

The Educational assessment reforms in post-independence Namibia: A critical analysis

Sakaria M. Iipinge & Gilbert N. Likando
Faculty of Education, University of Namibia
smiipinge@unam.na & glikando@unam.na

Abstract

This article provides a critical analysis of the assessment reforms in the education system in post-independence Namibia. Beginning with an historical overview of the education system, the article moves on to explain the assessment reforms in the Junior Secondary (grades 8-10) and the Senior Secondary (grades 11-12) levels. In addition, an in-depth discussion is undertaken of the localization of the Higher International General Certificate of Secondary Education (HIGCSE) and International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGSCE) syllabi within the new Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate (NSSC) Ordinary and Higher Levels. The latter forms the third part of this article. Finally, some lessons that the country learned from carrying out these assessment reforms are critically examined.

Historical context

At independence in 1990, Namibia embarked on several reforms in various sectors of the economy including education. In education in particular, the country was geared to achieve four major goals namely; *access, equity, quality and democracy*. The realization of the country's educational philosophical maxim "... towards education for all" has to support reforms in a number of areas including curriculum and assessment (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993). Similar to other countries in Southern Africa that emerged from the colonial regime, the new goals for education in Namibia were set as a response to dissatisfaction expressed toward lack of relevancy in both the content of the school curriculum and the assessment systems of the Cape Matriculation Examinations of South Africa (Njabili, 1995). The dissatisfaction, as Njabili (2004: 31) asserts, stemmed from the fact that "the schools and curriculum were organized and run on a racial basis, the curriculum content and assessment procedures were foreign, the curriculum materials were mainly examination syllabuses prepared in and by the ruling country." Thus, teaching and selection of teaching materials was determined by "the requirements of the foreign examination syllabuses regardless of the relevance to the nation" (Njabili, 2004: 31).

With reference to these observations, Puntis, from the Cambridge International Examinations quoted by Maletsky (2007) acknowledged that, "the transition from the old system to the new was a complex process, but Namibia has accomplished the change rapidly and successfully, enabling the country to take control of its education destiny" (www.namibian.com.na//index.php?id=28&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news5D=34478&no_cache=1).

In recognizing this complex transitional process the Ministry of Education and Culture (1993:29) also noted that:

During this transitional period the legacy of the previous system will continue to trouble us. Although there is broad agreement on the general directions our education system should develop, some of our citizens are resistant to change. There remain problems of communication and suspicion about motives. Perhaps most troubling is the continued reluctance of some to make the transition from educating elites to education for all and to the new education philosophy, principles, and pedagogy that transition requires.

Albeit, the transitional process had numerous constraints, efforts were made by the Ministry of Education to recognize the existing three phases (seven years of Primary, grades 1-7; three years of Junior Secondary, grades 8-10; and two years of Secondary Education, grades 11-12) in line with the revised National Curriculum policy (Ministry of Education, 2009). As per National Curriculum policy the education system provides for three terminal examinations.

First, at the end of Primary schooling (grade 7), learners were required write a semi external examination as a transition to the Junior Secondary education in four subjects, English Second Language, Mathematics, Social Studies and Natural Science and Health Education. Due to some challenges in maintaining quality in the marking of these examinations, semi-external examination was stopped in 2009 and schools were given a directive through the Ministry of Education Circular no. 28/2010 to set their own question papers as from November 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2010a). As per this directive, Grade 7 Standardized Achievements under the Education, Training and Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) were maintained in three subjects namely: Mathematics; English Second Language and Natural Science. Worth noting is that unlike other examinations that are geared towards promotion, the Standardized Achievements examination outcomes are used for diagnosis rather than for promotional purposes. With regard to promotional subjects table 1, provides a summary of how the Continuous Assessment (CA) and examination marks are calculated and determined in the upper-primary phase (grades 5-7).

Table 1: Assessment and Examination, Upper-Primary Phase (grades 5-7)

Subjects	Grade 5		Grades 6 and 7	
	CA	Examination	CA	Examination
Skills-based subjects (Languages)	50%	50%	50%	50%
Content subjects (All other subjects)	65%	35%	50%	50%

Source: Ministry of Education, 2009: 34

At the end of the Junior Secondary Education, learners are required to write the Junior Secondary Certificate Examination which in combination with the CA marks determines the learner's progression to Senior Secondary grades.

During the last phase (Senior Secondary phase), the learners are required to write either the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) replaced by the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate (NSSC) Ordinary or the Higher International General Certificate of Secondary Education (HIGCSE) replaced by the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate (NSSC) Higher level.

Pedagogically, the curriculum in the post-independence Namibia is based on the principles of learner-centred teaching and learning (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993). In the Namibian context, this principle is conceptualized in such a way that:

... all children can learn and develop given the right circumstances, and recognizes that this will vary from person to person. Therefore, learners will progress through Basic Education in as near to normal time as possible. Some learners will achieve very highly, most will achieve adequately, and some will go through Basic Education with limited achievements (Ministry of Education, 2009: 42).

Broadly examined the learner-centred approach aims to achieve the following tenets (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993: 120):

- an enlightened understanding of humankind, its culture, its traditions, and its history;
- a methodology that promotes learning through understanding and practice directed towards the autonomous mastery of living conditions;
- a general reorientation of the organization of school work with the view to fostering the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills by all pupils;
- continuous assessment of the learning process and its results;
- establishment of a non-confessional religious curriculum where teaching about the roles of different religious and other philosophies of life in the history of humankind is introduced;
- promoting and protecting the fundamental equality of all learners and equity in their access to, their work in, and their benefits from the learning environment; and
- introducing and encouraging classroom practices that reflect and reinforce both the values and practices of democracy.

On the basis of these tenets the National Curriculum for Basic Education (Ministry of Education, 2009:30) clearly asserts:

... the basic competencies in the syllabuses should state what understanding and skills a learner must demonstrate as a result of a teaching-learning process, and which will be assessed. ... it is intended that the curriculum be learning-driven, not assessment and examination driven. Assessment and examination are to support learning.

Assessment for the Junior Secondary Certificate (grades 8-10)

Backtracking this discussion to before independence, the South African examination at the Junior Secondary phase (grade 10) was the first to be replaced by the Namibia Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC) Examination in 1991 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993). This

transitional phase was implemented over a three year period, with the first examination written in 1993. It was intended that the curriculum for the Junior Secondary Certificate should:

- provide a common core learning experience for all Namibian youth;
- promote a balanced curriculum;
- improve the links between the learning in school, the local community, and the available job opportunities;
- introduce English as a common medium of instruction; and
- promote learning with understanding through a relevant national curriculum.

With reference to reforms in the Junior secondary phase Harlech-Jones, (1992) and Jansen, (1995) draw attention to the fact that some notable dramatic changes introduced after independence were: an immediate shift to English as the medium of instruction; the introduction of mathematics and science as compulsory school subjects; and the choice of vocationally-oriented subjects which aim to teach technological and industrial skills. As far as subject choices are concerned learners in this phase are required to enrol for 9 examinable subjects. With the exception of Mother Tongue all subjects are taught and assessed in English. In terms of curriculum orientation there are five core subjects in the junior secondary curriculum namely: Mathematics; Life Science; Physical Science; Geography and History and two optional promotional subjects which include Agriculture; Computer Studies; Design and Technology, Home Economics; Needlework and Clothing; Accounting; Keyboard and Word Processing; Typing and Entrepreneurship; Visual Art and Integrated Performing Arts.

Promotion to grade 11 is based on a point system. In other words, a learner can only be promoted to grade 11, if a minimum of 23 points have been obtained in the best six subjects including English with a minimum of an F grade/symbol. Worth mentioning is that, at the initial introduction of the Junior Secondary Curriculum in 1993, learners were required to score a minimum of 19 points but that this had been increased to 23 by 2000. Ideally, as the assessment policy states, the promotional points were to be pitched at 27, but due to constraints experienced during the implementation stage this was not feasible. Some of the issues that hindered the implantation of 27 points as a minimum promotional criterion to grade 11 included the consistently poor results for grade 10. This impacted negatively on the addressing of equitable access to education; a corner-stone to the country's philosophical principle "...towards education for all" (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993). Access was one of the fundamental principles/goals of education in the post-independence Namibia and curricula were to reflect this principle. As Mutorwa (2004) points out the existing curriculum in schools at the time of independence was seen as an obstacle to access to education for Namibians.

The examination results are graded according to a 7 point scale of grades A-G and points are awarded for subject grades as follows: A=7; B=6; C=5; D=4; E=3; F=2 and G=1. In 2010, a total of 33 570 full-time Grade 10 learners registered for national examinations. Out of the 33 570, learners who wrote the Grade 10 examination that year, 17 187 qualified for admission to Grade 11 in 2011. This meant that 51.2% of the learners qualified for admission to Grade 11 compared to 50.3% in 2009 (Ministry of Education, 2010b). The Ministry of Education in a press statement acknowledged that, "on average, since 1993 the percentages of learners qualifying for admission

have been between a minimum of 37.2% and a maximum of 51.2 %” (Ministry of Education, 2010b: 3). The caveat to this is that, “this status (state) of affairs surely calls for all of us as a nation to embark upon a holistic transformation of our education system” (Ministry of Education, 2010b: 3).

Continuous Assessment (CA) in the Junior Secondary Certificate contributes 35% or 50% of the summative grade. The weighting of continuous assessment and examination results is specified in each subject’s syllabus, for example, skills-based subjects (languages, Pre-Vocational subjects) and content subjects (all other subjects), see table 2.

Table 2: Weighting of CA marks in grade 8-10

Subjects	Grades 8-10	
	Continuous Assessment (CA)	Examination
Skills-based subjects (languages, Pre-Vocational subjects)	50%	50%
Content subjects (all other subjects)	35%	65%

Source: Ministry of Education, 2009: 34

Based on table two it is reasonable to argue that the results of grade 10 serve as a yardstick to determine whether a learner should start studying a subject at the Ordinary or at the higher level in the Senior Secondary phase, where field specialization is required (see table 3).

Table 3: Grading system in the Junior Secondary phase

Grades	Mark range	Grade descriptors
A	80%+	Achieved Basic Competencies exceptionally well. The learner is outstanding in all areas of competency.
B	70-79%	Achieved Basic Competencies very well. The learner is highly proficient in most all areas of competency.
C	60-69%	Achieved Basic Competencies well.
D	50-59%	Achieved Basic Competencies satisfactorily.
E	40-49%	Achieved a sufficient number of Basic Competencies to exceed the minimum competency level.
F	30-39%	Achieved the Basic Competencies needed to be considered competent. The learner needs compensatory teaching.
G	20-29%	Achieved the minimum number of Basic Competencies worthy of a grade. The learner needs compensatory teaching.
U	0-19%	Did not achieve the minimum level of competence. The learner needs compensatory teaching.

Source: Ministry of Education, 2009: 33

In addition to grade 10 results, CA results during grade 11 are also used as a determinant of whether or not a learner should be entered for the examination at the Ordinary instead of the higher level, and in the case of Mathematics, and Second Languages at the Core or Extended Ordinary Level.

Assessment for the Senior Secondary Certificate (grades 11-12)

Representatives of the Cambridge International General Examinations (CIE) were invited by the Namibian government, soon after independence, to assist in the reform of the Senior Secondary education phase. The Higher/International General Certificate of Secondary Examination (H/IGCSE) replaced the Cape Education Department Matriculation examination in 1994 in grade 11. This new system made provision for school-based assessment or course work compulsory in some subject syllabi and optional in others. Howarth, (1995) noted that to begin with the Ministry of Education decided that due to lack of resources and expertise, school-based assessment should be used only for subjects for which it is compulsory component. In response to local, regional and internal recognition Britain designed the HIGCSE to suit the Namibia's situation (Njabili, 1995). Among the challenges Namibia experienced was that, from the beginning, South African universities would not accept IGCSE alone for matriculation exemption (Swarts, 1995), even though, as Howarth (1995: 40) points out HIGCSE and IGCSE aimed to:

- support modern curriculum development;
- promote international understanding;
- encourage good teaching practice; and
- set widely recognized standards.

Swarts (1995:6) argues that from the Namibian perspective, the H/IGCSE was found to be “pedagogically appropriate as a starting point to develop an own Namibian Senior Secondary Certificate”. In the same vein Howarth, (1995:41) claims that H/IGCSE was founded on the ideal that “learning and assessment should be integrated and not divorced from each other”, as was the case with the Cape Education system. Furthermore, in this model, learners are provided with opportunities for their work to be assessed both at the school and externally, in this case in Cambridge. This, according to the Ministry of Education and Culture (1993: 124), would allow teaching and assessment to move away from:

... a culture of failure to the education that ‘requires that we rethink the philosophy that guides our examinations ... we are moving from an approach that emphasizes success versus failure toward an orientation that focuses on encouraging and recording achievement’.

Another cited advantage of the H/IGCSE was that it was designed to cater for a wide range of abilities of learners. For example, a learner could choose to sit for either a core paper (with grades C-G) or an extended paper (with grades A-E). No conversion from extended grade to core grades took place. The learner was either graded or ungraded in the specific paper. This setback posed challenges to some teachers in terms of adapting to the new system of grading because they were used to the Cape Education system with its flexibility whereby a subject could either be

taken on the Higher Grade or the Standard Grade and a fail in Higher Grade, would automatically be converted to a pass in Standard Grade.

Localization of the Namibian Secondary Certificate

From the initial stage of the consultations with the CIE, provision was made for the localisation of the H/IGCSE qualifications, as they would serve as a foundation for developing the Namibia Certificate of Secondary Education. At the National Conference on H/IGCSE, Prime Minister, Nahas Angula then the Minister of Education and Culture commented:

IGCSE is specifically tailored for foreign countries while GCSE is the version in use in Great Britain. Overall it would seem to me that IGCSE is a specifically tailored export model as against GCSE which is the real thing. This requires that we build up our own capabilities – our own examination system, and our own assessment mechanisms ... (van der Merwe, 1995: 181).

It should be emphasized that the Prime Minister's sentiments concretized the need for localization. In 2006 the Namibian Senior Secondary Certificate (NSSC) Ordinary and Higher level syllabi and examinations were implemented in grade 11. These syllabi are mostly based on the CIE's International General Certificate of Education (IGCSE). The achievement of this initiative was hailed as another achievement in the education and politics of the country as it was the first time ever that the country would have its own examination system. The Ministry of Education took trouble and care to develop the new syllabi and examinations insisting that they should be of "a high quality in order meet the international recognition and that the standard should at least be equivalent to or higher than that of IGCSE and HIGCSE (Ministry of Education, 2007: 2). To realize this daunting task the Ministry "worked closely with experts from Cambridge to carry forward the strengths of the Cambridge curriculum and examination system to the new NSSC system and made changes where necessary to ensure that the new NSSC curriculum and examination system are relevant to the Namibian needs" (Ministry of Education, 2007:6). In order to maintain quality standards Maletsky, (2007) noted that, "... after localization, Namibia maintained links with CIE to ensure the maintenance of standards and international recognition of the new Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate" (www.namibian.com.na//index.php?id=28&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news5D=34478&no_cache=1). Prior to implementation new syllabi were subjected to tight quality assurance tests, before they were approved by the National Examination, Assessment and Certification Board (NEACB).

There are ten changes worth pointing out that were introduced during the localization process of the syllabi and curriculum:

- 1) Literature, which was a syllabus separate from IGCSE First Language English and First Language German syllabi, was integrated into these two Ordinary level syllabi;
- 2) Both the IGCSE and HIGCSE Mathematics syllabi were upgraded to include more topics at Ordinary level, and to study important topics in greater depth and with a higher level of application in the new Higher level syllabus;
- 3) The Development Studies syllabi was upgraded with the inclusion of more topics of relevance to the Southern African context, e.g. NEPAD was included;

- 4) Because of the overlap between Geography and Environmental Management essential non-overlapping topics in the Natural Environmental syllabi were incorporated in the Ordinary level Geography syllabus, and the Environmental Management syllabus was phased out;
- 5) The IGCSE subjects Child Development, Religious Studies and Music were phased out because of the very low candidate enrolments in these subjects;
- 6) The seven specialized IGCSE technical subjects were phased out. Design and Technology remain the only “technical subject” at both NSSC Ordinary and Higher levels;
- 7) The structure of the NSSC senior secondary curriculum remains the same as for IGCSE and HIGCSE;
- 8) The Core/Extended differentiated examinations which existed for ten (10) IGCSE subjects were done away with in the NSSC Ordinary Level syllabi except for Mathematics, Afrikaans as a Second Language and English as a Second Language, where they were retained;
- 9) The grading scales of A*(highest) to G (lowest) for Ordinary Level and 1 (highest) to 4 (lowest) for Higher Level were retained as was the case for IGCSE and IGCSE respectively; and
- 10) Art and Design, French and Computer Studies syllabi and examinations were still to be borrowed from the Cambridge system. The localization of these syllabi has not been completed because of a lack of capacity and expertise in the Namibian Education system in these subject areas. Ministry of Education (2007:3)

Although there has been a public outcry at the erosion of discipline in schools purportedly due to the phasing out of other subjects such as religious and moral education, it should be emphasized that there has been no study undertaken to examine the effectiveness or otherwise of the new localized curriculum and examination system. In the absence of such a study this article has limited itself to the analysis of the changes and processes that informed the transition process.

Conclusion

Changing from the old education system in Namibia, which was characterized by inequality and fragmentation, to the new system, was a gradual process. As noted in the Policy Dialogue Reports: Examinations (1993: 3) “... a major objective [to reform assessment systems] was to begin the lengthy process of mental decolonization away from the images of an inferior and separate people which permeated the old curriculum and pedagogy”. For quality assurance and the maintenance of public confidence, links with Cambridge were thought to be vital, especially after the localization of the syllabi. As Njabili (2004: 38) observes, “it should be noted that the most sensitive part of curriculum change is change in the Assessment and Examination System. Poor performance in Public Examinations, to the public at large is often taken as an indicator of poor teaching and learning”.

Now that the government of the Republic of Namibia, through the Ministry of Education, is in charge of its assessment systems and procedures the reforms there have been an indication that the curriculum is being well served. This is encouraging since research has shown that

“curricular objectives can best be achieved if examinations and assessment serve the curriculum. Frequently curriculum has been the servant of examinations.” As Njabili (2004: 37) argued, “... in such a situation, the content of the curriculum and emphasis in teaching is determined by examination demands”.

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