

Exploring Stakeholders Views on Government of Lesotho's Abolition of Standard/ Grade Seven Examinations in 2017: A Case Study of Primary Schools in Maseru

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Abstract

This study explored the views of parents and educational stakeholders in Lesotho over the abolition of grade seven examinations by the ministry of education in 2017. This has been prompted by the views raised from different sections of professional bodies and the public that taking such a stance will compromise the quality of education. In addition concerns have been raised that the learners who might not be ready for secondary education will be ushered into the grade. The study sought to find out what factors propelled the Ministry of Education to introduce this policy, and to what extent were the made consultations before this policy was formulated, implemented and adopted. The study will also review the documentary evidence on both merits and demerits of writing an examination at grade seven. This study also focused on establishing whether a pilot for this decision was carried out vis-a-vis the results of the study being implemented in the policy enactment. A mixed method approach was utilised in data gathering, presentation and analysis. The study established that the authorities did not carry out wide consultations before implementing the policy and that secondary school teachers find it difficult to deal with the influx of pupils from the primary school level. Stakeholders feel the policy was implemented in an improper manner and prematurely.

Keywords

Abolition, Consultations, Examinations, Policy, Stakeholders

1. Introduction

Examinations have a significant influence on how courses are learnt and taught at any level. Educationists have a motive to go the extra mile in delivery if they know the students are to go through an examination process at the end of course of study. Naturally, they would try as much as possible to avoid the record of having failing students and this is beneficial to the learner. For instance, Kellaghan and Greaney (1992) write that public examinations tend to exert enormous influence on the nature of learning and teaching; they tend to dictate not only what is taught but also how it is taught. In developing countries, while most examinations serve a number of functions, including certification and accountability, their main function is to select students for the next highest level of the educational system. Their impact is most pronounced due to the shortage of places, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels of formal schooling.

An education system with a weak foundation has the potential to destroy a whole nation's future. Policy makers should therefore exercise utmost caution when coming up with new policies. There should be thorough research and wide consultations so that inputs from all stakeholders are taken into consideration. Issues to do with education can have long term consequences for national economies and irreparable damage can be done by a few policy makers' negligence or poor decision making.

For a country like Lesotho, the public service has a record for poor performance (Monyane, 2008). Monyane (2008) elaborates by saying that the Lesotho Public Service has grown extensively but the instigation of new systems and processes has been slow and therefore resulting in poor service delivery to the clients. This is a public service that is populated by personnel from an era when educational levels were still rated highly. Concerns have been raised that currently, the standards of education are on a downward spiral. This suggests that, the future of the education system in Lesotho paints a bleak future. This is why policy makers should use their expertise to improve the system. Linked with the foregoing, the study was premised on exploring the abolition of grade seven examinations and to establish whether the policy makers were thorough in their preparation for formulating such a policy. The study also explored the merits of implementing such a policy in order to establish whether all stakeholders were consulted and if they were in agreement with such a policy. The study also sought to establish if a pilot study was done before implementing the policy and what were the outcomes.

1.1. Background of Study

Prior to the abolishment of grade seven examinations in public primary schools in Lesotho, the Ministry of Education and Training in 2015 released a new curriculum which focused on formative assessment but, excluded summative assessment. The justification for such a paradigm shift in primary school education reads as follows:

Assessment and curriculum are closely integrated and mutually supportive. The 2009 Curriculum and Assessment Policy introduces continuous assessment (CASS) as a key strategy to education. Continuous assessment is an on-going system of monitoring and assessing learners' progress. It is closely integrated with the teaching and learning process and actually supports learning. It is formative assessment, done in the school environment through daily teaching. It can also be achieved through projects, quizzes, tests, interviews and observations (Ministry of Education and Training, 2015:5).

The Ministry of Education and Training (2015:5) Integrated Primary Curriculum Grade 5 Syllabus document goes on to justify:

In the context of Lesotho, it has been decided to merge formative assessment and assessment for learning, moving away from the traditional ways of testing, which have been found to be severely limiting. Testing through examinations and tests provides learners with marks or grades, for example 7/10 or 12/20. However, it does not give any indication of what the learner is actually able to do. Instead of marks or grades, the new methods of assessment will generate statements about each learner's progress and ability. These will help learners, their teachers and future teachers, their parents and guardians as well as education policy makers to know exactly what a learner has learned and is capable of doing, also indicating areas where remedial work is needed. A further disadvantage of conventional testing is that teachers feel under pressure to "teach for the next exam" and ignore aspects of the curriculum which will not be examined. This results in teaching focusing on an excessively narrow body of knowledge, which does not deliver a well-rounded education or prepare learners for the demands of the real world. The continual assessment which will be used to assess learners' progress in the new integrated curriculum will allow the teacher to teach and assess the whole curriculum.

However, there is no evidence that any study was carried out which produced results pointing out the merits of the formative assessment and assessment of learning over summative assessment in Lesotho.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The government of Lesotho embarked on an educational policy that marked a major shift in educational delivery and assessment that culminated in the abolition of examinations at grade seven level. The problem is that stakeholders perceive this as detrimental to the quality of education as all pupils are ushered into the secondary school level regardless of whether they are fully prepared or not. This creates problems for quality of delivery at secondary school level and into tertiary. The other problem is with the consultation process which stakeholders also feel was not comprehensive before the policy was adopted and implemented.

1.3. Study Objectives

The study sought to establish the rationale behind the abolition of grade seven examinations in Lesotho and whether the stakeholders were consulted and with what outcomes.

1.4. Research Questions

- What prompted the government of Lesotho to introduce the policy that abolished grade seven examinations in public schools?
- What are the views of stakeholders on the abolishment of grade seven examinations?

1.5. Conceptual Framework

This study is informed by the concept of assessment. According to Ghaicha (2016), assessment is defined as part of the educational process where instructors appraise students achievements by collecting, measuring, analyzing, synthesizing and interpreting relevant information about a particular object of interest in their performance under controlled conditions in relation to curricula objectives set for their levels, and according to the procedures that are systematic and substantively grounded.

Assessment is the systematic process of gathering information from many sources to make appropriate educational decisions. It identifies the student's strengths and needs and contributes to the design and implementation of effective strategies (Yukon Department of Education, 2015). Assessment usually comes in two predominant forms; summative and formative. Wooley (2011) says that summative assessment refers to summary assessments of student performance- including tests and examinations and end-of-year marks. Wooley (2011) goes on to say that summative assessments of individual students may be used for promotion, certification or admission to higher levels of education. Formative assessment, by contrast, draws on information gathered in the assessment process to identify learning needs and adjust teaching (Wooley, 2011). Wooley (2011) goes on to say that summative assessment is sometimes referred to as assessment of learning, formative assessment, as assessment for learning.

1.6. Literature Review

After a period of massive expansion, education in many African countries has, during the last decade, encountered a series of problems. While demand remains high, progress towards universal provision at the primary level and expansion at the secondary level has slowed, mainly because of a shortage of both financial and human resources as compared to the ever increasing numbers of students (Fuller 1986; World Bank 1988). Given this situation, the choice for policymakers, for at least the remainder of this century, would appear to lie either in increased efficiency in the use of existing resources or in the acceptance of declining standards of access, equity, and scholastic achievement (Windham 1986).

Examination results are seldom used to provide useful feedback to schools, administrators or curriculum bodies. Thus, a good opportunity to effect change tends to be exploited. Scholars are of the view that a test must be valid, reliable, and efficiency. Therefore, the pressure on students to perform will remain substantially unchanged while, lack of places at the next highest level persists. Where such bottlenecks exist, it is naive to think that teachers will not attempt to gear teaching to testing, or that

students will not seek outside help to enable them to advance to the next level.

The idea that examinations may have an important role to play in effecting a reform in education in developing countries arises from the belief that they exercise a strong influence on what is taught in schools and can be used as instruments of transparency and accountability. It can also be argued that they provide a relatively simple means of controlling a system.

Despite massive expansion, the discrepancy between provision at primary and secondary levels remained great. Examinations are used to control the flow of students at this juncture, as well as at other points, in the educational system. The success or failure of a student at any of the important selection points in the system can have very serious consequences for his or her educational and occupational future. In other words, the role of the examinations is to act as gatekeepers in educational systems. Reason being the number of places diminishes as one ascends the educational hierarchy this is an indication that examinations have acquired and continue to possess a critical space in the education system of developing and developed countries.

Although resources are limited, and even diminishing, school-age populations are increasing rapidly. During the past twenty years, over 50 million new pupils enrolled in school throughout the continent, and it is expected that the number that will become eligible in the next twenty years will be 110 million (Windham 1986). In addition, the demand for educated manpower to support economic growth is likely to grow, putting pressure on governments to expand educational facilities.

Examination performance over time is a source of evidence regarding changing standards (Kahn 1990). However, the characteristics of students taking an examination as well as, the standard required to achieve a particular grade in an examination, particularly if a predetermined proportion of students is assigned to each grade, may vary from year to year. Moreover, in the day-to-day workings of schools, the effects of assessment on curricula and on student achievement are not so dramatic. However, there can be little doubt that examinations, to which high stakes are attached, exert considerable influence on what goes on in schools (Fredericksen 1984)

First, most examinations, at both primary and secondary level, are limited to pencil-and-paper tests and so ignore a variety of skills that cannot be measured in this way. Second, examinations emphasize the achievement of scholastic skills (particularly language and mathematics at the end of primary schooling) paying very little attention to more practical skills. Third, in most examination questions, the student is required to recall or recognize factual knowledge, rather than to synthesize material or apply principles to new situations. Fourth, many examinations contain very little reference to the everyday life of students outside the school, dealing with scholastic topics and applications for the most part, rather than, for example, trying to find out if a student can use money in the market place. Fifth, the quality of actual items used in tests is often poor (Cambridge Educational Consultants 1988; ERGESE 1986; Kelly 1991; Lesotho 1982; Little 1982; Myeni 1985; Oxenham 1983).

Given the importance of public examinations in educational systems, to an extent that a school's success may be "judged strictly by the performance of its students in the examinations" (Fafunwa 1974, p. 193). Thus, it is not surprising that the role of examinations has received particular attention in the context of the problems facing education system in Africa today. For some observers, external public examinations are perceived as contributing to the problems, while others see a role for examinations as part of a possible solution. Those who perceive examinations as part of the problem cite the evidence considered above concerning the inadequacy of examinations. If examinations serve to distort or prevent desirable learning, it might not seem unreasonable to conclude that public examinations should be abolished. Together with this view, it is usually proposed that a system of school-based assessment should be installed in place of external examinations

It is also argued that examinations, if properly designed, could have a beneficial effect on the quality of education in schools. Because of the high stakes associated with examinations in terms of student opportunities and teacher accountability. Whereas, changes in examinations would most likely be reflected in changes in educational practice in schools. If the changes involve improving the quality and scope of examinations, these in turn should result in improving the educational experiences of students in schools (Heyneman 1987; Heyneman and White 1986; McNamara 1982).

2. Methodology

The study was carried out in Maseru, Lesotho. Maseru is one of the ten districts and the capital city of Lesotho. This place was chosen because of its convenience to the researchers and due to the fact that all relevant respondents of the study can be easily accessed to provide more useful information to address the topic under study.

The study adopted the qualitative research design. The criteria for selecting a research design depended upon the appropriateness of the techniques for the objectives of the study (Cohen, Manion & Keith, 2000). This was done because the researchers were purely looking for opinions and views of various stakeholders regarding the topic under study. In addition, the qualitative research was utilised because it is exploratory in nature thus, enables the researchers to enter into the field with an open mind (Patton, 2002). The population for this study was sampled using purposive, snowball, convenience and simple random sampling. To sample the policy makers, the researchers employed a purposive and snowball sample while simple random sampling was used in this study to select five primary school teachers and principals. The parents and general public were also the target group for this study and they were selected using convenience sampling. It is also worth noting that the researchers altered the sample as the gathering of data and searched for further cases due to the trends that were emerging from the data that was collected. The researchers adopted this change to ensure that the population selected could contribute immensely to the research inquiry.

In order to get in-depth information on the topic under study, the researchers used face to face as well as telephonic interviews to collect data. Researchers chose this method basing themselves on Bryman (2004) who states that, if one wants to understand people's world and their life she/he should talk with them. Moreover, the interview allowed the researchers to enter into the other person's world, to understand the respondents' inner perspective and the meanings they make from those perspectives (Mushi, 2002).

The study was analyzed qualitatively in textual representation. Researchers identified common themes and categories that emerged from the data and these were grouped together. This assisted the researchers with identifying key concepts. Issues and ideas that emerged from this data were then summarized, analyzed and presented in words.

It would be ideal to have document analysis as one of the data collection instruments, since we are talking about policy implementation and abolishment of the examinations

3. Findings

Findings revealed that when the policy to abolish primary leaving certificate examinations in Lesotho was implemented, there were no proper consultations made with major stakeholders being teachers and parents. It was shown that in 2010 when this policy was put in place, a few schools were selected for a pilot study and this began with pupils in standard one (standard 1)/grade 1.

Findings also showed that the Ministry of Education in Lesotho did not invite teachers in all primary schools to deliberate on this policy in order to make meaningful decisions and thus teachers were not ready and found it a mammoth task to deal with these pupils. There was no training conducted by the Ministry to prepare teachers on how to address pupils from the pilot schools.

For the duration of their studies no assessment were conducted for the pupils despite exercises were still given in class. Emerging from the findings of the study was that when these pupils were in the final year of primary, they did not sit for the examinations. The challenge for this pilot study was that at the time students enrolled at secondary school which was in 2017, they were enrolled together with pupils who sat for examinations from many various schools which were not part of the pilot study. It was further revealed that the pupils whose schools were not part of the pilot had sat for tests and other assessments all the time that they were in primary school and this was followed by the final examination in standard seven (std 7). This means that the pupils

whose schools were piloting the policy were to enroll in the same classes with the ones who had been assessed for various assessments and posed a challenge. Interviews showed that teachers did not participate in the decision making process on this policy and thus they were not trained on how to deal with pupils from piloting schools. It therefore, this posed a challenge on how these pupils who were never exposed to being assessed on any test could be mixed with the ones who were able to write quarterly and final examinations at their schools. Teachers further highlighted how this proved to be difficult as some of these pupils were below average and as such were not ready to leave primary school as more improvements had to be done on teaching and learning to further prepare them for enrolment into secondary schools. Some of these pupils, teachers argued, could not write and express themselves properly in their native language and a lot more faced challenges of using English as a medium of instruction.

Parents also indicated that they were not consulted with the introduction of the new policy by the ministry of education. They said that they learned about this policy through their children and some of the principals/teachers who cared to explain it to them although it was not clear how their children were to be enrolled in secondary schools.

On the other hand, the results of the study illuminated that other parents felt it was a good initiative for the government to abolish standard seven examinations, others were of the view that the whole issue was not clear and communicated properly so that parents' opinions could be heard. They showed that they believed examinations were still necessary so that their children's capabilities and understanding could be gauged through them, and now that they have been abolished it is not clear how teachers will determine which students are struggling to understand content at primary school level and who are quicker to understand.

Furthermore, it emerged from the parents that it is confusing that their children do not write any form of assessments to test their understanding and they wondered what will happen to them when they enroll in secondary schools. Parents indicated that they were still waiting for the Ministry to pronounce itself on how they reached this decision without engaging them so that a clear understanding could be reached.

One primary school principal said that in 2015, the ministry of education and training officials simply informed them of the new curriculum and material guiding the teaching of the new curriculum was to be distributed into the schools. He further stated that there were no consultations with stakeholders and no piloting was done with any schools in the country.

One parent responded that the fact that grade 7 pupils are no longer writing examinations is detrimental to the quality of education. She gave the example that where some teachers would voluntarily carry out winter classes with pupils in the slow learner category, or for purposes of catching up on lost time during the year, and these had stopped. She went on to say that it was visible, the work ethic by primary school teachers has deteriorated as children get to school, play on the school grounds outside the classrooms, assemble to be fed and in no time at all, they are on their way back home.

Decision making in policy formulation and implementation in Lesotho is done just for the sake of decision making without considering that is how nations are built or destroyed, said one senior educationist. She said that the first reform in education in the country was in 1970 and this reform changed the grading system at primary school level. Up to 1970, there were 8 grades at primary school level; Grade A and B, then Standard 1 to 6. Changes were just made without any consultation process or justification given as one grade was eliminated and the system adopted 7 grades; Standard 1 to 7. She said that the authorities said the country would adopt continuous assessment whereby no child would repeat a grade if failed like in the past to ensure no child would proceed to the next level if not ready. She went on to say this was detrimental because teachers lost a certain discipline and the whole work ethic in the education sector died. Teachers adopted the attitudes that if pupils could no longer fail and repeat grades, why bother with extra work. She said, back in 1970, these decisions in education reform were heavily influenced by political party stalwarts who viewed children in public schools as future clerks who did not need a sophisticated education. She went on to say that the politicians viewed these children merely as voting statistics who should not rise above their station and that is where the whole education system was destroyed. She also said that the unfair part is that these policy makers' children

attend school in South Africa where they are groomed for the international job market and never attend local public schools affected by such policies.

4. Discussion of Findings/ Analysis

In countries where formative assessment is adopted, like the United Kingdom, pilot projects were carried out thoroughly. Collins (2016) writes that roughly 10 large –scale research projects brought assessment for learning to schools throughout the nation and this was driven by university research. Teachers in the schools piloted formative assessment practices in their classrooms using a collaborative action-research model, and researchers looked to these teachers, their students, and their school cultures to determine what worked well and what caused efforts to falter (Collins, 2016). This means the major policy making decisions and implementation should not be regarded as something political. Thorough research should be done on the merits as well as on how best to implement the new policy. This aligns with the findings of the study where it was illuminated by the participants that the authorities in Lesotho should therefore have done a thorough homework before introducing the nullification of examinations at grade 7 level as well as the restructuring of the primary school system back in 1970. Authorities should be making amends to the detrimental 1970 policy rather than go ahead with the continuous assessment idea introduced in 1970. Ninomiya (2016) writing about formative assessment, argues that the theory by Black and Wiliam (1998a, 1998b) is far from being fine tuned for formative assessment curriculum to be implemented at national level. Ninomiya (2016) says that in more recent research Torrance (2012) points out the impasse in which formative assessment now finds itself. In spite of theoretical development and justification over many years, the practice is often limited in terms of its scope and its utilization of the full range of possible approaches associated with formative assessments” as it tends “to involve fairly mechanistic forms of activity (Ninomiya, 2016). Evidently, developing economies with the means to implement formative assessment aligned curriculum are taking it a step at a time and have not fully adopted it yet, with Lesotho despite being a developing it is fully implemented already. That is premature of the authorities who went on to adopt and implement a system that has not been tried and tested in the country. Such rush decision in policy formulation and implementation is likely to have long lasting detrimental effects on the education sector of Lesotho in particular and the national economy in general. The country needs experienced personnel to develop and sustain the economy now and in the future and this cannot be produced by personnel that are victims of policies that have not been proven workable or beneficial.

Parents, teachers and all other stakeholders should be consulted before policy is adopted for implementation. Rodrigo and Amo (1999) say that public consultation is one of the key regulatory tools employed to improve transparency, efficiency and effectiveness of regulation besides other tools such as Regulatory Impact Analysis (RIA), regulatory alternatives and improved accountability arrangements. There are three related forms of interaction with interested members of the public which are; notification, consultation and participation (Rodrigo and Amo, 1999). This should be done in an open and transparent manner and the authorities in Lesotho should have paid heed to this consultative process before adoption and implementation of the no examinations at grade seven level policy in order to avoid lack of consensus on the issue.

Vreugdenhi (2012) writes that pilot projects are policy instruments mainly applied to introduce or test new practices, concepts or technologies. Authorities in the education sector in Lesotho should have carried out thorough and wide pilot studies with schools in the country in order to introduce and test the compatibility of the formative assessment mode of learning with the culture and environment and resources available in the country rather than prematurely handing the policy down to school authorities like is the scenario that transpired. As it stands, not even a single school in the country has an idea of how this formative assessment model really works as well as the long term effects on their products.

5. Conclusion

Assessment is critical and influential to the education process at any level. The government of Lesotho has effectively introduced a formative assessment based curriculum in public schools and ended summative assessment. The challenge with this policy is that no consultations were carried out with all stakeholders. The piloting was not done widely, long enough and transparently to the extent that the whole process is vague to teachers especially at secondary school level. No training programmes were carried out with the teachers who are supposed to implement this new curriculum. Parents are confused by the new curriculum and dissatisfied. The ministry responsible should consult widely and do the piloting in a transparently thorough manner.

6. Recommendations

It is recommended that the Ministry of Education engage in consultations with all the stakeholders to discuss issues relating to this policy so that mutual understanding could be found.

There is an urgent need to train all primary and secondary school principals/teachers on this pilot project as it is clear that there is still no clarity on how to address pupils from piloted schools to avoid any discrepancies that may occur in the future as a result.

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