

“Skill, drill, and kill”: Zimbabwean Teachers’ views on once-off summative assessment

Lokesh Ramnath Maharajh, Lucia Tsitsi Musikewa

University of KwaZulu-Natal

South Africa

Abstract

This paper reports on teachers’ summative assessment experiences at grade seven level in selected primary schools in Chegutu District, Mashonaland West Province in Zimbabwe. The study’s purpose was to determine the effect and impact the final, standardised, and high-stakes assessment have on teaching and learning at grade seven level in these primary schools. Using a qualitative research design, we generated data from eight teachers who were purposefully selected from four of the different primary schools found in Zimbabwe (rural, farm, urban, and boarding). Semi-structured interviews, documents, and records analysis were employed as data generation to allow for rich and detailed information from all available sources for this research. This paper presents and discusses the data about teachers’ summative evaluation experiences at grade seven in the Zimbabwean education system. The findings reveal a severe effect and impact of end-of-year grade seven examinations on teachers, instructional practices, the curriculum, the learners, and the education system. It also shows that teachers depend excessively on drilling and repetitious revision practices to meet the standards required and expected by stakeholders. The findings further reveal contradicting responses from teachers on enhancing learners’ performance from drilling and coaching. There emerged from the findings a consensus among teachers on merging formative, continuous, and summative assessment forms. This paper suggests a more balanced and holistic assessment structure at grade seven level that caters to learners’ diverse populations and environments in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: summative, experiences, high stakes testing, balanced, holistic assessment

1. Introduction

Researchers worldwide concur that assessment is a critical and important function of any educational system (Brookhart & Nitko, 2014; Kizlik, 2012; Mussawy, 2009; Taras, 2008). Like any other examination-oriented society, Zimbabwe uses summative and standardised high-stakes tests as gatekeepers for selection or exit purposes for learners from one educational stage to the next. Assessment in this test-driven context is used to evaluate both the school and the learners’ effectiveness (Gebril & Brown, 2014). Judgements about the quality of a specific school and learners are directly based on scores from the summative standardised tests. End-of-year summative assessments are the only indicators used to graduate grade seven learners from primary to secondary in Zimbabwe. This single standardised examination is determinative of

the learners' future. The assessment system in Zimbabwe still solely depends on traditional testing in primary schools.

National grade seven examinations in Zimbabwe occur at the culmination of the primary level, that is, grade seven levels. Grade seven learners were, all along, being tested in four subjects, namely: Mathematics, English, indigenous language, and General Paper, which consisted of Environmental Science, Social Studies, Religious and Moral Education. In 2017, a fifth subject was added and examined, which is Agriculture. Candidates receive a different result for each subject in units on a nine-point grading scale from one to nine, with one being the highest possible grade and nine being the lowest. The learner with the best results will have five units (one point in each subject), and the one with the worst results will have forty-five units (nine points in each subject). The primary purpose of the grade seven examinations is to certificate the learners' level of educational achievement (Kanyongo, 2005). The results are also used for the selection of learners in secondary school education. Most so-called good secondary schools, mainly private and church schools, use these grade seven results as their form one learners' selection criteria. Muranda et al. (2016) confirm that grade seven results are used to determine the quality of secondary school that a learner will join. Chikowore (2012), quoted in Muranda et al. (2016), explains that parents whose children fail public examinations go through a stressful and challenging time trying in vain to secure places in good secondary schools. The rest of the schools, particularly those in rural areas, have a mass admission policy whereby they accept anybody regardless of their grade seven examination results. This is according to the government policy of Education for All (EFA).

Zimbabwe's curriculum has tremendous influence from examinations like in any other country. The aims, content, organisation, and evaluation of the curriculum are determined by the examination (Hedwick et al., 2013). According to these researchers, the curriculum aims to impart knowledge and skills through various subjects. The examination aims to assess the level of mastery of the acquired knowledge and skills. This is where the discrepancy exists; the few hours examination may not address all the skills and attitudes that the curriculum wants to be developed in the learners (Hedwick et al., 2013). Examinable classes and subjects are typically considered first and given first preference in terms of the best teachers, resource allocation, and timetable. Non-examinable subjects like Art, Music, and Physical Education are not put on the priority list, even though they contribute a lot to the learner's social and emotional well-being. Hedwick et al. (2013) also observe that teachers also tend to use methods that enable them to cover the syllabus in the shortest possible time so that their learners will have more time to revise for the examination. This is a form of drilling, and not much learning will be taking place.

As a primary school teacher and administrator in church day and boarding schools for twenty-eight years, one of the authors had opportunities to interact with, observe, even visit and compare teaching and learning in schools from different socio-economic backgrounds. She also had opportunities for staff development programmes with other school administrators and teachers from different schools, within and outside my district. From these experiences, she was struck by the most common Zimbabwean primary schools' adverse conditions, which still struggle to produce good results like any other primary school in Zimbabwe.

Against this background, we endeavour to explore from teachers' experiences the impact and effect of the continued final, once-off event of standardised high-stakes summative assessment per se at grade seven level in Zimbabwe. We anticipate that this paper will contribute more input into the fusion of formative assessment, merged into continuous and summative assessment for final evaluation and decisions for grade seven learners in Zimbabwe. This paper addresses the following research question: *What are teachers' experiences of summative evaluation at grade seven level in the Zimbabwean education system?*

It is hoped that this paper would give more insight to education authorities, the Zimbabwe Schools Examinations Council (ZIMSEC), school administrators, teachers, parents, and all stakeholders, for an overhaul of assessment practices from summative assessment to a consideration of a more balanced assessment mode at grade seven level. This paper seeks to contribute to the emerging awareness of the need to reconsider assessment practices that will benefit learner's future and the society as a whole at grade seven level as highlighted in the recommendations from the Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training of 1999 in Zimbabwe (Nziramasanga, 1999). It is envisaged that the teachers' experiences will give a clearer picture of the impact of the current summative assessment at grade seven level and prompt more research and action in this area in Zimbabwe.

2. Impact of high stakes testing

Our paper takes cognisance of numerous studies that have been done worldwide on teachers' experiences concerning summative assessment at different levels in the education system. However, very few studies have explored this phenomenon at a grade seven level in the Zimbabwean context. It is envisioned that the teachers' experiences will contribute more information and shed more light regarding the turn that the Zimbabwe education system intends to take in to embrace continuous assessment and to merge it with summative assessment for a fairer assessment that considers all categories of learners and advances quality teaching and learning.

Researchers on modes of assessment in the past decade agree that summative assessment if used per se, encourages rote learning of facts and cramming of information rather than acquiring functional skills and knowledge (Blazer, 2011; Jones, 2007; Ritt, 2016; Spann & Kaufman, 2015). The CIET (Nziramasanga, 1999) reiterated the same sentiments and recommended that Zimbabwe's education system should move away from an examination-driven curriculum and adopt a system of assessment that would produce marketable learners. Teachers teach and coach for the examinations using various assessment strategies to make learners memorise the subject content taught to attain high scores in the final or summative examination.

Advocates contend that, although most consequences around summative high-stakes standardised assessments are negative, they have some positive effects on education. Blazer (2011) reports that some researchers argue that comprehensive standardised measures of testing can increase teachers' professional development. A survey of teachers in Florida where high-stakes standardised testing was practiced provided

evidence that these programs had created an increase in teachers' knowledge of testing. Teachers could differentiate between norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests. The teachers could recognise, use, and develop high-quality tests and were able to score them. The tests helped the teachers to be focused and consistent in their teaching approaches. Polesel, Dulfer, and Turnbull (2012) argue that testing may result in teachers developing explicit expectations of what they should be teaching. The tests give clear signals of what is important in the curriculum, thereby directing both teachers and learners to those areas they need to concentrate on and guiding them on approaching them. Polesel, Rice, and Dulfer (2014) support the view that the alignment of the curriculum with high-stakes standardised testing may result in greater curriculum consistency within and across schools, ensuring a command of agreed competencies and transferability experiences across constituencies. The tests are matched to curricular standards, and all teachers teach to these standards. Standardised tests set standards to which teachers and schools can aspire. The tests are, therefore tools to maintain academic standards. Results of these tests can easily be compared within and across schools. Results can also accurately represent the effectiveness of teachers and schools, making them accountable for teaching and learning.

Polesel et al. (2012) assert that testing motivates learners to study and attain goals, working towards the set curriculum. The set targets provide learners with more precise information regarding their knowledge, skills, and potential. It was thus motivating them to work harder. The standardised measures of testing can be used as feedback, particularly to teachers, schools, and the entire system. For the grade seven exit classes in Zimbabwe, these tests may not be very beneficial since they will be a cohort exiting that level. The tests are more useful as feedback to the system and guide reform for the next cohort.

A recurring perspective in literature is the negative impact that high-stakes standardised testing can have on the curriculum, teaching, and learning. While standardised tests may offer excellent ways to assess learners without bias, these tests may have adverse effects on learners who take the tests and parents, teachers, and the schools. Teachers, parents, and the school are also exposed to pressures and stress due to high stakes testing demands. Teachers and the school pay the price if their learners do not perform well on standardised tests. They are accountable for the learners' results, hence the pressure and stress. Parents in Zimbabwe go through the same stress, as they have to help and support their grade seven children to pass, to secure a place for secondary education in good schools. This comprehensive testing has not been found to generate consistently positive effects on teaching and learning. Crocco and Costigan (2007) concur that the meaningfulness of standardised test scores as indicators of authentic learning has come under severe questioning in the literature. Questions arise on the curriculum depth covered and sound instructional practices reflected in the test content.

Blazer (2011), in a study on the unintended consequences of high-stakes tests, observes that teachers feel that instructional decisions are increasingly based on what is most likely to be included on high stakes tests. Teachers cannot rely much on their professional judgement and expertise. Repetitious instruction has become the dominating approach to teaching, aiming to make the learners pass the tests at all costs. Teachers abandoned more innovative instructional strategies, such as cooperative learning and creative

projects, favoring more traditional lectures, and recitation to prepare learners for the tests (Blazer, 2011). They have shifted from supportive and collaborative teaching approaches. High-stakes testing negatively impacts creative and effective teaching, leading to cramming for tests rather than instruction (Polesel et al., 2014). In a study by Jones (2007), teachers reported that the tests stifled their teaching ability and creativity. Teachers adopted teaching styles that emphasise transmission teaching of knowledge and drilling on test-taking skills. In this context, teaching and learning are focused on content rather than on the concepts' knowledge and skills.

Crocco and Costigan (2007) note that teachers report that testing has substantially influenced their instructional planning. In devising their plans for instruction, they look at previous tests to ensure that their curricula include most of the test content and test objectives. Teachers even adjust their instructional plans based on the previous class's test performance or the current class's most recent test performance. They can no longer meet learners' needs but rush through the curriculum to cover content before the test. Polesel et al. (2014) comment that testing encourages teaching methods that promote shallow and superficial learning rather than a deep conceptual understanding of modern information-based societies' knowledge and skills. This focus on limited skills deprives the learner of broader and personal development. The learners experience a limited range of classroom activities and have fewer opportunities to link their learning with the world beyond school activities, such as excursions (Polesel et al., 2014). Teaching is limited to narrow test preparation. Rather than developing the learners, the focus is placed on improving test scores.

Minarechová (2012) points out that teachers emphasise learners are achieving maximum test scores in their national test results through "teaching to the test" and coaching learners in how to answer questions. The trend is to increase emphasis on tested content, with most teaching time devoted to preparing for the testing. Spann and Kaufman (2015) observe that teachers focus on subjects that are tested and teach test-taking skills. Mussawy (2009) sees this as the diversion of classroom instruction to emphasise low-level content and necessary skills. The test dictates what to teach and how to get learners to pass the test. This increases the redundancy of instruction in teachers.

Teaching to the test leads to narrowing and re-aligning the curriculum (Spann & Kaufman, 2015). The pressure to improve test scores causes some teachers to neglect material that the external test does not include. They redefine course objectives and re-sequence course content in an attempt to improve test scores.

Test scores are used to rate teachers, administrators, and schools (Jones, 2007). This development gives the impression that quality teaching and quality education are measured through learners' performance in high-stakes standardised tests. Jones (2007) further compares measuring temperature with a tablespoon with ascertaining education quality through test scores. How good or how bad a school is cannot be judged by a one-time standardised test.

A further argument is that Zimbabwe's primary curriculum, which stretches from ECD to grade seven, might be too big and extensive to be measured with a one-time summative standardised test at the end of

grade seven.

In Australia, Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2012) confirm that schools are judged on published results and placed on league tables. Comparing test scores among teachers and schools can lead to some teachers blaming colleagues or lower grade levels for poorly preparing learners (Russell, Madaus, & Higgins, 2009). Publishing or displaying results can humiliate some teachers or schools. Publishing results also creates pressure on teachers and schools. Similar observations were made by Polesel et al. (2012), that publishing result has a danger of the potential for the naming and shaming of poorly performing schools, which most likely would be disadvantaged schools. Literature confirms that there is a strong relationship between socio-economic status and student performance. This must be recognised in the comparison of schools' performance. The publication of results very much influences parental perception and choice of school. Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith (2012) add that parental access to information about schools' results becomes codes or indexes for individual schools and education systems' quality. These labels can result in detrimental effects to the low economic schools or those in disadvantaged communities.

Russell et al. (2009) argue that it is not the test per se that causes disorders in teaching and learning assessments, but the stakes associated with the test scores that drive teachers, learners, and other stakeholders into behaviour that results in the many unintended outcomes discussed so far. Much of the research at an international level raises legitimate questions and deep concern regarding the impact of standardised summative tests on the curriculum and pedagogical experiences. Looking at Zimbabwe's test practices, there is a need to ascertain from the teachers' experiences, whether improvement in test score performance is actual evidence for improvement in learning. For those schools that perform well, there is also a need to determine whether the good test scores reflect the schools' intensive test preparation practices or of an emphasis on necessary skills and deep learning.

3. Methodology

A qualitative study approach was chosen. This approach sought to understand the phenomenon in its context settings; hence, the study was conducted in schools where the teachers operated. The teachers themselves brought their voices, elucidating their experiences with a summative assessment at grade seven level. A qualitative case study methodology was employed involving four schools from four different primary schools in their socioeconomic categories: rural, urban, farm, and boarding schools. Two participants from each school were then selected purposefully for their potential and experience with a summative assessment at grade seven level. We managed to collect rich, up-close information of the teachers' experiences right at their sites, in their classrooms.

Semi-structured interviews were used to allow the teachers to freely express themselves at length though guided but laid down questions to control aimless deviation. Face to face, conversations were made in a flexible and unconstrained atmosphere. Teachers were free to share at length their experiences with a summative assessment at grade seven level. Documents and records analyses were the other data collection

instruments used in this study. The documents and records gave ample evidence and confirmed findings in this study, particularly on practices promoted in summative assessment in Zimbabwe's primary schools.

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were also considered to show the extent to which the results of this study were trustworthy. The use of multiple methods and multiple sources in collecting data helped confirm the participants' experiences. The wide range of different sites selected, from the rural, urban, farm, and boarding schools, helped identify common patterns in primary schools in Zimbabwe, thereby justifying the application of this study to similar settings. Semi-structured interviews, documents, and records helped to develop a dependable, detailed account of the teachers' experiences with summative assessment. We used triangulation to reduce the effect of biases as researchers. Audio tapping was another technique that we used to be able to capture the teachers' responses verbatim. Reflexivity helped us remain focused and eliminate our personal beliefs, interpretations, and summative assessment experiences.

Ethical issues in conducting empirical studies were considered too. In response to our request, teachers voluntarily signed the consent forms to participate in the study. Permission was sought and granted from the Head office, provincial and district offices to conduct the research. Permission was also sought and granted from all the four schools that were sampled for the study. In introducing the study to each of the respondents, we assured them first of our respect of confidentiality and anonymity in their responses to the research questions. All this was to ensure that we abide by the legal requirements binding research processes.

The sample size came as a limitation in that the number was too small to generalise for all schools in Zimbabwe. However, the study may be a revelation to schools, teachers, education authorities, and all stakeholders, particularly those who decide on Zimbabwe's assessment practices. We encountered another limitation in financial provisions for the research. Accessing the farm, rural and boarding schools was very expensive due to the distances between the schools. This, therefore, determined our sample size to one school per category. However, the shared experiences of summative assessment that the teachers from the different categories of schools shared may confirm a reflection of other schools of the same categories in Zimbabwe. To minimise our influence on the teachers' responses in the study, we emphasised free, honest, and accurate information from the participants while assuring them of anonymity and use of their contributions for purposes of research only.

In the next section, we present selected data followed by a theorised discussion.

4. Discussion of data

This section of the paper addresses the research question, which reads: *What is the impact of teachers' experiences of summative evaluation at grade seven level in the Zimbabwean education system?*

The first sub-theme reveals the teachers' experiences of the effects and impact of the end of year grade seven examinations.

4.1 The effects and impact of the end of year grade seven examinations

In response to the teachers' experiences of the effects and impact of end-of-year grade seven examinations, four out of the eight participants expressed concern that the non-consideration of learners' different backgrounds regarding questions and comprehension of the second language, which is English. The concern was on differences between urban and rural learners regarding access to technology and exposure, with the rural learners disadvantaged. These participants had this to say:

Some years examinations seem to cater mostly for urban schools than rural schools (Mr. Chipe)

There is more general knowledge, particularly in the general paper, which becomes an advantage for the urban learners who get information from televisions and other media sources. (Mrs. Nhao)

The system seems to favour learners who are mainly in urban areas while maybe neglecting those who are in rural areas, considering that the modern-day world is fast changing in terms of technology. Learners in urban areas have access to new technology, which allows them to explore more areas of learning than those in a rural setup. Their performance differs. (Mr. Manga)

The performance at grade seven level in most rural areas remains poor most of the time. (Mr. Pindi)

As reiterated in the literature review, Jones (2007), in his Florida study, confirms that there is a correlation between the status of the school and academic achievement. Environmental factors around the urban, rural, farm, or boarding schools in this study could interfere with performance in the standardised summative examinations they are all exposed to at grade seven. Hedwick et al. (2013), in their study on the impact of examinations on the curriculum in Zimbabwe, also contend that poor performance is high in rural areas, mainly because of the unavailability of adequate material and human resources. Spann and Kaufman (2015) also confirm that standardised summative examinations have constricting effects on learning among the poor, minority, and English second language learners, particularly in under-resourced schools. The two researchers also believe that culture and exposure can also interfere with standardised summative assessments, as expressed by the participants regarding differences in environmental setups and exposure for the learners.

Five of the eight participants were concerned about the inadequate time to cover all the content that would suffice for the end of the year or summative examination at the end of grade seven.

One teacher made the following comment:

There is not enough time for the teacher to prepare for the examinations. There is too much pressure on the teacher and the learners. (Mr. Chipe)

This could be why Kirkpatrick and Zang (2011) assert that exam-oriented education systems are second to none as causes of anxiety. Teachers are worried about target setting and concerned about the school's league table position. The end of year grade seven results ranking for schools in the district under study confirm the teachers' anxiety.

The response from one of the teacher participants was:

You will not have ample time to teach the non-readers to read and grasp concepts they need for the

examinations simultaneously. You have to drill the concepts. (Mr. Chipe)

Mr. Manzu (a participant) added that their classes were too big, for example, 54 learners, and the teacher had no time for all the learners. Regarding the practice of rushing through the curriculum to cover content before the examinations, Polesel et al. (2012) contend that the needs of the learners cannot be met with such big classes, which, worse still, include non-readers.

Another participant had this to say:

....at grade seven-level, we are worried about revision and preparation for the examinations. Teaching ends in grade six. There are too many subjects examined with extensive coverage, particularly in the general paper. (Mrs. Nhao)

Due to the pressure of work at grade seven-level, another participant expressed:

You not only use the stipulated time but also to sacrifice your own time, even going to teach during study time. (Mr. Musi)

Hedwick et al. (2013) confirm that in Zimbabwe, examination classes do not enjoy the holidays. They are called back to school to rush over the syllabuses and revise the past papers, confirming Mr. Musi's response in the interview that they teach for examinations even during study time for the learners. Every single opportunity is utilised in preparation for examinations. Extra lessons are common, particularly for examination classes, thereby overburdening the learners, the parents, and the teachers themselves. Jones (2007) expresses such practices are inappropriate for the teachers and the learners because they emphasise 'skill, drill, and kill.' Teachers get over-concerned about attaining good results at the end of year examinations yet depriving learners of other developmental skills and killing the teachers' creativity and initiative in competent teaching (Jones, 2007).

Mrs. Meye, a participant in this study, acknowledged that they teach focusing on examinable subjects at grade seven. In Zimbabwe, the examinable subjects at grade seven are English, Mathematics, General Paper, Agriculture, and one vernacular language. This is a confirmation of Hedwick et al.'s (2013) observation that, even in primary schools, non-examinable subjects like Physical Education, though timetabled, are not taken seriously and are unfortunately substituted by the examinable subjects.

There was also concern about the many subjects and the amount of matter that the primary school child was expected to master and write the final examination at the end of grade seven. One participant had this to say:

I also believe there are too many subjects examined, extensive coverage, particularly in general. (Mrs. Nhao)

The concern of inadequate teaching and learning materials like textbooks, stationery, library, as expressed by Mr. Manzu in the interview, is supported by Spann and Kaufman (2014) as typical in poorly funded schools like the rural and farm schools. Polesel et al. (2012) recommend that such complexities in different school populations need to be considered in establishing assessment structures. Popham (2008) condemned the unfairness in measuring teachers' competencies and learners' abilities on a mere test score. This researcher advised that schools, teachers, and learners' unique challenges needed to be addressed in

considering assessment systems.

The findings on teachers' experiences in this study have demonstrated the severe effect and impact of end-of-year grade seven examinations on teachers, instructional practices, the curriculum, the learners, and the education system. The evidence in these findings was that the effect and impact were far-reaching and gloomy, particularly for learners and schools from low socio-economic backgrounds. The examination performance and results confirmed this negative impact on low-income schools.

Ritt (2016) refers to the low-income and marginalised learners as 'at risk' sub-groups who are portrayed by standardised tests as failures due to their nationwide test scores. As shown in the findings for this study, outside environmental risk factors were not recognised by standardised end of year grade seven examinations. The 'one size fits all' approach in the grade seven final examinations understudy did not fully and fairly represent all learners of different backgrounds in Zimbabwe's primary schools. Findings from this study showed that, as long as the personal and school environmental characteristics that affect learners are not addressed, these 'at risk' sub-groups will continually fail academically. The final examinations will continue to affect learners' success, even after the primary level. The environmental factors include teaching and learning resources both at home and school, parents' income, parents' support to the school, parents' level of education, community support, among many other factors. Ritt (2016) emphasises that today's summative testing creates an environment that marginalises learners due to factors out of their control. Low-income schools in this study were quite inadequately resourced due to the environments around them, which were primarily determined by the income of their parents. Unless the government intervened in support of the schools, there would be very little chance of getting support from the parents in terms of material and human resources towards summative assessment. Hence, learners would continue to be disadvantaged and fail the summative examinations. There is a need to understand and consider these diverse environments and backgrounds of learners and schools in this study to help all learners meet their full potential academically and socially in any assessment.

4.2 Teachers and maintenance of standards

Responses from almost all participants' experiences with performances in their respective schools reflected an acknowledgment that both teachers' and learners' hard work, cooperation, and support from fellow teachers, parents, and administration contributed significantly to improvement and exemplary performance summative examinations for grade sevens in their schools. The following statements revealed the teachers' experiences on attributions to improvements and exemplary performance in their schools:

Collective action and hard work by teachers, learners, and administrators... (Mr. Chipe)

Hard work from teachers, cooperation from parents, as well as support from the administration. (Mrs. Nhao)

The extra mile from the grade seven teachers themselves, support from all stakeholders. (Mrs. Nhao)

The school head motivates teachers. (Mr. Manzu)

Hard work from the teacher... have a supportive administration... (Mrs. Meye)

It is hard work from the teachers.... knowing that they have been trusted to be given grade seven classes....

It is the mirror of the school. (Mr. Musi)

Hard work on the part of the learners as well..... Parents initiated individual or group support to the particular classes in which their children are. They support supplementary textbooks and any other needs that will contribute to a conducive environment for the learning of their children in the classroom. (Mr. Musi)

According to the participants, another contributing factor to improvement and good performance was the utilisation of weekends and holidays for extra lessons, drills, and revisions. Some of the teachers gave statements like:

We also teach during weekends and school holidays. (Mr. Manzu)

Learners come to school during weekends and holidays. (Mr. Manga)

However, Hedwick et al. (2013) perceive the use of weekends and holidays for lessons, coaching, and revisions for examinations as deprivation of resting time and enjoyment of school holidays for both the teachers and the learners.

At the same time, teachers with reasonable percentage pass rates had encouraging everyday experiences like:

Good learning and working environments.... vast resources, such as textbooks and learning materials. (Mrs. Meye)

Students are encouraged to speak in English.... working and sharing ideas in groups. (Mrs. Meye)

The school has almost adequate resources. Teaching and learning environments are conducive. We encourage our learners to speak in English. (Mr. Musi)

Mr. Musi, a participant in this study, added that they had a library, and library reading time was officially timetabled, which contributed to the pass rate. According to Mr. Musi, more activities, like public speaking and quiz competitions in their school, were advantageous to exposure to more information and expression in English for their learners. Supporting researchers like Gorman, (2015) believe that suitable social and emotional environments contribute to learners' academic achievement.

One participant, however, openly expressed that there was no improvement in their school. He attributed this to a lack of adequate learning materials, particularly those that would help in mastering English. According to him, English, being a second language, was the leading cause for the low pass rate. Researchers such as Jones (2007) and Spann and Kaufman (2014) support this teacher's view that using English in teaching and learning for non-English speakers can be a barrier and disadvantaging factor, particularly with the low socio-economic learners often found in under-resourced schools. The rural school in this case study is a good example.

The participant also added that parents contributed to the low pass rate by allowing and, unfortunately, at times facilitating absenteeism of their children. Another participant also emphasised the high absenteeism rate, sometimes initiated by the parents themselves, who gave their children chores at home when they were supposed to be at school, particularly during weekends and holidays, for extra lessons and revisions.

He added that their farm community did not prioritise education at all. Berliner (2011) believes that teachers need not be blamed for lack of success in using summative assessment with learner populations of different social and economic statuses. Still, the whole community must be held accountable for inadequate support in the whole teaching and learning process. However, despite the discouraging circumstances, the teachers enhance their learners' performance, as shown in the next section.

Based on high scores in the summative examinations or end-of-year examinations for grade sevens, judgments on a good teacher or school in Zimbabwe are based on high scores in the summative end-of-year examinations. Parents also expect teachers and schools to produce and maintain high standards of performance on the grade seven results to secure places for form one in excellent and prestigious schools that are also better performing. The findings revealed that these expectations made it imperative for the teachers to work extra hard and under pressure to produce the expected results. The grade seven teachers went an extra mile and utilised all available time, including holidays and weekends, to prepare the learners for the examinations and maintain high pass rates. Mussawy (2009) reiterates that accountability is central to these high stakes summative examinations. Therefore, this study's findings depict teachers who depend excessively on drilling and repetitious revision practices to meet the standards required and expected by stakeholders. According to the findings, some schools even engage ZIMSEC examiners to give teachers and learners workshops on test-taking skills.

4.3 Strategies used by the teachers to enhance the performance of learners

Asked about strategies they employ to enhance their learners' performance because of summative assessment at grade seven-level, almost all participants alluded to how they vary their use of teaching methods. The variety ranged from group activities, creating conducive learning environments, magazines and newspapers, participatory activities like discussions, peer teaching, question and answer sessions, debates, dialogues, and revisions in various forms.

Extra time and lessons were a common practice for all the eight participants. All the participants work flat out to utilise all the time they have with the grade seven classes to prepare for their summative final examinations. Hedwick et al. (2013) confirm this common practice for grade seven classes in Zimbabwe, where the teachers and the learners have to forfeit their holidays and resting time to complete the syllabus and revise past examination papers preparation for final examinations. The following extracts were examples of the teachers' responses, which included early morning lessons, extra afternoons, and study times, weekend and holiday sessions:

We also have holiday lessons, but the challenge is that not all pupils are coming for the lessons. (Mr. Chipe)
We encourage the pupils to come early in the morning, but the challenge is the distance because the pupils are walking long distances. (Mr. Pindi)

.....and extra time, particularly weekend school (Mrs. Nhao).

We come early and start lessons earlier than in other classes. (Mr. Manzu)

I encourage them to come early to school and start lessons at 7:15 am. We also have studies during the evening about an hour and a half or two... (Mrs. Meye)

I also create extra time with the pupils, starting school earlier than the stipulated time, meeting them in the afternoons during the weekend. During weekends, I take them for discussions and revisions. (Mr. Musi)
We have weekend school, particularly in areas that need a lot of attention. We also apply for holiday lessons for the ministry. (Mr. Manga)

Yeah, we do morning work early in the morning. By 7 o'clock, learners must be seated in class doing morning work. Every morning they write a test in Shona, English, or Mathematics. (Mr. Sile)

However, despite the prospect that extra time and holidays could help raise the pass rate in schools, as reiterated by the teachers, this practice also worked to the detriment of the disadvantaged rural and farm learners in terms of their school distances. The second participant lamented over this challenge as a contributing factor to low pass rates in their school. Their boarding and urban schools' counterparts could be in the classrooms as early and as much as they could to prepare for the same final examinations. Dutro and Seland (2012) observe that schools and these forms of assessment no longer consider the child and their environment but rather focus merely on tests. Dodge (2007) describes it as the one-size-fits-all notion embedded in standardised summative testing.

There was also a general practice by some of the participants of daily, weekly, and monthly tests as a strategy to enhance performance in examinations for the grade sevens. Progress record books from the participants reflected and confirmed these weekly and monthly tests. This practice could be what Blazer (2011) refers to as repetitious instruction, which has dominated teaching in examination classes intending to make the learners pass tests at all costs. Due to the demands that come with public examinations, the summative assessment, in this case, teachers are compelled to spend more time preparing their learners to master the national examination content and coach their learners on test-taking strategies (Dhindsa, Omar, & Waldrup, 2007). The following extracts from some of the participants confirm this observation:

I also give weekly tests to assess my learners. (Mr. Manzu)
I also employ many weekly assessments, testing on concepts that they will have covered that week, i.e., repetitive learning. (Mr. Manga)
I borrow tests from other schools as far as Masvingo. They sometimes give me their weekly tests, their monthly tests, and from Bindura. (Mr. Sile)

The findings reveal contradicting responses from teachers on how they enhance learners' performance from the drilling and coaching they allude to in working towards high scores in their schools. Teachers talk about varied teaching methods like group activities, magazines, and newspapers for practice in English, employing participatory activities in teaching, and various forms of revisions. However, coaching and drilling are still portrayed generally in repetitious instructional practices, like intensive revision sessions during holidays, weekends, and any other extra time, as revealed in the teachers' responses on strategies they use to enhance learners' performance. By this, teachers focus their teaching on what is to be assessed as studied in the trend of past examination papers. The teaching is teacher-centered, mainly the lecture method, to cover as much content as possible for the examinations (Muranda et al., 2014).

Another strategy from the findings is on weekly and fortnight tests given as practice for the summative

examinations. However, as Aftab, Qureshi, and William (2014) observe, no individual or diverse learning styles are considered in this approach. According to the findings, the numerous tests aim to identify areas not mastered and drill on them to prepare for final examinations. In their study on examinations washback, Andrews, Fullilove, and Wong (2002) discovered that teachers spent about two-thirds of their teaching time working on examination-related material and concentrating on past examination papers in their teaching. Teachers in this study were not spared in this regard. Therefore, quality control in teaching and learning is necessary to balance all curriculum content and benefit even the low performing learners in these findings.

5. Conclusion

The main objective in assessment is to improve learner performance and teaching effectiveness, not merely for auditing teachers' and learners' performance. Therefore, this paper recommends assessment that provides an ongoing source of information to teachers about learners' understanding to adjust instruction, develop interventions, inform the teachers where the learners are concerning the targeted learning goals, and improve subsequent performance. As shown in the related literature, assessment should increase learners' motivation to learn rather than demotivate them.

The paper also recommends that continuous assessment be factored into the final grade, which is the summative assessment. The use of continuous assessment can give a clearer picture of the learner's performance over a long period and over several assessments, which can be an advantage to all learners' categories in ensuring that they achieve something out of their seven years of primary education. There need for a balance in assessment modes for a more comprehensive and more authentic picture of a learner's performance and achievement.

The paper has shown that total dependence on only the final examination at the end of grade seven is unfair and inadequate as a means to evaluate and grade the whole seven-year primary course for the diverse populations of learners in Zimbabwe. Some of the challenges cited with the standardised high-stakes summative assessment at grade seven level include:

- large class sizes that hinder the implementation of a variety of continuous and formative activities
- the use of English as the only examination language in all subjects except for the vernacular subject
- diverse populations of learners who are expected to sit for one examination despite their different and sometimes disadvantaged categories
- comparison of grade seven results for these diverse populations
- lack of adequate resources to cope with the standardised high-stakes summative assessment
- intensive preparations for the one final external examination at the end of grade seven

Building teacher capacity in continuous and formative assessment is recommended for adoption to improve assessment skills and, subsequently, learners' achievement. Considerable changes in the Zimbabwean system of assessment are needed to avoid the only considered external examination at grade seven. A range of assessments would present better and holistic information on what learners can achieve their experiences, skills, and abilities within their diverse environments.

6. References

- Aftab, A., Qureshi, S., & William, I. (2014). Investigating the washback effect of the Pakistani Intermediate English Examination. *International Journal of English and Literature*, 5(7), 149-154.
- Andrews, S., Fullilove, J., & Wong, Y. (2002). Targeting washback—a case-study. *System*, 30(2), 207-223.
- Berliner, D. (2011). Rational responses to high stakes testing: The case of curriculum narrowing and the harm that follows. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41(3), 287-302.
- Blazer, C. (2011). Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing. Information Capsule. Volume 1008. *Research Services, Miami-Dade County Public Schools*.
- Brookhart, S. M., & Nitko, A. J. (2014). *Educational assessment of students*. Washington, DC: Pearson Higher Ed.
- Crocco, M. S., & Costigan, A. T. (2007). The narrowing of curriculum and pedagogy in the age of accountability urban educators speak out. *Urban Education*, 42(6), 512-535.
- Dhindsa, H. S., Omar, K., & Waldrup, B. (2007). Upper secondary Bruneian science students' perceptions of assessment. *International Journal of Science Education*, 29(10), 1261-1280.
- Dodge, T. (2007). Impact of Standardized Testing Emphasis on Teaching and Learning in Kindergarten through 12th Grade in United States Schools: East Tennessee Principals' Perspectives.
- Dutro, E., & Selland, M. (2012). "I Like to Read, but I Know I'm Not Good at It": Children's Perspectives on High-Stakes Testing in a High-Poverty School. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 42(3), 340-367.
- Gebril, A., & Brown, G. T. (2014). The effect of high-stakes examination systems on teacher beliefs: Egyptian teachers' conceptions of assessment. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 21(1), 16-33.
- Gorman, L. (2015). Peer effects in the classroom.
- Hedwick, C., Mavies, K., Madungwe, L. and Mandiudza, L. (2013). The impact of examinations on the school curriculum: A Zimbabwean perspective. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 2(1), 65-74.
- Jones, B. D. (2007). The unintended outcomes of high-stakes testing. *Journal of applied school psychology*, 23(2), 65-86.
- Kanyongo, G. Y. (2005). Zimbabwe's Public Education System Reforms: Successes and Challenges. *International Education Journal*, 6(1), 65-74.
- Kirkpatrick, R., & Zang, Y. (2011). The negative influences of exam-oriented education on Chinese high school students: Backwash from classroom to child. *Language testing in Asia*, 1(3), 36.
- Kizlik, B. (2012). Measurement, assessment, and evaluation in education. Retrieved October, 10, 2015.
- Klenowski, V., & Wyatt-Smith, C. (2012). The impact of high stakes testing: The Australian story. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 19(1), 65-79.
- Minarechová, M. (2012). Negative impacts of high-stakes testing. *Journal of Pedagogy/Pedagogický Casopis*, 3(1), 82-100.

- Muranda, A. Z., Tshabalala, T., Ncube, A. C., & Gazimbe, P. (2016). An Investigation into the Causes of Low Pass Rate at Grade Seven Final Examinations in Mudzi District in Mashonaland East Province. *Nova Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(4).
- Mussawy, S. A. J. (2009). Assessment practices: Student's and teachers' perceptions of classroom assessment.
- Nziramasa, C.T. (1999). The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and National Report of the Republic of Zimbabwe. Harare, Zimbabwe: Government Printer.
- Polesel, J., Dulfer, N., & Turnbull, M. (2012). The experience of education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families. *Sydney, Australia: The Whitlam Institute*.
- Popham, W. J. (2008). Formative Assessment: Seven Stepping-Stones to Success. *Principal Leadership*, 9(1), 16-20.
- Ritt, M. (2016). The impact of high-stakes testing on the learning environment.
- Russell, M., Madaus, G., & Higgins, J. (2009). *The paradoxes of high stakes testing: How they affect students, their parents, teachers, principals, schools, and society*: IAP
- Spann, P., & Kaufman, D. (2015). The negative effects of high-stakes testing.
- Taras, M. (2008). Summative and formative assessment: Perceptions and realities. *Active learning in higher education*, 9(2), 172-192.
- Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) (n.d). *A training manual on the setting and marking of grade seven classroom tests*. Harare, Zimbabwe: Research and Development Division.

Copyright Disclaimer

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).*