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**NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS IN CENTRALIZED EDUCATIONAL
SYSTEMS: A BLESSING OR A DIPLOMA DISEASE ? - A CASE
STUDY OF THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE**

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ABSTRACT

There is no denying the fact that examinations have been a much discussed topic within educational spheres all over the world and, especially in countries with centralized systems of education. In most countries of the world, school examinations have been known to become a major means of social mobility, prestige and promotion. Besides, examinations affect socio-economic structures through the application of the criteria selection. This is so because, success in examinations usually determines an individual's entry into higher education and thus to professional posts. Consequently, a situation has evolved in which nation-wide examinations have been seen by some as a good educational enterprise (a blessing) whereas others have termed them as breeders of an educational diploma disease. An attempt has been made in this paper to examine the arguments that surround the efficacies or demerits of national examinations, with particular reference to the experience of Nigeria in the area of secondary education. The evolution, characteristics and operation of national examinations as practiced in Nigeria are discussed, and arguments for

any viewpoint one may hold as to the effectiveness of national examinations, it would be better to utilize them while cautiously avoiding any complete dependence on them.

**Evolution of National
Examinations in Nigeria**

Laws requiring paper and pencil test of elementary school pupils had been passed as far back as 1887 under the Education Ordinance of Nigeria. Since that time, one form of examination or the other had been conducted for pupils of elementary schools; so that, by 1916, it became mandatory for elementary school leavers seeking admission to Government Secondary Schools to pass (with high grades) the Standard VII Certificate Examination (WAEC) 1966). These examinations were conducted by the Overseas Local Examinations Syndicate of the Universities of Cambridge and London (U.K.) and continued until 1948 when the West African Departments of Education took over

school exams in the then British Territories of West Africa (Ghana, Gambia, Sierra-Leone, Nigeria and later Liberia).

By 1955, the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) had established a single international examination system for secondary schools in countries previously mentioned and, this has continued to date. Under this system, any secondary school student would be deemed to have successfully completed his secondary education if he passed the West African School Certificate Examination -WASCE or Senior School Certificate Examination, SSCE as it is being referred to recently (WAEC, 1967; ABUBAKAR, 1970). Thus, the WASCE gradually became a yardstick for the determination of the type of job, career or higher education that a student would get into after graduating from the high school. This situation led schools and parents to place more emphasis on passing the WASCE with excellent grades rather than the acquisition of relevant knowledge and development of appropriate abilities and skills. It is not surprising therefore, that this National Examination and the Certificate or Diploma it offers, have become the leading determinants of teaching procedure, course of study and the future careers of students in Nigerian Secondary Schools (Fafunwa, 1969; Nwana, 1980).

WAEC and The Practice of National Examination in Nigeria

The West African Examinations Council (WAEC) is a large autonomous and dynamic body that has wide powers to conduct examinations for elementary and secondary school graduates in the countries it serves. It is comprised of about 60 members, some of whom are nominated by the national committees of the council in the countries it serves. The universities of Cambridge and London (U.K.) also have one representative of teacher organizations, universities, ministries of education, civil service, and commercial interests (FGN, 1967; WAEC, 1966; 1984). The council conducts examinations either on its own authority or on behalf of other examining bodies. For example, national and /or international examinations conducted by the council include: middle school leaving certificate examination; entrance examination to secondary schools; entrance examinations to teacher training colleges, civil service competitive examinations and, finally examinations for teacher training colleges. Funding for the activities of the WAEC are provided mainly by the participating governments although some notable external organizations have made significant financial contributions. These include: The British Council, Ford Foundation (USA), United

States Agency for International Development (USAID), Educational Testing Service (ETS), New Jersey, and the University of Chicago. These overseas agencies and institutions had at one time or the other provided the WAEC with a continuous source of technical and consulting services (WAEC, 1966; 1970; 1984; 1994).

The School Certificate Examination (i.e., WASCE) is taken at the end of the secondary school education and, performance in it usually determines whether or not a student receives a certificate/diploma. Moreover, the type of diploma received has always been a major determinant of whether the student furthers his/her education or gets a "good" paying job. The diploma was usually graded in an ascending order of: fail, GCE grade III grade II, or Grade I. In the last few years however, this diploma grading system has ceased to be used in Nigeria to classify high school graduates although, the council still retains subject grading (WAEC, 1984; 1985). Thus, passing the WASCE with a high grade level of achievement is extremely important and this has become the noble goal of students, teachers, and schools alike (Black, 1980; Akanbi, 1996). For example, if a student performed below the level of a grade II in the examination, it is certain that he would find it difficult to further his education, particularly up to the University level. Gradually therefore

this national examination has come to determine the course of study, classroom teaching procedures, and the future careers of the secondary school graduates. The examinations conducted by the Council are in the form of essays, objective type questions, practicals in science subjects and orals in French and English Languages. This system of examination (and its accompanying syllabus) is so structured and centrally controlled that the WAEC has become an unrivalled dominant testing agency in the country, particularly at the secondary school level. The same argument could be made for other West African Countries which have similar dealings with the Council (Nicol, 1971; Oyego, 1985). Despite the fading away of the diploma grading system by the Council, institutions of higher learning and employers still evaluate secondary school graduates' examination results by aggregating their subject grades - a system that has no practical significant difference from the previous system.

National examinations as practiced in Nigeria have generated a great deal of unethical practices and unfair means of passing the WASCE in order to get the diploma so much so that teachers, pupils, examiners, parents and ministry of education officials have started losing confidence in its effectiveness and reliability. These practices reached a climax during

Merits of National Examinations

A special prestige is usually accorded to high performance in national examinations such as the WASCE. Candidates who perform very well do not usually find it difficult to either secure well paying jobs or to proceed to institutions of higher learning through which they could qualify for their desired professions. Because of the seeming importance of this examinations, there are usually concerted efforts by secondary school candidates to pass it with very good grades. School authorities also put in all relevant resources and preparations to ensure that their students perform creditably well in the examinations. After all, good performance by any school enhances its funding, recognition and patronage by the government. Performance in the national examinations results in the establishment of reliable yardstick for comparative merit of the different institutions. The competition created by such performance, also helps in the development of incentives for better teaching and learning in the various schools (khan, 1969). Ralph Tyler, one of the advocates of national systems of examinations, has succinctly argued that these examinations are meant

to assess the educational progress of large population in order to provide the

public with dependable information to help in the understanding of educational problems, needs; to guide in efforts to develop sound public policy regarding education. This type of assessment is not focused upon individual students ... but it furnishes overall information about the educational attainment of people (Tyler, 1966, p. 15).

Furthermore, Lindgreen (1973) cited the concept of accountability as the major reason for a system of national examination because, according to him "whenever we spend money, we are likely to be concerned about getting our money's worth, i.e., to be sure that input is equal to output." (p.342). In an appropriate reaction to the growing public discontent with the falling standards in U.S. schools during the Sputnik era, Bestor (1958) contended that the establishment of a nation-wide system of examinations was well overdue. According to him such a system would "test, by a common standard, the results of the operations of our separate state school systems" (p. 71). He was strongly of the view that every progressive nation must need to establish a fair, impartial and unbiased audit of her schools. He further cited the prevailing high standards of education obtained in

countries such as Japan, Britain, West Germany, France and the former USSR to have been possible due to the rigorous examination system their secondary school students go through before graduation. The absence of a national examination and a complete reliance on internal examinations have been termed "anti-development" for a number of reasons: internal examinations tend to lead to indiscreet comparisons of students; thousands of private candidates are usually left unattended to and teachers could yield to local pressures. In the latter case, grading standards could vary from school to school and thus be void of a uniform significance throughout the country concerned. Some educators have also contended that, if teachers are given an entire freedom to evaluate and classify their own students for graduation purposes, they may tend to be lax in covering the prescribed syllabus or over-compromise on standards. It is therefore argued that a system of national examination is needed to maintain a uniform standard of efficiency in all institutions and thereby institute a healthy competition among institutions as well as among graduating students. In addition, very few (if ever there is one) institutions of higher learning are said to rely completely on individual schools' internal assessment for admission purposes (Neill, 1978; Mitzel, 1982; Torsten, 1983; Obielodan, 1993).

Demerits of National Examination

Antagonists of national examinations are of the agreement that a national examination is one of the most unsatisfactory features of secondary education, as well as being a major institutional barrier to higher learning. They argued that these examinations obstruct curriculum revisions due to their accompanying prescribed syllabus, textbooks, and the centrally prepared external examinations which stifle teacher and college initiatives and experimentation (Steino, 1981; Ahmed, 1985; Akanbi, 1996). It is also the view of many educators that national examinations do more harm than good by encouraging rote memory of facts for the primary purpose of passing a diploma exam. In the case of Nigeria, critics of the WAEC contend that the undue prestige accorded the examining council had resulted in the examination determining the curriculum rather than the reverse being the case (Fafunwa, 1969; Black, 1980; Nwachukwu, 1986).

Perhaps, one of the harshest criticisms of a system of national assessment came from John Ryor, a former president of the National Education Association (USA). He remarked

Tests of this kind don't serve students, parents or teachers.
They do not measure

what is being taught and what is happening to our students. They ought to be dispensed with, once and for all (The Chronicle, Sept. 6, 1977, p. 11)

Characteristics of a good examination are that it should be valid, reliable, easy to mark and easy to score. It should also motivate pupils and teachers to work more effectively. Judged against these criteria, critics argue that national examinations possess grievous limitations that should disqualify them from being used to grade, classify and select students. These limitations include :

- (i) being easy to mark but difficult to score.
- (ii) having low validity — few questions are usually asked on the courses of study and such questions usually measure only knowledge of facts. Attitudes, applications and appreciation are often neglected or relegated to the background.

Furthermore, it is often claimed that the performance and behaviour of students' stay in school are not usually taken into consideration when determining the final examination results and award of diplomas. Thus, due to an overemphasis on students' grades, these examinations have been characterized by cheating,

undesirable conventions and several unethical practices (Holmes & Lauwery, 1969). There is no doubt that the experience of Nigeria has borne witness to such features (Ojibara, 1998).

Some other cited demerits of national examinations are that: they dominate curriculum and instruction and therefore hinder curriculum improvement; they lack direct and personal contact with students and hence make impossible a comprehensive assessment of their achievements; they are expensive and time consuming; and they make students indifferent to their lectures and thus eventually become slack in their studies since they could easily obtain "pass" marks. Consequently, students study for the purpose of gaining success in examinations rather than for the acquisition of relevant knowledge, understanding and skills.

A Blessing or a Disease ?

Systems of national examinations are not peculiar to Nigeria. Similar practices are in operation in many European countries, Japan, the then USSR, former British and French colonies of Africa and Asia. The British Grammar Schools' GCE/CSE diploma, the French Lycees baccalaureat, German's abitur, and India's Schools Certificate are a few examples (McFadden, 1981; Torstein,

1967, 1983). Only in the U.S.A. (except the State of New York) has the selection function of national examination been called into question. Strictly, selection does not play a major role at secondary or undergraduate levels in the U.S.A. although it is interesting to note that more and more universities (in the U.S.) have in the recent past, been placing greater emphasis on high school students' scores in a nationally administered standardized Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT)).

Whichever system of evaluation is adopted, one thing must not be overlooked: it is not possible to dispense with a system of evaluation of scholastic achievement of children which enjoys public confidence and prestige. In spite of the widespread criticisms regarding the effects of national examinations on the educational system (such as the case of Nigeria), the problem of finding substitute arrangement which would be practicable and well-suited to the prevailing conditions in such a country continues to be a complicated one. Viable alternatives are yet to be developed and implemented with an appropriate degree of success.

Whatever their shortcomings are, the importance of public examinations should not be underestimated for several reasons. Firstly, they have been helpful in the maintenance of the standard of education in the countries in which they are in operation. This has been achieved by using such

examinations to set levels of proficiencies that are to be achieved by all students in order to qualify for the certificate or diploma. Without such a system, standards are liable to deterioration at any level. Seen in this context therefore, these examinations are actually blessings and not educational curses or diseases! Secondly, each institution has its own quality of education and accordingly, it will be unfair to compare students on the basis of institutional marks alone. Public examinations such as the WASCE provide a basis for the comparison of students by giving one common examination to all. Thirdly, the national examining bodies can furnish a model of efficient testing since they are in a better position to afford expert service than any individual school. In Nigeria for example, most of the Council's examiners are university professors/lecturers or highly experienced college or secondary school teachers. Finally, national examinations are supposed to give an impartial assessment of students. This is possible since no personal elements enter into the exams - the examiner does not know the examinee and vice versa. These types of examinations should therefore stay and be strengthened.

The preceding views become increasingly important when the question of the international

equivalence of diplomas/certificates is considered. As more students leave schools and universities to go abroad for undergraduate, graduate, post-doctorate and research studies, where do they stand? What, for an example is the value in the U.S.A. or Germany of a diploma awarded in Shanghai, Japan, Nigeria or the Philippines? And, when these graduates return, what will their foreign degrees be worth in their countries? These are important questions that must be answered when countries begin any process of abandoning this system of national accreditation of their schools' diploma.

In spite of the anomalies contained in the system, it appears clearly that the odds are against abolition. The trend today is rather towards a greater emphasis on nationally recognized examinations world-wide. Most educators in the countries already mentioned in this paper appear to view their national examinations as a blessing and not a disease in their educational systems (Atiyeh, 1962; Ahmed, 1985; Akanbi, 1996; Okebukola, 1977). On the other hand, the experience of countries such as Nigeria appears to suggest that we must not rely completely on a national examination system whereby students are taught by one teacher but are evaluated by an entirely different (or external) person. Teachers and local authorities should be given more freehand in the evaluation of

their students - who they know better than anybody!

Conclusion

There are multiple challenges that face national examinations in centralized educational systems: First, ensuring that the national examinations will encourage the best type of teaching; secondly, achieving economy, reliability and objectivity without damaging the organic unity of learning, third, finding the types of questions which would both reflect the stated educational objectives and provoke in teachers, a critical attitude towards their teaching methods. As a result of these challenges, it is suggested that significant efforts in the field of education should be directed along the following lines: exerting pressure for greater co-ordination between examination practices and educational theory, ensuring that the impact of examinations on teaching is wholesome: and, conducting more extensive researches into the improvement of oral and practical examinations. Because most countries operate some type of centralized educational systems, scores in the nationally constructed examinations determine to a great extent, selection for further education. Hence, genuine efforts are needed by all those concerned in these countries to resolve the different issues raised in this paper.

In the peculiar case of Nigeria there is need for a more co-ordinated enforcement of existing laws guiding the conduct of national examination. For instance, Decree 20 of 1984 with respect to examination malpractices needs to be invoked. This decree prescribes series of punishments for those who commit or aid examination malpractices at the national level. Such punishments include 25 years imprisonment and dismissal from job for those found guilty. These are currently not being vigorously implemented. Preventive measures could also be embarked upon to minimize obvious problems attached to the conduct of this national examination i.e. the WASCE. These measures could include the production and popularization of books on skills for effective studying, examination preparatory skills and examination coping strategies. No matter what positions an individual decides to take with respect to this discourse about national examinations, one thing is at least obvious in the prevailing circumstances. This is the fact that, an individual's level of education is generally regarded as decisive factor in employment opportunities and in social mobility.

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