



The Effect of Frequency of Tests and Examinations on Curriculum Implementation in Public Secondary Schools in Kenya.

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ABSTRACT

Tests and examinations have been used as curriculum evaluation tools in learning institutions worldwide. The objective of this study was to establish frequency of tests and examinations and its effect on curriculum implementation in public secondary schools. The study adopted descriptive survey design. Stratified and simple random sampling was used to select respondents. The study area was Kakamega County with a representation of 408 public secondary schools. The target population consisted of 408 principals, 2040 academic HODs and 29521 form four students of 2019 all from 408 public secondary schools in Kakamega County. Sample size consisted of 2040 respondents: 1800 form four students, 40 principals and 200 academic HODs. Data was collected by use of questionnaires for HODs and students and an interview schedule for principals. Quantitative data was analyzed by use of descriptive statistics while qualitative data was organized into sub- themes in order to establish patterns, trends and relationships from the information gathered. The analyzed data was presented using charts and tables. The study findings revealed that frequency tests and examination was practiced in most secondary schools. This practice had back wash effects on curriculum implementation as schools spent most of the time doing examinations at the expense of teaching and learning.

Key words: Tests, Examinations, evaluation, Curriculum Implementation

Background of the Study

Tests and examinations are undertaken worldwide as a way of evaluating the curriculum and measuring learner's academic progress and achievement. The student's future significantly depends on how they excel in national examinations (Nicholas & Berliner, 2007). For many students and parents, the whole purpose of schooling has been trivialized to passing examinations. It is undeniable that evaluation continues to be a subject of debate and argument over the years because the value of the curriculum is measured using feedback obtained from the students' scores in examinations (Rortberg, 2004). Pertinent issues have been raised concerning the form evaluation should take, what should be tested, the extent to which teachers should be involved, how often evaluation should take place and what to do with data on pupil's performance (Bennett, 2003).



Examination systems in African countries, not surprisingly, have been strongly influenced by traditions in the European countries that colonized them. Following traditions that are both British and French, examinations are formal, terminal, and subject-based. Countries in Francophone Africa use the French Baccalauréat system at the end of secondary school, while Anglo-phone countries have had close ties with British examining boards (UNESCO, 2004). Despite the curriculum reforms that emphasize inquiry-based learning like competence based curricula, there is still a strong focus on high-stakes secondary school exit examinations in most African countries.

Moreover, while most curriculum reforms emphasize relevant learning outcomes (competencies), like critical thinking, public examinations in Africa tend to be limited in terms of the knowledge and skills they assess. Examinations tend not to measure skills associated with application, analysis and synthesis; and seldom assess the knowledge and skills that students need in their everyday lives after school. Although the exit examinations are important in determining student competence, they are not sufficient in themselves (Barrett & Bainton, 2016). The purpose of the study was to establish frequency of tests and examinations and its effect on curriculum implementation in secondary schools.

Statement of the Problem

The general aims of Education in Kenya strive to foster nationalism, patriotism, and promoting national unity, promoting social, economic, technological and industrial needs for national development and self-fulfillment promoting respect for development of Kenya's rich and varied cultures. Basic education curriculum in Kenya 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. Whereas aims of education gear towards furnishing individuals with appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes, the realization of the goals can only be achieved through effective implementation of the curriculum.

Examination oriented education focuses on the cognitive aspect of development while the aspects like social, emotional and physical seem to have been ignored despite their contributions to holistic development of the learner. Teaching learners for the purpose of passing examinations



is perceived to have negative affect on the quality of the graduates that are churned out of education system as most of them lack relevant skills, knowledge and values which can make reliable, honest and productive members of the organization. It is against this background that the current study was conducted to establish the effects of frequency tests and examinations on curriculum implementation in public secondary schools in Kenya.

Objective of the study

The objective of the study was to establish frequency of tests and examinations and its effect on curriculum implementation in Secondary schools.

Research Questions

The question that guided the study was: Does frequency of tests and examinations affect curriculum implementation in secondary schools?

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The study focused on frequency of tests and examinations in public secondary schools and its effect on curriculum implementation. The study was conducted in Kakamega County in Western region of Kenya. The region was preferred for the study because it had many public secondary **schools 408** in number whose study findings could be generalized to represent the entire nation. This study used a descriptive survey research design utilizing both qualitative research methods and quantitative approaches. This research design was preferred for generalization of the findings to represent a large population. The study population included: students, heads of academic departments (HODs) and the principals.

Different limitations hindered the progress of this research, for instance; some principals continued to postpone the interview. To mitigate this challenge the researcher booked appointments with the principals who chose convenient time for the interview. In some cases telephone conferencing sessions through zoom platform were organized where the researcher was able to ask questions and record the responses from the principals. Some schools were not accessible due to poor transport networks coupled with heavy rains. This problem was mitigated against by the use of motorbikes which enabled the researcher to access remote areas. In some



cases research assistants were used to access interior areas and distribute questionnaires to the respondents.

Theoretical Framework

Constructive Alignment Theory

The constructive Alignment Theory was developed by Professor John B. Biggs (2002). Constructive alignment refers to connectedness of the teaching and learning activities and assessment to learning objectives. It is a theory used for devising teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks, that directly address the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) in a way not typically achieved in traditional lectures, tutorial classes and examinations. The teacher makes a deliberate alignment between the planned learning activities and the learning outcomes. This is a conscious effort to provide the learner with a clearly specified goal, a well-designed learning activity or activities that are appropriate for the task, and well-designed assessment criteria for giving feedback to the learner. The alignment aims at establishing relationships between curriculum objectives, learning experiences and assessment. The theory was found ideal for this study because it focuses on establishing relationship between curriculum goals and objectives, teaching and learning pedagogies as well as assessment practices.

Review of Related Literature

Frequency of tests is used in this study to refer to a number of times students are subjected to continuous assessment tests and examinations in a span of a year. Frequency of testing has been and is still a hot topic in education across the world. Researchers have offered several possible explanations as to why frequent testing should benefit teaching and learning. According to Khalaf, et al (1992), frequent test makes students work harder throughout the course because they want to get good grades in examinations. According to Bangert-Drowns et al (1991) frequent testing offers the student feedback or knowledge of their results giving them opportunity to see their areas of strength and weakness and giving students more time to work toward eliminating the areas of weakness.



Leyendecker et al. (2005) observed that secondary education in sub-Saharan Africa was dominated by final national high-stake examinations. Despite decades of criticisms and efforts at reform, these examinations play a central role in secondary schooling in both Anglophone and Francophone countries. Viewed in wider perspective, the dominance of examinations is not a uniquely African challenge. In North America, high-stakes secondary school national examinations remain the core accountability mechanisms in secondary systems around the world. These examination systems have a powerful backwash effect on secondary schools; on teachers and what they teach; and on students and what they learn.

In a selective narrative review on the power of testing in improving memory and retention, Roediger and Karpicke (2006) reviewed some historical and contemporary findings on testing effects. They observed that frequent tests are beneficial in free recall of information, repeated testing of the learning material attenuates forgetfulness and significantly improves long-term retention. They found out that testing effects also exist in cued-recall and paired-associate learning, in which participants learn paired items such that presentation of one item of the pair evokes memory recall of the other item. While frequent testing is thought by many to benefit education in a variety of ways, the validity and value of traditional standardized tests are subjects of increasing debate. Recent studies raise questions about whether improvements in test score performance actually signal improvement in learning (Linn, Grave, & Sanders 1989).

Other studies points out that frequent standardized tests' narrows curriculum content, they neglect higher order thinking skills and have limited relevance and meaningfulness of their multiple choice formats (Shepard, 1990). Rather than exerting a positive influence on student learning, testing may trivialize the learning and instructional process, distort curricula and usurp valuable instructional time (Smith, Edelsky, Draper, Rottenberg, & Cherland, 1991).

According to Schieble (2006), National Curriculum in Britain has significantly narrowed what can be taught and has reinforced a skill and drill approach to schooling. It is virtually impossible to avoid when there's such an emphasis on assessment results and classroom teachers are held accountable for students' test scores. Prince Charles made headlines regarding the National Curriculum and examinations when he encouraged teachers to enrich their teaching despite the

straitjacket of assessment. He went on to affirm that more frequent examinations shrunk time for learning leading to defensive teaching (Peter, 2005).

According to Stiggins, (2008) testing of learners at very short intervals loses its value and undermines society effort to provide quality and relevant education to its Children. Supporting these sentiments Schrank (2016) affirmed that frequent testing by instructors in their courses implies additional work which may not be reflected in student learning. Moreover, administering frequent tests consumes valuable instruction time that could be employed in teaching rather than testing. In addition, Marshall (2007) pointed out that students study less when given more examinations because the overall weight of each exam on the overall class grade is lower. According to Marshall, some people believe that too much testing is not good for students, implying it hinders education while others think with frequent testing teachers are too focused on the test and teach towards it, giving their students only the information they need to do well on the test and nothing more. This then can leave behind a school climate that is not conducive to fostering independent learning

Gullickson (1985) noted that evaluation of students learning is a regular part of the school routine and sizable amount of classroom time is devoted to the assessment of student learning. Since teachers must give more time to the preparation and scoring of tests and other examinations, a substantial proportion of a teacher's day is devoted to issues surrounding student evaluation. According to Mwabeza (2010) frequent testing denies students time to deepen their knowledge and to understand the relationships among the range of concepts covered in a given subject.

A study by Kigotho (2004) revealed that due to high demand for better results from the stakeholders, teachers have to find better ways of enhancing students' performance in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examinations (KCSE). These efforts have resulted into joint examinations which bring together schools in a sub- county or region just replacing directly the mock exams. This was supported by Peterson, (2002) who noted that teachers are the most important school factor on how much children learn and they should interact with students more through teaching and proper preparation for their respective lessons. He further noted that too much evaluation of learners and concentration on marking interferes with quality interaction



between the teacher and the students on one hand, and group dynamics among the students on the other. According to Peterson, learning goes on when students are free to interact outside the classroom unencumbered with an avalanche of examinations.

The present study critically examines frequency of tests and examinations in Kenyan secondary schools its effect on curriculum implementation.

Research Design and Methodology

This study used a descriptive survey research design. The design was found appropriate in the study because the study sought to describe the current situation of tests and examinations in secondary in schools.

Study Area

The study was conducted in public secondary schools in Kakamega County. The county is Kenya's second most populous county after Nairobi with an estimated population of 1,660,651 (Kenya Census, 2009). The area has also an important feature such as: Kakamega forest which attracts rains throughout the year making the area conducive for farming activities as well as tourist attraction area.

Target Population.

Secondary school principals, heads of academic departments and form four students in public secondary schools in Kakamega County formed population study.

Sampling Procedure

The study used stratified sampling, simple random sampling, systematic sampling and purposive sampling techniques. The total number of public secondary schools in the county was 408. Schools were stratified into four categories; National, Extra-County, County and Sub- County. 10% of schools from each stratum were chosen for the study through simple random sampling procedure.

Sample Size

The sample size in this study was 2040 respondents comprising 1800 students, 200 HODs and 40 principals.

Research Instruments.

The study used questionnaires and interview guide for data collection.

Questionnaires

The questionnaires for the students and HODs were designed by the researcher basing on the objective. Closed ended questions were developed for both students and HODs. Responses to the closed ended questions were placed on a 5 Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD).

Interview

A semi structured interview guide was developed with a series of structured questions. A face to face interview was conducted between the researcher and the principals. In some cases telephone conferencing sessions were organized for the convenience of the principals.

Validity of Instruments

In order to ascertain the validity of instruments, expert opinion was sought from supervisors, lecturers, and peers on face, content and format of the questionnaires and interview guide. Consultations with supervisors, helped to identify errors and offered the opportunity to modify and improve the instruments.

Reliability of Instruments

Reliability of the instruments was measured through test- retest method. This involved administering the same instrument twice to the same group of subjects. In this case the researcher identified appropriate group of subjects, administered the test keeping all initial conditions constant. The same test was administered to the same subjects after a period of two weeks. Reliability was determined by correlating two administrations using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient (r). A correlation coefficient 'r' of 0.68 was obtained indicating the instrument was reliable and consistent for the study.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 while qualitative data was analyzed by coding responses and interpreting in line with key

themes of the research questions. The result of the study was presented in tables, graphs, pie charts, explanatory texts and summary statistics.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

Response Rate

A total of 32 (80%) principals out of 40 (100%) proposed sample size were interviewed and their responses analyzed. Out of 1800 (100%) questionnaires for students 1515 (84%) were filled and returned for analysis while 182 (91%) out of 200 (100%) for HODs were returned. Generally 85% response rate was realized which gave a higher representation for generalization of the study findings.

Effects of Frequency of tests and examinations on Curriculum Implementation

The objective of the study was to establish frequency of tests and examinations in secondary schools and its effects on curriculum implementation. Information was gathered from HODs and students using questionnaire items and from the principals using interview guide. The findings were recorded in the table below.

HODs and Students Views on Frequency of Tests and Examinations

INDICATORS(STUDENTS)	S.A	A	U.N	S.D	D
We do examinations most frequently.	32%	37%	8%	14%	9%
Frequency testing helps to improve content mastery.	51%	35%	2%	5%	6%
We do joint exams with other schools.	58%	36%	1%	2%	3%
Frequent testing interferes with normal learning.	28%	22%	6%	22%	23%
I like doing tests and examinations as a form of learning.	7%	9%	4%	50%	32%
HOD's Responses.					
Students do examination most frequently.	24%	66%	4%	2%	4%
Many examinations help students to master the content.	26%	51%	8%	7%	8%
My department takes part in joint	28%	58%	8%	6%	1%

examinations.

Many examination cause stress on both teachers and students.	14%	47%	13%	16%	10%
Frequency testing consumes time for normal learning.	21%	35%	13%	16%	15%

Results from the table shows that 1049 (69%) of the students and 164 (90%) of HODs agreed that examinations were frequently done while 346 (23%) of the students and 11 (6%) of the HODs disagreed with the statement that examinations were frequently done. The interview results revealed that 30 (98%) of the principals agreed that examinations were administered weekly, monthly and fortnightly while 2 (2%) agreed that examinations were done termly. The study shows that majority of the respondents agreed that tests and examinations were done frequently. Testing students frequently consumes quality time for teaching and learning and eventually affects curriculum implementation. Furthermore, practice of frequent tests encourages rote learning as learners struggle to memorize concepts for the sake of examinations. The study findings were in agreement with Slomp (2008) whose study revealed that where high stakes are attached to assessments, distortions in the education process may occur, such as excessive focus on teaching students the specific skills that are assessed, narrowing the curriculum, adopting rote-learning styles of instruction, allocating more resources to those subjects that are tested and sometimes even outright manipulation of results may occur.

Furthermore, the findings were in agreement with Makokha (2009) who affirmed that most schools overburden learners with frequent continuous assessment and examinations as well as loads of assignment which consumes time for normal learning. Accordingly, the findings also concur with Schrank (2016) which found out that, frequent testing by instructors in their courses implies additional work which may not be reflected in student learning. Moreover, he maintains that frequent tests consume valuable instruction time that could be employed in teaching rather than testing. Contrary to this study findings and supporting research findings on backwash effects of frequent tests and examinations on curriculum implementations, some studies shows that frequent testing has positive effects on curriculum implementation.

According to Marcell, (2008) when frequency of testing is increased, there is an increase in students' involvement, responses to questions, and discussion of reading materials. In addition Haigh (2007) maintains that regular testing reinforces students' engagement with the course and provides immediate positive feedback. Furthermore, Murphy (2015) believes that if testing is done in the right way, it can be an effective way of learning tests can produce better recall of facts and a deeper understanding than an education devoid of examinations. Although some studies reveals that frequent testing of learners improves learning, frequency of tests and examinations has negative effects on curriculum implementation given that students spent most of the time doing examinations at the expense of learning.

The study sought data from respondents on whether frequent testing helps students to improve content mastery. Results showed that 131 (86%) students and 140 (77%) HODs agreed that frequent testing improved students level of content mastery while 183 (12%) students and 27 (15%) HODs were of contrary opinion that frequent testing did not improve content mastery. Findings from the principals showed that 19 (59%) agreed that frequent testing improves content mastery among students. The results indicates that majority of the respondents agreed that frequent testing improves students content mastery in subject areas. When students are tested frequently on a specific concept the chances of improving content mastery is high unlike those who are tested less frequently. This findings concur with Karpicke and Roediger (2009) who established that frequent testing is a powerful means of improving learning.

The findings were also in agreement with that of Taylor and Nolen (2008) who found out that assessment events in schools should occur frequent enough for the teacher to see whether the instruction is successful and the learners have mastered the content. They further established that frequent testing helps teachers to identify students with difficulty in content mastery so as to develop proper teaching instruction to address their needs. Some studies however disagree with the statement that frequent testing helps to improve content mastery. A study by Nenty, et al (2007) however revealed that assessing leaners without teaching does not help them instead it makes learners have weak understanding of the concepts within any given subject area

The study sought data from the respondents on whether their school participated in joint examinations with other schools. The results in the table shows that 1420 (94%) students, 156 (76%) HODs and 30 (94%) principals agreed that their schools took part in joint examinations.

This shows that besides internal tests and other mock examinations, teachers from different schools organized for external examination commonly known as joint evaluation tests. Existing literature supporting the study findings indicate that there are many types of examinations in the education system in Kenya which include internal tests and examinations, Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE), Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE), Mocks and Joint examinations (Akrofi, 2007). The findings align with those of Kasembeli, (2014) who observed that effort by stakeholders to improve performance in schools has led to joint examinations which bring together schools in a sub- county or region replacing directly the mock examinations. Correspondingly, Mwanzia and Miano (2007) also found out that stiff competition in examinations has led to a mushrooming of zonal examining panels formed by schools in a given zone or districts. By pooling resources together schools in a zone financed development of examination instruments which individual schools administered to their learners. The findings reveals that most secondary schools engage students in joint examinations despite the governments ban on mocks.

The study also sought data from HODs on whether frequent tests and examinations caused stress for both teachers and students. The findings showed that 111 (61%) HODs agreed that frequent testing resulted to stress while a simple minority 48 (26%) disagreed. Findings from the students indicated that 1243 (82%) did not like the practice of tests and examinations. The findings revealed that majority of students and teachers had negative attitude towards the practice of tests and examinations in their schools as it was a source of stress to them. The finding is in line with the study of Qi (2007) who found that many examinations were a source of stress to the learners. He further noted that exam-centric education causes extreme stress on students because tests were regarded as a means to prove their worth in education system.

In other similar studies, it was observed that examinations generally determine people's future in that those who pass are assured of joining good secondary schools and proceed to pursue prestigious courses at the university while who fail feel useless and this affects their self- esteem as they believe nothing good can come out of their efforts. Some students commit suicide for failure to pass either KCPE or KCSE (Peacock, 2011). In addition, Melissa (2014) also



established that tests and examinations generate an emotional toll in form of anxiety and stress in some children.

Furthermore Koech (2008) identified fear for mock examinations as a cause for unrest in secondary schools in Kenya. This indicates that many examinations cause psychological stress and anxiety to both students and teachers. It also leads to discrimination among bright and weak students which results to anger and hatred. It is evident from the findings of this study and other studies there frequent testing is practiced in secondary schools. The frequency at which testing took place caused stress on teachers and students.

Summary of Findings

The objective of the study was to establish the frequency of tests and examinations and its effect on curriculum implementation in public secondary schools. The findings revealed that majority of respondents agreed that tests and examinations were frequently done in most secondary schools. The study further revealed that students and teachers did not like the frequency at which examinations were done as it led to psychological stress which in some cases led to suicide among candidates. In addition the study revealed that students spent most of the time doing series of examinations followed by rigorous revision program that equally consumed time meant for meaningful learning. Furthermore, the findings revealed that most school participated in joint examinations with other schools besides mock examinations organised by sub counties and religious based institutions.

Conclusion

Many examinations denied teachers and students opportunity to interact with the curriculum content and engage in meaningful learning activities. Even though the frequency of examinations differed from one school to another, it was clear from majority of the respondents that schools administered many examinations especially in the candidate class. Frequency at which examinations were administered affected curriculum implementation as most of the learning time was spent on testing.



Recommendations

Although the school system cannot dispense with examinations as a form of evaluation, some measures can be taken to demystify them and make them play their role in education without impacting negatively on the intended goals and objectives of the curriculum.

The government through MOE has formulated testing policy in secondary schools. It was however noted there was no clear policy guidelines on internal testing. The government through MOE should develop a policy on internal testing for the purpose of uniformity in evaluation across all public secondary schools.

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