

The Influence of Examinations on the Stated Curriculum Goals

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of examinations on curriculum implementation. It is based on an empirical study that involved collecting data and analyzing perceptions from teachers and students from various secondary schools in Bomet District. The Theoretical framework for the study was adopted from Wiggins and McTighe (1999) backward design model which involves identifying the aims and goals of the school program before decision making. The study, sought to establish the relationship between examinations conducted in secondary schools and the stated curriculum goals. The study established that examinations have had a backwash effect on the curriculum. For instance, the teachers cannot engage all the methods of instruction to attract the learners' interest in class, selection of the content is determined by examinability and integration of life skills in the various subjects was also ignored or rushed over. These are contrary to the education goals which are expected to be achieved in the school system. The study recommends that the examination setters should attempt to set balanced examination questions to include all areas of the syllabus, and test questions which do not require procedural skills alone but also require thinking skills that prepare students to be innovative, creative, and imaginative.

Keywords: Examination, Curriculum, Instructional Methods

1.1 Introduction

Education is a very important human activity and a necessity for any society for it fashions and models man to be able to function well in his environment. The purpose of education is to equip the citizenry to reshape their society so that the flaws and inequalities are eliminated. Research reveals that, while both the quantity and the quality of schooling matter for economic growth, quality is much more important (Woessmann, 2006). Examinations have been undertaken worldwide. They have been used to assess students aptitudes, achievements, inform decisions about curriculum and instruction, and make predictions about how successful a student may be in future (Nichols and Berliner, 2007). For about a century, testing for assessing aptitudes e.g. intelligence and achievement has taken an important part in the Kenyan education system. During the colonial period, public examinations were organized by the colonial government for the benefit of their government. The Kenya African Secondary examinations were first taken in form four in 1940 (Sifuna and Otiende, 1994).

Today there are many types of examinations in the education system in Kenya which include the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) which is undertaken at the end of class eight and the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education taken at the end of Form Four. The reason learning has been reduced to studying the text, particularly at the secondary school levels, is because the immediate goal of learning is to pass tests that open doors to higher education. School success is determined almost exclusively by high passing scores on examinations (Akrofi, et al, 2007). These could be explained by the funnel-shaped nature of the educational structure in Kenya. The pyramidal structure makes access to higher education a literal uphill task, with examinations constituting the means for climbing that hill. This has led to competition due to the increase in number of students thus limiting vacancies for the next level.

1.2 Background to the Study

At the turn of the millennium many countries and governments worldwide committed themselves to the development of sub-Saharan Africa, with specific emphasis on poverty reduction. This commitment was outlined in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) namely eradication of poverty and hunger, provision of free and compulsory primary education, promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, reduction of child mortality, improvement of health services, fighting HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, management of the environment and development of regional trade (UN, 2008).

In line with this, the government of Kenya has developed a long term development strategy of transforming Kenya into a middle level income country by the year 2030. Termed “Vision 2030”, the vision recognizes Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) as the foundation for economic progress (Karani, 2007). This can be achieved through education of its population. The vision for the education sector for 2030 is to have globally competitive quality education, training and research for sustainable development (GOK, 2007). Mwanzia and Miano (2007) point out that for assessment to play a role in fostering quality education, it must pay attention to the goals of education in terms of what is taught and learned and the levels at which the knowledge and skills acquired by the learner are assessed. This led the researchers to investigate if what is taught and learnt in school pays attention to the goals of education or the examinations expected.

The aim of education is to produce an all round individual who is productive to himself and his society. Education brings about progress since a well informed and enlightened population will participate meaningfully in development. Individually, people will need literacy skills in order to make informed choices for better life hence education for sustainability. Otieno (2002) defines Education for Sustainability as a lifelong learning process that leads to an informed and involved citizenry having the creative problem solving skills, scientific and social literacy and commitment to engage in responsible individual and co-operative actions. Thus the Education system should seek to prepare the learner to achieve these skills for life which are overlooked when examinations are given an upper hand in school.

Teaching should equip the learner with the right attitude, knowledge, understanding, skills, ways of knowing and practical competencies needed to function autonomously in society, and which reflect the underlying aims of education and broadly accepted values of the society in question (De Luca, 1994). In Ghana, there is lack of respect for mere book knowledge without wisdom (Akrofi, et al; 2007). This may be attributed in part to their experiences with school instruction that generally stresses memorization of text and recall of information, hence de-emphasizes creativity and responsibility for constructing learning, and minimizes ability to connect school information to a wider world of understanding (Akrofi, et al; 2007). Thus when the examination system focuses only on knowledge, it influences acquisition of the required skills hence working against the goal of education which is to produce an all round individual who can fit in the society.

The requirement for schools to be seen to do well in terms of student attainment and the clarity of the relationship between teaching, learning and student outcomes has for some teachers engendered a feeling that if something is not to be assessed then it need not be taught (Freeman, Holmes & Tangney, 2001). Evidence that what is not examinable is not taken seriously in schools is seen in Kenya where, at independence, the Ominde Commission recommended that Kiswahili be a compulsory subject in the primary schools (Shiundu & Omulando, 1992). Since the subject was not examinable, most schools did not offer it. Other subjects like Practical Education and the teaching of HIV/AIDS suffer the same fate. This prompted some educators to recommend that HIV related subjects be made to stand alone and be examinable. This was to ensure it was given the seriousness it deserved in the curriculum.

The draft Education Master Plan, 1997-2010 suggests that the issues of relevance and quality of education need targeting for reform. The education sector has not satisfactorily met its objectives of inculcating a modern scientific culture, enhancing morality among learners and producing an employable labor force (Otieno, 2002). This shows that there is a gap between the goals of education and what is actually being taught in schools.

Teaching methods tend to be influenced by demand on teachers to perform. Unfortunately, teachers’ performance is measured by students’ scores in examinations which influence their approach to teaching. According to a research in Pakistan, it is reported that teachers are bound to switch their teaching methods to mainly the lecture method and adopt teacher and curriculum centered approaches to teaching and learning so as to ensure good performance in examinations (Rehmani, 2003). These teaching approaches turn students into learning machines all day long throughout the four year period (Buhere, 2007). Students wake up at dawn, and attend lessons up to 9 pm daily, without the respite that should punctuate learning or any other routine activity. Drilling and uninterrupted teaching undermine thinking that helps to make sense of what one has been taught (Ibid). In such schools, Continuous Assessments Tests (CATs) are done at night. It is assumed that doing CATs during the day is a waste of time meant for normal teaching. Education stakeholders’ including (Teachers, Students, Parents, Employers and the Government) interest in what goes on at the school perhaps influences what goes on in class. A case in point was in America in 2001 where the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which attached great significance to test scores, was passed.

In this case, teachers and administrators can receive bonuses for high student scores, or, as is more typically the case, they can be reassigned or fired because of low student scores and poor student gains (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). In Kenya some schools give incentives to teachers which can influence their approach to teaching. Despite all these, examinations are an important part in the school curriculum since they enable policy makers to know the state of the curriculum and take corrective action. Bishop (1985) says the fault is not with examinations. Discarding examinations will be a case of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Education is the process by which people acquire knowledge, skills, habits, values or attitudes. The purpose of education is to fashion a new human being and to guide the pupil to act with independence and face the world around him on his own, (Giuissani, 1995). It is the duty of the education system to equip learners with practical skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills in preparation for further training, self employment, the world of work and preparation for life. Education is a tool through which National Development is achieved. The formulated curriculum is rich enough to meet the broad goals of education which are national unity, unity of purpose, social responsibility, moral and ethical values, life-long learning, science, technology, equity, quality and environment. Access, equity, curriculum relevance and quality challenges have characterized Kenya's education system over the years, (Policy view, 2008). One of the suspected causes for poor quality is a lot of attention being paid to examinations. As Mwanzia & Miano (2007) argue, schools ignore aspects of learning that are stipulated yet not tested in the curriculum. Some schools may not cover the syllabus holistically. Some topics which are not thought to appear in the examination are not taught, while some practical's in science subjects are ignored and the life application sections on various topics ignored.

All these issues have many repercussions on the intended curriculum if not solved. It fosters cheating in examinations due to the desire for high scores and learners being forced to perform highly. This pressure on students often leads to students' unrest in schools. The teachers on the other hand are forced to apply the less effective teacher – centered methods of teaching to the disadvantage of the weak learners. The study hoped to shade some light on the impact of examinations on curriculum implementation. This was to highlight the loopholes that cause these effects and therefore make amendments. This research was also to inspire scholars to conduct more research in this field to fill up the gaps which will be exposed by this research. Apart from inspiring scholars, this study will contribute to the wealth of knowledge in the current system of education. It also shades light on practical realities and implications of focus on examinations on curriculum implementation. This study will shade light on the quality of teaching and learning in our schools. This is important information especially because Kenyans place utmost value on academic performance in national examinations.

1.4 Examinations and Skills Stated in the Curriculum Goals

Any nation desires to have a well educated workforce with the ability to think and analyze, using varied reasoning and problem solving skills in an integrated manner. This is necessary for national development. Basically; every subject in the school system should be able to provide skills like critical thinking, disaster preparedness, desirable moral standards, problem solving skills, positive attitudes, mutual respect and many others. However, it was generally observed that most teachers and students preferred skills to pass examinations compared to other skills required by the education goals. According to Policy View (2008), the over-emphasis on examinations has limited schemes for making learning and training programmes practical-oriented. The learners are taught content that is predicted to be examined while sometimes the same content is repeated several times for the students to memorize. From the study, pressure to pass examinations had a greater influence in the skills one would desire to impart in the learners. It was also evident from the responses that most students were not aware of what these skills were. This showed that they had not been taught about them.

Due to examination pressure, it was revealed that teachers taught the various skills last in the syllabus instead of integrating them in the various topics. According to Khalid (2007), the repercussion of this is that teachers would think that they would only have to deal with mathematical thinking and problem solving last, after they have completed the topics and not to weave these skills throughout the syllabus. Thus the learner needs to learn the skill of Mathematical thinking in Math and not just to calculate sums but to build a long term strong foundation on mathematical concepts which will be useful to them in future. Mathematics as a subject is applicable in many areas of further learning and also in life therefore when the skill is learnt and internalized it is an asset to the learner.

1.5 Conclusion

From the findings and discussion, it was concluded that examinations have had a negative effect on curriculum implementation. The examinations have played a central role in the entire school programme influencing each activity that took place in the school. As a result of pressure due to examinations the teachers cannot engage all the methods of instruction to attract the learners' interest in class. Teacher centered methods like the lecture methods are used at the expense of the learners' understanding. Examinations also made teachers to be selective in the content to be taught. For instance predicted topics were taught while the rest were either done partially or completely left out. Integration of life skills in the various subjects were also ignored or rushed over when all the other "important" topics have been dealt with. The unexamined subjects like Practical Education were also not taught. This is supposed to be a compulsory subject in the school curriculum in every class but its slot is used by the teachers to cover the syllabus or for revision. All this happenings are contrary to the education goals which are expected to be achieved in the school system.

1.6 Recommendations

1. The Ministry of Education should emphasize on formative evaluation more than the summative. For example, formative - 60% and summative - 40%. Thus the ministry should initiate and enact a policy to integrate Continuous Assessment Tests in the final evaluation of learners achievement.
2. The examination setters should also attempt to set balanced examination papers. Thus the examination should include all areas that have been planned for in the objectives of the school curriculum. This will make the students and teachers take seriously every aspect of the school curriculum.
3. Since the purpose of education is to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes for the development of the self and the nation, teachers should not prepare students just to pass examinations but also to be innovative, creative, and imaginative. To achieve this, teaching methods such as debates, fieldtrips and inviting resource persons should be taken seriously to allow the learners to be exposed to the world and to think critically.

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