

PUBLIC EXAMINING IN NIGERIA: LET THE STAKES EXTEND

By

Dr. H. O. Owolabi,

Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education,

University of Ilorin, Nigeria.

Abstract

This paper enumerates the purposes of public examinations. It identifies the weakness of placing emphasis on the selection and certification purposes of public examinations while down playing the importance of the other purposes. It points out how this emphasis could promote examination fraud. Wholesome recognition of and emphasis on all purposes of public examinations have the capability of making the school system perform its role efficiently in the educational system. Failure of the Nigerian educational system to prescribe proficiency level for learners and attach specific responsibility to every stakeholder and as well institute accountability procedures are discussed. Problems associated with raising the stakes for only the examinees (students) while leaving out school authorities, teachers, examination bodies, sponsors and government departments are also discussed.

Introduction

Examination in the school system is seen worldwide as a requirement on which the most important decisions about the progress of learners and the performance of teachers, school administrators, boards at the district, local or national level are based. Manifestation of problem in the educational system is easily detected by the extent to which learners perform well in designated public examinations. The extent to which the system develops as well as the trend of growth are also determined by use of the results of certain public examinations. There are mainly six purposes for which the public examination systems operate (Molnar, 2003). These are to:

- select candidates who are found suitable for whatever purposes the examination designed;

- offer certificates after candidates have duly completed specified educational programmes;
- control the curriculum and the way it is delivered;
- motivate schools to have clear goals, sense of purpose and direction and provide bases for giving of incentives and rewards;
- monitor educational standards, and
- report the extent to which schools are effective.

A close look at the educational system of many nations indicate that the first two purposes tend to be uppermost in the set up and operations of public examinations. The remaining four are treated with various degrees of importance by actors in the education sub-sector. To this extent, the first two could be categorized as high priority while the last four are low priority purposes of public examinations. In a sense, this prioritization affects the operations of the public examination system of any country and the uses to which results released by examining bodies could be put.

Limiting the Stakes

Children in Nigerian primary schools are expected to spend six years to acquire the first school leaving certificate and thereafter, gain admission to secondary schools. Apart from teacher-made tests in the form of end of term and promotion examinations, pupils take the first school leaving certificate and entrance examinations for admission into junior secondary schools only at the end of six years of primary education. At the end of a three-year programme in the junior secondary school, a certificate examination is taken by students. The same pattern of examination is repeated at the end of senior secondary education. In summary, children in our schools are exposed to public examinations three times during twelve years of schooling. These tests are too few and far between. The atmosphere is too much of a threat to the interest and progress of learners. It is in this context that the assertion that testing should force our schools to change what they teach and how they teach it (Linn, 1998) becomes relevant.

Pupils in different primary schools struggle to gain admission to secondary schools which are considered to be good enough and within the limits of their parents' resources. There are cases of movement of students from one school to another based on needs such as failure to meet the expectation of parents or student on academic standards, relocation of parents, wish of parents or students for a change, financial problems and various other unmet desires. It is apparent that children as well as their parents want to avoid schools labeled as poor in terms of their own rating of standard. It would seem that many schools may not have pupils and students if all the learners have the opportunity of making a choice. The implication therefore is that these schools also attempt to make up for the many deficiencies responsible for the poor level of performance. The ownership structure of schools tends to affect funding, and by implication the resources available for teaching and learning as well as learners' performance in public examinations.

The main idea behind high stakes testing is the awareness of the opportunities available to examinees after successfully completing the examination. Pupils in primary six seek admission into secondary schools of their choice after sitting for the common entrance examination. Movement from junior to senior secondary schools however appears to pose little or no problem since those who sit for the JSCE are almost always accommodated in senior secondary schools. The situation at the end of senior secondary school is more serious. Opportunities either for admission to higher institutions or employment tend to be highly competitive. The university matriculation (UME) and polytechnics/colleges of education (PCE) examinations offer admission chances to less than 10% of all applicants in Nigeria (JAMB, 2002). The public examination system in Nigeria raises the stakes only for the learners. When problems arise, only the examinees bear the brunt of making several attempts until their performance improves. Many get frustrated and so drop out due to repeated failure. Whereas testing in schools should hold adults who are teachers accountable for teaching and the young ones who are students for learning, nothing happens to the teachers and school personnel in institutions where these students received their education. The question then arises whether the nation has any specified conditions for ensuring success for all learners in the school system or not.

Let the Stakes Embrace All

Molner (2003) states that high-stakes tests are used to make important decisions about the future of student and teachers. They are tests whose results attract specific and serious consequences. Various rewards or punishments may be specified for students, teachers or schools/districts. Before the stakes in public examinations could be meaningful, what should be attained by both learners and other role players in the school system must be specified. The standards set by the United States of America in the No Child Left Behind Act for example, include:

- i. All children should be able to read by the end of the third grade.
- ii. All in the eighth grade should learn the basics of algebra.
- iii. All high school students should be computer literate.
- iv. High school students should be prepared to take all the tough courses to prepare them for college.

To enforce the standards set above, the No Child Left Behind Act otherwise known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization of 2001 provides that only States meeting certain conditions are eligible to obtain federal aid on education. The conditions require that states should set standards in mathematics, reading and sciences; test all learners beginning from 2005/06 school year; ensure that all students perform at a proficient level; school districts and schools must publish results of testing; and those who do not meet these standard will be labeled “in need of improvement” and their children free to move to better schools. Five consecutive years of failure of a school to make adequate yearly progress will attract either a close down, take over or reorganization of low performing schools. Allowing parents to transfer their children from failing schools, awarding cash bonuses to teachers whose students earn high averages or show improvements, dismissal of teachers or school administrators for low performance of students, using test scores to determine the students worthy of promotion to next grade and using graduation test for award of relevant certificates are used to compel performance.

In the United Kingdom, there are four stages at which learners are exposed to public examinations. The first stage is at age 7, second stage at age 11, third stage at age 14 and the fourth stage at age 16 when students sit for GSCE. Learners are subjected to both internal and external tests in Mathematics, Science and English. The sense in which public examinations are conducted is to make room for all to do well in spite of the diverse students' population. The teachers are allowed to remain long enough with learners to link measures of students performance to the competence of the teacher with respect to minimizing drop outs.

Denmark appears to provide the model of a country where there are almost no school dropouts in spite of the diverse students' population. The teachers are allowed to remain long enough with learners to link measures of students' performance to the competence of the teacher With respect to minimizing drop outs, the Nigerian educational system requires standard, rigour and funding.

The Nigerian educational system requires standard in the sense of prescribing a level of proficiency for every learner, rigour in the sense of what should serve as benchmark for every class in major school subjects, and funding in the sense of providing enough resources to cater for every child to make their reach acceptable level of proficiency. The major issues now arising go beyond the draconian decrees against cheating in public examinations, limiting tests to high priority uses and purposes and leaving the weakest group of individuals to sort themselves out of the problems not necessarily caused by them. There is therefore the need to immediately:

- To set standards which will make the educational system responsible for the success of every single group and person attending school in the country.
- Hold every operator in the school system responsible for the educational outcomes of the respective institutions in which they operate.
- Set standards for every class in major school subjects.
- Provide for tests of progress towards the standard determined for each class.
- Compel the report of performance by schools and their boards
- Provide for appropriate reward and punishment for students, teachers, school

administrators and boards

- Make adequate funding subject to satisfactory fulfillment of these conditions.

Conclusion

The much expected revolution in the educational system will only be realizable when the examination system provides sufficient data with which to prosecute every single school and learner. A situation in which we are left completely in the dark concerning learners' abilities and proficiency level until certificate examinations are attempted leaves much to be desired. American Evaluation Association (2000) came up with a position statement on the need to investigate the harmful effects of high-stakes testing. Education evaluators in Nigeria now need to make valid and reliable tests available and on a continuous basis to smoothen the process of professional guidance to move the nation's educational system forward.

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