.

7.2 Content

The content of the Zimbabwean secondary school curriculum is made up of both practical and academic subjects. Selection of these subjects at school level is biased towards the extent to which pupils can pass them in an examination, notwithstanding the availability of material and human resources. In the allocation of material resources, examinable subjects are considered first. Non -examinable subjects such as Guidance and Counselling and HIV /AIDS Education are not put on the priority list even though they contribute greatly to the social and emotional well being of an individual.

Teachers who are experienced in teaching examination classes have studied the pattern of the examination. They are able to identify, and in most cases with great precision, the content areas that will be covered in an impending examination. As a result, they concentrate on teaching those areas at the expense of the whole prescribed syllabus content.

7.3 Organization

Organization in the school system is examination oriented. The 'O' level classes, (Form Three and Four) are in most cases allocated to senior teachers in the school whose record of teaching and possibility of making pupils pass in an examination is impressive and known. New teachers in the school, especially the recent college graduates are usually not trusted to teach examinable classes. In most cases, they are allocated lower forms while their diligence will still be under assessment.

Examinable classes in many schools are streamed according to ability, the idea being to encourage competition among the academically gifted and to separate them from the less gifted and in some cases often disruptive and playful students. This has an effect on both the teacher and the student in that pupils in the best classes are encouraged to work harder and live up to expectation, that of passing the examination. On the other hand those labelled academically less gifted are allocated non – academic subjects and this makes them feel academically inferior to their fellow students yet they may also be very good in other non academic and non examinable areas such as sports. Most schools in Zimbabwe do not offer sporting activities as disciplines in the curriculum so as to nurture such pupils’ talents. They are offered as co-curricula subjects in most schools. Even in the primary school where Physical Education is time-tabled, it is not taken seriously because it is not examinable at the end of the primary school course. Teachers also tend to concentrate their effort on the best classes which they know are capable of passing the examination.

On the time table, examinable subjects are usually given the first slots in the morning when students are still energetic. Non-examinable subjects are usually done after the examinable ones. During examination preparation, teachers use time allocated for non examinable subjects to revise the content covered in examinable subjects. Teachers of these non examinable subjects do not enjoy high esteem in the school as compared to those of examinable subjects.

During examination time, non examinable classes are also affected. They lose much of their learning time as their classrooms are turned into examination rooms. Some teachers of the non examinable classes are also drawn into the examination schedule by way of invigilation. Due to a shortage of infrastructure in most schools, the school time-table is adjusted in order to accommodate examinations. The rest of the school pupils only do their lessons when examinations are not in session. On days when examinations are scheduled for both morning and afternoon sessions, no teaching and learning take place for Form One to Three pupils. The O-level examinations are written twice a year, that is in June and from late October to end of November. In schools where students register for the June and November examinations, cumulatively, the amount of teaching and learning time lost by pupils not sitting for the examination in a year is somewhat substantial. Considering that these pupils also write end of term examinations set and marked in the school, the net effect is that their school year becomes truncated.

8. Implementation

Implementation of learning methods that are time consuming is compromised by examinations. Teachers resort to the use of methods that enable them to cover the syllabus content in the shortest possible time so that their pupils will have more time to revise for the examination. Therefore, what transpires during lessons is not much learning but a form of drilling. As a result, communicative and interactive methodologies that cater for the development of skills in the psychomotor and affective domains are sidelined. Teachers are more concerned with perfecting pupils’ techniques of answering examination questions. Some authors have

capitalised on the importance accorded examinations by compiling past examination questions for the different subjects and providing model answers and binding them as books. Such books have become best sellers for bookshop owners as they are the favourites of 'O' Level students. Parents prefer to buy such books to basic text books that have knowledge for their children.

9. Evaluation

The school curriculum endeavours to inculcate certain skills and attitudes in pupils such as those of moral and civic consciousness through the study of subjects such as Guidance and Counselling which regrettably are not examined. It therefore becomes very difficult for teachers of these subjects to ascertain with any degree of accuracy the extent to which what they are teaching is either understood or acknowledged by pupils. Their subjects are not taken seriously by pupils. The examined subjects tend to carry more weight in the school curriculum than those not examined.

The marking of examinations is centralized and the style of marking was adopted from The Cambridge Examination Board. Markers of examinations, who are teachers, leave their schools to participate in this rewarding exercise and augment their meagre salaries. The markers are paid per every script they mark. Therefore how much money one gets at the end of the exercise is a function of how fast they are in the marking? As a result, the tendency to hurry over the allocated scripts and request more cannot be ruled out. Although it can be argued that the scripts are moderated, only a sample is moderated. Cases of some students getting results for papers they did not sit for have also cropped up. This has made some parents to doubt the authenticity of their children's results hence in some instances candidates request ZIMSEC to remark their scripts. Such an exercise is also costly as it is not done for free. Others have also opted to be assessed by foreign examination boards such as the Cambridge examination board which has a credible record marking and processing large scale examinations. At the end of the marking exercise, Examiners Reports are produced for every subject to assist teachers. Such reports highlight strengths and weaknesses of candidates, comment on the quality of answers given and also comment on the quality of the examination.

9.1 Pupils

Examinations are stressful to pupils. They are labelled in terms of their performance. They develop a negative self concept if they do not pass as they think examinations spell either success or failure in their future lives. Krishnamurthi cited in Arggarwal (1997,pp 9) comments about examinations,

"When you compare B with A, openly or secretly, you are destroying B.B is not important at all for you have in your mind the image of A who is bright, clever and you have given him a certain value."

Thus, pupils tend to feel inferior when they are not successful after their performance has been rated against others. Pupils who do not feel adequately prepared for the examination or who

fear failure have often been involved in hook and crook means of passing such as smuggling material into the examination room so that they can copy. Cases of pupils getting access to examination papers before the examinations are written are not uncommon. This has led to the withdrawal of the particular examination paper and pupils have often been delayed in writing the examination in the affected area as they wait for an alternative paper.

9.2 Teachers

The major defining characteristic of a good teacher in Zimbabwe is competence. Teacher competence in the Zimbabwean context is now somewhat distorted as it is judged by the number of passes registered in an examination. This kind of competence enhances teacher status among colleagues and in the community. Some districts and provinces have introduced the best teacher award. In other schools teachers are rewarded by the school according to the number and quality of passes that their students get. This has motivated teachers to work hard in preparing pupils for the examination. In most schools pupils no longer enjoy school holidays as they are called back to school so that they rush over the syllabuses and revise past examination questions.

Some teachers have become popular for coaching examination techniques to students. Such teachers place emphasis on the art of answering questions in an examination. They conduct what is commonly known as extra lessons where they charge exorbitant prices for their services per hour, week or month. This situation is not peculiar to Zimbabwe only. Al-Issa (2007) observes that in the state of Oman some parents send their children to teachers for examination preparation and the fees can be as expensive as US\$50 per student per hour. Such teachers even conduct these lessons during school hours. In Zimbabwe, extra lessons are done after school, during lunch time at school, during weekends or holidays. This has an effect on the pupils that they may not take their work seriously during normal classroom periods knowing that they would cover up for the lost time during extra lessons. Pupils due to write an examination no longer have adequate time to rest during school holidays.

The element of chance cannot be ruled out in 'O' Level passes due to the heavy coaching that the students receive. In the end, some pupils who pass the 'O' Level examination may not be academically good but they may have passed as a result of the intense drilling they received on examination techniques. Such candidates get the false impression that they are academically good and proceed to do advanced level studies. Through the same means they get to university level with good passes but very little understanding of basic concepts in particular subject areas and choose programs whose academic rigours may be heavy for them to handle. The chances of such students becoming incompetent professionals are very high.

Examinations stifle teacher innovativeness. The teacher cannot teach content outside the scope of examinations as this may lead to unnecessary overload of information on the students. The teacher cannot also experiment with new methodology during content delivery lest pupils fail to grasp the concepts and may need revisiting which is time consuming. Thus the same content is taught every year to a particular level and the same methodology is employed until the

syllabus completes its cycle. In some schools, teachers of examinable classes are not allowed to go on annual leave. In such schools, they fear that pupils might not pass when taught by the less experienced teacher.

9.3 Parents

Parents also feel the impact of examinations financially. They part with money to send their children for extra coaching and buy examination revision books and guides so that their children pass as most of them believe that examinations are a milestone in their children's lives.

9.4 Schools

Schools have been categorized by society as bad and good on the basis of the quality of 'O' Level results they produce. Good schools are the ones that register many passes in an examination. Thus, a school with good educational facilities and highly trained personnel may not be classified as good if its pass rate is low at Ordinary Level and if its focus is not on the examinations. The so called good schools tend to abuse their good reputation by inviting hundreds of Grade Seven pupils to attend entrance examinations into the secondary school system. Some schools run more than one entrance examinations as a way of selecting the best and also raise funds by demanding entrance fees yet in the final analysis; they enrol few Form one pupils. Parents take their children for these entrance examinations with the hope that their children would strike a chance to pass the entrance examination and get a place for Form One at the good school. A place at such a school is an assurance of passing the 'O' Level examination at the end of their secondary school course.

10. Examinations and the hidden curriculum

Examinations carry a form of hidden curriculum. The fact that some subjects are examined while others are not suggests that some subjects are more important than others. Whereas the benefits of non-examined subjects may not be instantly quantifiable, their impact on a student may last a lifetime. Some teachers negotiate with teachers of non examined subjects to use their time to teach examined subjects thereby conveying the message that the non-examinable subjects are not important.

Recommendations

Although the school system cannot dispense with examinations as a form of assessment, some measures can be taken to demystify them and make them an enjoyable part of the learning process. Teachers can be empowered to make decisions on students who are not ready to sit for an examination to discourage them from writing. An alternative would be the introduction of national assessments at Form Three levels to determine the aptitude of pupils so that the less capable can delay in writing examinations. Such students can be given an extra year of learning so that they understand the major concepts in various subjects. In that way, they will be prepared to write the examination with confidence in the following year. This is akin to what

was obtaining in Zimbabwe in the 1980's in the former group 'A' schools that some pupils would write 'O' Level examinations after five years as a way of allowing the less academically gifted more time to learn before they sit for their examinations.

In the planning of the national school curriculum, the CDU should liaise with ZIMSEC so that curriculum aims and examination aims are synchronised. Also ZIMSEC is encouraged to set examinations covering all topics to minimise the idea of spotting questions by teachers. Such an approach calls for restructuring of questions. If possible, this can take various forms of structured questions to ensure effective content coverage. This will discourage teachers from teaching for examinations but for the acquisition of knowledge.

Teachers are encouraged to read and make use of comments from Examiners Reports so that all pupils benefit during formal school times. More often than not pupils who take up extra lessons with private teachers who mark examinations stand to benefit on the ways of answering examination questions more than others.

Poor performance in examinations is high in rural schools. One main cause of that is the dearth of material resources. Responsible authorities are encouraged to avail sufficient resources to their schools in order for them to produce better results. In that way, they would not appear inferior to other schools

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