The Dog Wagging the Tail or the Tail Wagging the Dog? The Impact of National Examinations on Curriculum Implementation in Zimbabwean Secondary Schools

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Abstract
It is now commonplace in the Zimbabwean secondary schools that examinations have dictated the curriculum instead of following it. Public examinations have negatively impacted on curriculum implementation in secondary schools. Regrettably, quality education has been the biggest casualty. This case study collected qualitative data from school heads, teachers and students to ascertain how examinations have impacted on teaching and learning. Twenty (20) form four teachers responded to questionnaires, sixty (60) students participated in focus group discussions and three (3) school heads were interviewed from the three randomly selected secondary schools in Masvingo urban. The research found that national examinations have grossly affected, influenced and dictated the way the curriculum has been implemented. School quality has thus been described in terms of the overall pass rate in national examinations. In turn, teachers have narrowly focused their teaching on possible examination topics at the expense of some vast knowledge forms. Both teachers and students have carried a heavy academic cross on their shoulders and the pressure and strain have resulted in a lot of cheating. The study recommends a two way evaluation system in which the student’s school grade and that of the national examinations are combined to come up with the overall final result. The Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council should have its own pool of full time item writers and examiners in order to enable teachers to have wider coverage of the syllabuses and avoid concentrating on possible examination topics.

Keywords: curriculum implementation, national examinations, quality education, assessment, evaluation.

INTRODUCTION
Zimbabwe’s education system continues to be modelled along the British educational system with its deep-seated emphasis on examination. Singh’s (2010) observation has been that external examinations took root in virtually all British colonies and have become entrenched as an integral part of pedagogic practice. This has had a knock-on effect on curriculum implementation of the Zimbabwean secondary school curriculum. The implementation of a viable curriculum can easily be betrayed by an examination system which pays little regard to the merits and superiority of other important skills and practical capacities over theory and academic knowledge. It is unsound educational practice to allow an examination to determine what students need to learn.

Zindi’s (1989) research observed that there is too much concentration on academic subjects, with a consequent failure to value non-academic and non-cognitive aspects of the curriculum. With this scenario Stiggins (1999) noted that teachers now spend most of their teaching time in examination related activities. Without necessarily denying that examinations are one of the important and key aspects to school effectiveness and curriculum evaluation methods, the road to the examination destination should allow dynamic dialogue between the teacher and the student (Leat and Nichols, 2000). The Zimbabwean classroom scenario has shown very little respect and concern for this interaction between the teacher, student and the curriculum as sound curriculum implementation practice as examinations have become engrained in the minds of teachers and students as the only proper means of assessment. Freire (1972) has stressed that without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education. In the same vein, Ndawi and Maravanyika (2011) observe that curriculum implementation can be seen as a process of the school facilitating the interaction between the teacher and the curriculum. Teachers, because their focus is on examinations, have tended to perpetuate rote traditional, unreflective and teacher centred methods rather than bringing in innovative and productive methods that put the student at the centre. Singh (2010) says that external examinations continue to dominate and haunt the thinking of teachers in secondary schools today. There is need to move from the present situation of authoritarian professionalism (Save the Children, Norway, 2009) to democratic, collaborative, adaptive and flexible approaches. A product from this approach does realise that there is life after examinations and does not leave school with just an achievement represented.
by a symbol or a grade and feeling victimised by the school environment when he/she does not pass but is proud of skills and real life experiences gained. Zindi (1989) further adds that there is an undesirable emphasis on extrinsic rewards through grades and symbols which fail to recognise and reinforce other important areas of the curriculum that contribute to the development of the whole child. Zimbabwean examinations are thus all about remembering and little application (News Day, Wednesday, February 8, 2012).

Letting examinations dictate curriculum implementation is demeaning to the whole curriculum process and being too simplistic and the need to embrace Apple’s (1999) notion of authentic assessment by asking students to demonstrate complex reasoning and concept application cannot be overemphasized. This would create a climate designed to instill confidence in students to tackle a wide range of life problems they confront every day which do not require examination techniques which they could have been subjected to for most of the time during formal learning. This type of curriculum implementation allows the teacher to celebrate differences and diversity in their teaching and assessment practices rather than encourage the narrow focus on examinations, conformity and compliance. Judd (1918) in Clarke et al (2000) has this to say:

We all understand now in definite scientific terms that children are different from one another…… that the best we can hope for is improvement not absolute achievement of ideals (p. 162).

The problems of examinations according to Ndawi and Maravanyika (2011) have restricted teachers’ freedom to explore the curriculum in its widest sense and have negatively affected the implementation of the curriculum. Teachers, therefore opt for methods which can easily make the student pass the examinations e.g. drilling which promote rote learning at the expense of active learning strategies where students are encouraged to be innovative through critical thinking. Dounay (2000) thus argues that teachers end up encouraging rote memorization instead of problem solving skills.

The definition of school effectiveness and quality have been narrowly conceived to mean success in examination at any given exit point in the students’ academic life. This is further exacerbated by the ranking of schools as top ten, bottom ten or the O% performing schools (Mandiyuza, 2006 and Muzavazi, 2006). Regrettably, according to Clarke et al (2000) communities, school heads and educational supervisors make high – stakes decisions about students, teachers and schools based on these examinations. For example, the community respects such schools which are highly ranked for producing excellent ‘O’ and ‘A’ level results and parents would prefer to send their children to these ‘good’ schools. The stress and strain is now on teachers, students and their respective schools to avoid the bottom ten or 0% tag. Teachers have thus foregone curriculum implementation through integrative and participatory measures for sustainable and lifelong learning practices for learners to a technical examination driven process. The situation has degenerated into cheating by both teachers and students with reports of teachers writing examinations for their students and students attempting to enter examination rooms with some material to copy from. Kanyeze (2010) observes that this distortion implies that schools invest a vast number of learners into the mainstream economy without requisite skills. Kanyeze (2010) further adds that the failure of the post independence policies to deal with curriculum deformities that have emphasized on examinations at the expense of a wide range of knowledge forms should be quickly addressed. The resultant scenario is that constructive teaching is devalued and key teaching practices ignored resulting in attendant risks of having poorly educated students who quickly become irrelevant soon after school. Thus, from Freire’s (1972) analysis, education is suffering from narration sickness and the teacher’s task is to ‘fill’ the students with the contents of his/her narration. The content students get is detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Curriculum implementation should, thus, become outwardly oriented to produce a school product that is less vulnerable to today’s volatile world.

Examinations however have their own merits. Croft(1989) in Singh (2010) identified examinations as providing definite goals for teachers and students, providing a measure of school and teacher standards, helping motivate students to learn and finally they are ways for schools to achieve ‘status’. Zindi (1989) also finds examinations as a means of identifying students’ strengths and weaknesses in order to find ways of helping them. This underlines how examinations are an important ingredient in assessing curriculum and student performance, but should not be allowed to lead curriculum implementation process, rather they should follow it.

It is against this background that the research sought to understand how examinations have impacted on curriculum implementation in Zimbabwean secondary schools and make recommendations on how curriculum implementation practices can be enhanced.

Questions Guiding the Study
The study is premised on the following questions:
• How have national examinations impacted on curriculum implementation in Zimbabwean secondary schools?
• What are the attitudes and perceptions of stakeholders on the examination system in Zimbabwe?

METHODOLOGY
The paper reports a qualitative research which sought to gather and interpret the perspectives of school heads, teachers and students from three (3) randomly selected secondary schools, on the impact of national examinations on curriculum implementation in the Zimbabwean secondary schools. In this case study, which provided insight in an issue (Stake, 2003), three (3) school heads were interviewed to access what was on their minds as curriculum supervisors, twenty (20) form four teachers representing a wide range of ‘O’ level teaching profiles were purposively sampled to respond to questionnaires and sixty (60) form four students as curriculum consumers were randomly selected to discuss examination issues in focus group discussions. The combination of data collection methods within one study broadened the scope of the study resulting in greater understanding of complex phenomenon (Morse, 2003). The qualitative procedure thus allowed interpretation of individual and group behaviour, attitudes, perceptions and convictions (McMillan and Schumacher, 2001) on examinations and curriculum implementation. The aim was not to draw generalisations; rather it intended to facilitate discussions on our understanding of how meaningful curriculum implementation consciousness can be raised among Zimbabwean secondary school teachers and school heads.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Across the three curriculum implementation stakeholders (school heads, teachers and students), they were agreed that examinations had grossly affected, influenced and dictated the way curriculum has been implemented in Zimbabwean secondary schools. Secondary school heads and teachers through interviews and questionnaires respectively expressed reservations about the current implementation practices that are examination driven with too much focus on national examinations at the expense of meaningful teaching and learning. School heads during interviews defined meaningful learning qualitatively to answer the process evaluation question, ‘How well has been the teaching?’ and quantitatively as, ‘How much the student has gained from the process?’ Heads and teachers noted that the current system does not recognise the process but is obsessed with the product.

Teachers through questionnaires agreed that their implementation of the curriculum was characterised by drilling, memorisation, simple recall with little emphasis on knowledge utilisation and development of life long survival skills. Heads through interviews saw themselves as powerless to redress the situation through their supervision given that schools in districts, provinces and nationally have been rank ordered as; top fifty (50) (Herald, March 7, 2012), bottom ten (10) (Mandiudza, 2006) and 0% (Muzawazi, 2006). Secondary schools have to produce results in public examinations to avoid labelling and build a name for themselves. This kind of pressure has not produced the environment conducive for curriculum implementation as noted by teachers (through questionnaires) and students (through focus group discussions) that they have spent too much time focusing on examination techniques such as coaching, intensive remediation exercises and evaluation exercises at the expense of extensive curriculum coverage and even participation in co-curricula activities. This is also evidenced by continuous print media adverts during this time of the year like; Holiday Revision Programme; O’ and A’ level November 2012 Exam preparation; Exam coaching for ‘O’ and ‘A’ level November 2012; Intensive individual student examination coaching and real examination writing sessions.(Newsday, 10 April 2012, p. 20) It appears that life comes to a sudden halt in all the other facets of the curriculum as all the resources, human, material and time are channelled towards examination classes.

When asked about what they thought about examinations, students in the focus group discussions revealed that it’s not easy to become an examination candidate. They admitted that the pressure is so much and there is no rest with teachers assessing them more often than not especially during second and third term. This is supported by Mambodza (NewsDay, 10 April 2012) who stated that examination time is hardly a favourite for many students. It’s a time of great psychological pressure and many sleepless nights. Thus, Dounay (2000) argues that such psychological pressure may even lead to poor performance, ill health and in worst cases some students end up committing suicide. Teachers, the students observed, abandoned all textbooks and syllabuses as they collected past examination questions, booklets containing recent and old past Cambridge or ZimSEC examination papers, marking guides to prepare their students for external examinations. From the focus group discussions, students also revealed that exams also put their parents under pressure in that they opt to pay for extra lessons (e.g. holiday lessons, private weekend tuition etc.) targeting those teachers who are known to produce good results, because they want the best out of their children. According to the students, teachers tend to use extra lessons to earn extra money and they sometimes put a lot of pressure on students so that they attend these lessons. It is also
used as a way of drilling the students for examinations as past examination papers are the only tool used extensively during these lessons. Mambozda (2012) adds that most students fail not because they do not know the concepts or do not have information, but they have not prepared adequately and lack examination techniques. Tragically, this approach has not added much value to teaching and learning, instead it has produced students with a wrong conception of life, narrow perception of reality and with testing limited to cognitive abilities and rote learning processes.

Interestingly, when asked about what they thought should be the case, school heads (through interviews) and students (in focus group discussions) talked about a wide range of possibilities that do not overemphasise the definition of successful curriculum implementation to mean passes in examinations but other life areas that are not academic. Some heads valued formative evaluation as they thought there are many areas Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZimSEC) should evaluate. They argued that ZimSEC could award certificates in sports, music, bricklaying, etc., areas that do not necessarily need writing of examinations. These areas, heads and students argued, have become important in terms of acquisition of life skills for individuals. In short, a lot of students have developed career paths in these areas after leaving school, areas that examinations have ignored. This is supported by Katanda (2010) who wrote that even parents complained that their children basically were not being taught life survival skills in terms of technical subjects that they can use to earn a living once they complete their education. According to heads and students, for examination to be meaningful, they should cater for individual differences emphasising all domains of learning rather than narrowing them to academic subjects. The present scenario has narrowly defined a successful ‘O’ level graduate as one who has passed five subjects including English and mathematics and successful curriculum implementation at school to mean the highest number of ‘O’ level passes. The system has overvalued examinations giving a lot of pressure on heads, teachers and students.

Teachers and students’ perceptions about curriculum implementation revealed uncertainty and ambiguity. It was interesting to note that teachers knew what curriculum implementation entailed but were bound by examinations to an extent that they were not sure they would ever implement it appropriately. Teachers have acted against their conscience, throwing all professional values through the window to achieve desired examination results. To teachers and students, the question of examinations has become ‘life and death.’ For students from focus group discussions, the system has left them with technical examination skills with no competencies to face the world which demand application rather than book knowledge. They may have a string of impressive As at ‘O’ level given this preparation hype but cannot function outside the realm of examination. Thus teachers have concentrated on examination coaching at the expense of effective curriculum implementation. This is in line with Singh’s (2010) observation that guessing and or predicting future examination questions, hammering finer points in framing acceptable answers, drilling to enhance rote learning of facts and information and above all motivating pupils to share the mental alertness exhibited by the teacher, characterised teaching in examination classes.

The study also realised that teachers have found it increasingly difficult to balance between curriculum implementation and examination with the graph heavily skewed towards examinations. Furthermore, with this pressure and strain, teachers have abandoned non-examination classes especially if one has both. The idea was that their time to be attended would come when they become an examination class. This has created a cycle in which classes are only prepared for examinations with very little learning and content coverage. This is consistent with Singh’s (2010) notion that the desire on the part of the teachers for good results, combined with pressure of covering the syllabus on time, and of enriching the examination candidates as much as possible was effectively differentiated into two, with teachers’ attention being disproportionately divided in favour of examination classes.

On a positive note, the study revealed that examinations also have their positive impact on curriculum implementation. Responses from school heads, teachers and students in support of this view, indicated that examinations are good in that they motivate students to learn and they make students organize their time, ideas and adopt good study habits because they know that at the end of the course they will sit for the examination. This is in line with Zindi’s (1989) view that examinations act as an incentive to students. Croft (1989) in Singh (2010) echoes the same view when he gives advantages of public examinations as:
- they help motivate pupils
- they provide definite goals for teachers and children
- examinations provide a goal worthy striving for
- they are ways for schools to achieve ‘status’ (p. 18).

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The research has sought to explore how examinations have impacted on curriculum implementation in Zimbabwean secondary schools. The research summarised and characterised classroom practices regarding how examinations have controlled teaching
and learning. Examinations according to the research findings have directed teaching and learning instead of following it, a case of the tail wagging the dog. Teachers have ignored the provisions of the syllabuses as they predicted and concentrated on those curriculum areas they thought could be in the external examinations. In this research, teachers’ perceptions about curriculum implementation illustrate ways in which their notions of professionalism have been negatively eroded by overemphasis on examinations. Participants in this study, teachers, school heads and students agreed that the curriculum has not been well implemented as examinations have taken the centre stage. They were also critical of ways in which this situation could be redressed. They claimed to be powerless to change the situation so that they can fulfill their roles and tasks as expected from them. While teachers thought they had the autonomy to implement the curriculum, they acknowledged their autonomy has been eroded by demands of examinations. This increasing expectation and demands placed upon teachers, heads and students have weighed heavily upon them and have compromised meaningful curriculum implementation.

The current situation therefore, requires high quality teachers with a new mind set, committed and innovative to balance the demands of curriculum implementation and examinations. The study appreciates any means of reducing pressure on teachers and students by adopting the Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training recommendation of three path ways to channel students to their areas of potential rather than restricting them to academic subjects. The need to overhaul the whole education system cannot be overemphasised. The study further recommends a two way evaluation system in which the student’s school grade and that in public examinations are combined to come up with the student’s overall final result. The use of the portfolio could be another innovative way of assessing students as it attempts to build the student’s academic and knowledge application profile. There is therefore need for continuous orientation and in-servicing of teachers to enhance their information and skills in interpretation and implementation of the curriculum.

REFERENCES


