

Using Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations to Assess Standards of Secondary Education in Nigeria: Illuminating Unresolved Issues

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ABSTRACT--- *This paper examines the issues surrounding achievement of standard assessment as part and parcel of the educational process. Assessment in education is important in determining the effectiveness and efficiency of all components of the educational system. Assessment provides information that assures whether or not the quality of education has been compromised. The issues examined relate to standard assessment including the high stakes in public examination, public perception of the major concerns on the validity of the processes and results of public examination at post primary level. Research perspectives, still so far inconclusive, were also examined. The writer listed areas that should be given attention in trying to respond to the challenges in public examination based on the writer's view that the present standards are unacceptably low. It is believed that the results of research studies could help to clarify the issues in public examination and thus help to substantially prepare the quality of assessment at the secondary school level and in education in general.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Professional educators, educationists, educational psychologists and government officials around the country have been pre-occupied with the issue of standard of education and with seeking ways of either raising or maintaining it through various means. The assessment of standards is not an easy one; it depends partly on availability of adequate information. Added to this difficulty is the fact that the term 'standard' has been used in different ways. Even though people ordinarily talk of standards in general sense, technically there is no consensus as to what it precisely means.

'Standards' have been conceived and used variously to mean a number of things in education. In a way it may imply the efficiency of the educational system or even the competences of the pupils. In the opinion of Akinpelu (1987) standard connotes comparisons of the prevailing situation with the ideals. But because of the complexities in determining the "ideal" which are either unknown or not clear, the word standard does not really tell us much about education or any phenomena that it applies to.

While the debate of the meaning of a concept helps in clarifications, the exercise is rarely of practical use. Standard of education is used to refer to the quality of educational offering, quality itself being the essential characteristic of a thing that distinguishes it from other things (Peters, 1977). A good quality education is thus one that fulfills the objective intended of an ideal education. In this sense standard of education could imply the quality of any or all of the input, process and product of the educational system.

It is very common to find schools, especially secondary schools advert that stress how good their facilities, teachers, methods and past results in pupil examinations have been. While results are not the only indicators of standards of schools, they are obviously themselves evidences of the standards of other components of the system. Stobart (2000) points out the ambiguity in the meaning of standards as it applies to examinations. Standards can refer to the demands the education system places on the students. Standards are expressed in the tasks that students are required to perform in school-based assessment and public examinations.

Examinations provide students with a particular opportunity to demonstrate some standards i.e. what they know and are able to do. They can be called performance standards if the examinations are valid, the examination standards will be consistent with the curriculum standards. Examination standards and performance standards interact resulting in irresolvable differences in interpretation of the same evidence – standard of education.

The ultimate aim of assessment is to identify what the requirements of the education systems are for; assuring that the quality of education is not compromised (Ali, 2005). Not compromising quality, and indeed, for quality of education to be assured, all the issues that are inexorably tied to a proper structure of assessment must be thoroughly and methodologically put in proper perspective. This paper illuminates some the issues, perceived to be unresolved, in using the examination standards as evidence of standards of education in the country.

2. A SCHOOL STANDARDS ASSESSMENT MODEL

The educational system is a complex system made up of many component parts. It is thus hardly realistic to speak of one component without considering how it relates or interacts with other components. Similarly, in assessing the standards of education, the components of the system, irrespective of the nature of the educational system and the interactions among them must be taken into cognizance. These components are universal in nature. A model for determining the standard of education based on the three key components is present in figure 1.

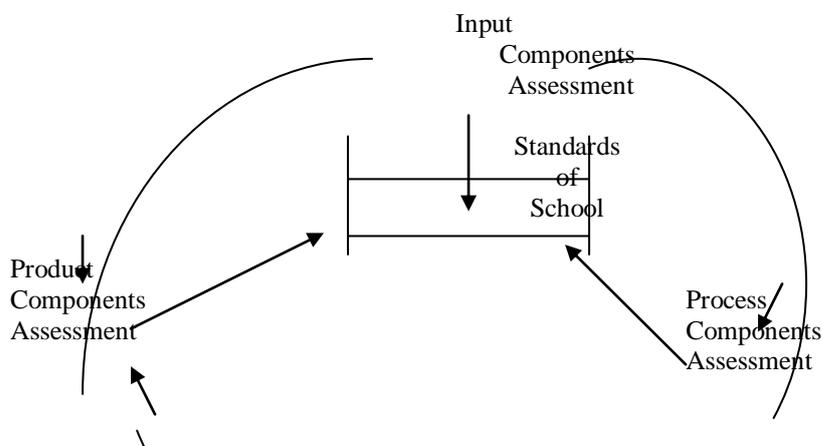


Fig. 1: Components of standard of education assessment

This simple schematic model shows the interrelatedness of the three components of the system – Input, Process and Product – used to assess standard of an educational enterprise. The circular arrows outside (around the circle) show the chain of influences or interaction between components used in deciding the standard of education. The input component consists of studios, laboratories, galleries, curricular package, text and non-text materials, teachers, finance, etc. that are put into the educational system. The qualities of these are pegged in input assessment. The process component include series of actions that are taken in order to make the students learn; these include the curricular process, teaching strategies, curricular organization, instructional methods, etc. Process assessment involves the evaluating of the quality of these elements. Product assessment involves assessing the quality of pupils based on public examination, school-based assessment and performance standards. The quality of examinations and other forms of assessment are particularly important here.

The straight arrows, pointing to the standards of schools at the centre, show the factors (components) often taken into consideration (either alone or in combination with other factors) in evaluating the overall standard of the school. The components (factors) taken into consideration at anytime in determining the standard of the education system depend on the sophistication of the model the assessor(s) has in mind. An assessor may adopt a simple model with only one component e.g. input in mind in assessing the quality of education in a school or an area. It is instructive that Fig. 1 shows that any time someone is talking of standards of education the person has one or more of the three components in mind, whether explicitly or implicitly mentioned.

3. ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS VERSUS ASSESSMENT OF THE SYSTEM

The purpose of public examination may be either to assess the system or the individual student or both. In some advanced countries with equally advanced educational system, different examinations are put in place to assess each of these purposes.

In the United States, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is not intended to measure and report individual student achievement but the assessment of the educational standards of schools and constituent states. On the other hand, many of the statewide assessments (e.g. the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) are meant to assess students' performance standards. The NAEP that is taken on national scope provides data on which the standards of the schools and, on the aggregate, the educational system can be assessed. It was thus designed to be concerned mainly with the performance of the education system. The second kind of testing programme designed to measure individual student performance or competence may be adopted by a state, district or even school. Many Minimum Competence Tests (MCTs) have been developed mainly by commercial organizations. The NAEP is typically regarded to be of high stake because many important decisions about the standards of the school and allocation of resources depend on the results of the assessment. The Minimum Competence Tests are regarded as low stake test because they are relatively less influential in decision making about education standards in general.

The high stake test results meant as indicators of school standards are used for such decisions as licensing of schools, awarding grants and similar important decisions. The low stakes tests are assessment of individuals and are used to determine their level of competences.

In the UK, the school certificate examination for school pupils was seen as an assessment of the school rather than the pupils (Mortimore, Mortimore and Chitty, 1986). It is intended to control the curriculum of the secondary school and encourage schools to provide a good and balanced education. The GCE examination, unlike the school certificate, was intended as an external assessment of individual candidates. It was not intended to assess the kind of education being provided by schools, but to assess the efficiency of the system. The GCE examinations are conducted by the University Examination Boards. In the UK and the U.S., the emphasis has increasingly shifted from assessment of the system towards the assessment of individuals (Forbes, 1982; Mortimore, Mortimore and Chitty, 1986).

In Nigeria, there is no distinction made between the assessment of the system and assessment of individual learners. Thus the Senior School Certificate Examinations (SSCE) essentially serves dual functions, the assessment of education standards and the assessment of individual competences. The results of the SSCEs are to some extent used to assess the standards of schools as well as the assessment of students. Because SSCEs serve the dual purpose of system and individual assessments, there appears to be over reliance on the results of the examinations. This probably explains why SSCE is one of unusually high stake. This reason perhaps accounts for why the SSCE has come to be characterized by such high levels of anxiety and examination malpractices. These constitute serious threats to the SSCEs and reduce their validity for school and pupil standards assessment.

4. ISSUES IN PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF ASSESSMENT

Public perception is a major concern in assessing the acceptability and standards of public examinations. In some situations surveys are conducted into how the public perceive the conducts and results of the examinations. Such surveys commonly involve the analyses of press reports and previous studies on public examinations standards (Murphy, 2003).

The areas covered by the surveys include the roles of the examinations, potential causes of loss of confidence in the examinations, perception of the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanism. Specifically, the following issues on standards of examinations could constitute concerns for the public:

1. The need for the provision of more information to the public about the examination system.
2. The demand for greater transparency in its operations.
3. The assurance that the examination boards take steps to ensure that their examinations are comparable under a multiple provider system.
4. The assurance that current qualifications were more or less valuable than those of the past.
5. The assurance that there are high levels of trusts in examination boards.
6. The assurance that the levels of confidence in the examination system were high especially among parents and that there are high level of trust of examiners.
7. The need to know that examination standards are still high and that the results of examinations are still reliable.

On these issues, the views on standards of public examination very often tend to be polarized into two broad camps: Those who felt that standards had declined and those who felt that standard had not changed or are rising. In general, those who feel that standards are declining tend to be in industry, the main opposition political party or pressure groups; while those who believe that standard were being maintained or rising tended to be representatives of teaching unions, examination bodies and government officials. People's views are in effect determined by their vantage position and the stake or interest on the object of the opinion. Public confidence in examination is important because the public is largely the user of the results they award and it is one of the main reference point on which the standards of education are evaluated.

5. RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE IN PUBLIC EXAMINATION

Research is the process of arriving at dependable solutions of problems through a planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data (Osuala, 1987). Research in education represents a systematic way of finding solution to education problems. Research studies are needed in the area of public examination in Nigeria to assist in the understanding of the examination process of the SSCE. The findings of such study could be ploughed back to potentially improve the policies and practices of examinations conducted by WAEC and NECO. Osuala (1987) views research as the most important tool for advancing knowledge, for promoting progress, and for enabling individuals to relate more effectively to the environment to accomplish purposes, and to resolve conflicts. The examination bodies should adopt problem-solving approaches based on research in dealing with several issues and problems needing consideration. So far limited progress has been made in addressing some of the issues around the conduct of the SSCE. It is apparent that not much effort and resources have been deployed to seek solutions to a number of potent research questions in public examination among scholars outside the examination bodies generally.

However, recently perhaps, because of the new developments in the area of educational assessment, researchers have started to give some attention to public examinations especially the SSCE.

For instance, Daniel's (2005) comparative survey of opinions of students and teachers on WASSCE and NECO SSCE shows that these groups perceive the conduct of the two SSCEs differently in terms of the quality of the question papers and the grades awarded by each council. It has been observed that people express prejudice against the results of NECO SSCE (Omole, 2001; Kolawole, 2001). Apparently prompted by this observation, Omole (2005) carried out a comparability study of students' achievements in NECO SSCE and WASSCE across a number of subjects. This study was apparently motivated by the needs to determine whether there was an empirical basis for public prejudice. Daniel (2008) conducted a comprehensive comparative analysis of the examination question papers and students' achievements in NECO SSCE and WASSCE in General Mathematics. The details of the studies cited are not of specific interest as the awareness that interest in these areas are growing among researchers. This new interest that is unfolding with respect to the SSCE is likely to keep growing. However, there is an obvious challenge for more studies to be carried out in the area of SSCE.

The list of potential research interest in this area could be long. Some of these include the following:

1. Determining the effectiveness, consistency and fairness in assessment of candidates' achievements in relation to the state assessment/learning objectives.
2. Determining whether performance standards are rising, stable or falling through monitoring students' performance standards over time.
3. Ascertaining the psychometric properties of examination papers requiring the analysis of performance data at question level.
4. Carrying out cross-qualification comparability studies involving the comparison of standards in the same subject across time within each body and comparing different qualifications (McGraw Report, 2004 final).
5. Comparing WASSCE and NECO SSCE questions and tasks demands of their papers.
6. Comparing the Examination processes such as setting, marking, grading Examination of students' work.
7. Comparing Examination papers both across subjects and within subject across time.
8. Investigating the predictive validity of SSCE results in relation to performance in a range of university courses and in the world of work.

6. CONCLUSION

There is a positive correlation between a nation's education standards and its capacity to build and sustain its development. With many unresolved issues in the SSCEs, there is no way the benefits derivable from new assessment arrangement at the secondary level can be fully harnessed. This paper discussed how the standards of assessments of students' achievement at the secondary school level are affected by the high stakes associated with examinations. From both public and research perspectives, the writer throws up a list of important areas and issues in public Examination at post-primary level. This list should serve to direct efforts, including research, at attaining acceptable standards in assessment of pupils' achievement at the secondary school.

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