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**EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT AND FALLING  
STANDARD OF EDUCATION IN NIGERIA**

**BY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Education in Nigeria has gone through a number of ordinances, laws and policies, all aimed at improving the quality and standard of education. Different assessment procedures/policies have also been injected into the system so as to improve the teaching /learning processes and thus uplift the standard of education.

This paper discusses the contribution of educational assessment towards the upliftment of the standard of education in Nigeria. The paper appraises the roles of examinations in the maintenance of standard of education through a review of studies conducted by examination bodies, especially the West African Examinations Council (WAEC). The outcomes of the studies reviewed are to ascertain whether the three educational domains are appropriately measured in a bid to establish the falling standard of education as well as tapping the potentialities of students.

The relationship between the curriculum, examination and standard of education is also highlighted to show its significance in the overall assessment of the student. The paper concludes with suggestions on how the quality of education and the entire educational system could be improved upon.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Standard has always been an issue of debate in education. The interesting, of course, is the way standard has often always been viewed as falling or declining. Public concern over standards comes in waves and is often triggered off by activities outside the world of classroom. When a cause for poor economic, social, cultural or technological performance is sought, the school system is always an easy target. Standard as generally accepted and the meaning of which I share, is a criterion or yardstick set-up or established by an organisation as a model against which other variables or items could be measured or judged. The criteria have to be uniformly agreed upon by the members of the group and should form the basis upon which the group would direct its objectives and aims. When there is a fall in the standard (Educational, Economic, Political or Social responsibilities), it means that the criteria already established have not been met.

Gipps (1988) has referred to standard as :

*"Levels of attainment in basic skills such as reading and Mathematics or levels of attainment in a much wider range of school activities, we may be talking about standards of provision, e.g. the number of teachers and books for child, or we may be talking about level of behaviour, dress and other social phenomena. Thus in the narrowest sense, standards can be level of performance on a test, in the widest sense can encompass notions of social and moral behaviour and discipline as well as educational attainment (page 21)*

According to Gipps (1988) when there is a fall in educational standards, it means that a particular level of attainment in reading and mathematics; in school

activities; and in performance on a test has not been met. From the socio-cultural point of view, fall in discipline means fall in the level of social and moral behaviour as well as other social phenomena. In the minds of the Nigerian public, decline in the standards of dress, moral behaviour, or discipline, which, could be due to changing social and cultural conventions, is likely to be connected with perceived decline in educational standards.

Education is considered to be a prominent agent for a social change and the school is a means through which a child's intellectual, spiritual, social and physical being grow into a mature adult capable of self-direction, and self-reliant (Abdullahi, 1988).

After going through educational hierarchies (from primary, through secondary to University), the individual is expected to be able to develop the right values and attitudes for his survival, acquire the right and appropriate skills, abilities, and physical and mental competences, so as to make significant contributions to the development of his society (N. P. E. 1981). It may be argued that the variable above are possible criteria to ascertain that some form of the "right" education has been acquired by a student. Alternatively a student's inadequate possession of such skills could be used to explain a falling standard of education. This paper discusses the role of examinations in the falling standard of education in Nigeria.

## 2. EXAMINATION AND STANDARD OF EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Assessment in education is primarily concerned with a measurement process. Assessment is meant to find out the change in behaviour, attitudes, aptitudes, abilities, skills and all other aspect of human competences expected of a subject after undergoing course of study.

Ward (1980) state that attainment testing attempts to measure what a student knows or can do which is usually related to the syllabus of a course he or she has undergone. Assessment of educational attainment includes a number of different method in which decision concerning the certificate or any other award is made. These assessment methods may include written examinations, interview, inventories, projective techniques, sociometry, practicals, observations and surveys.

Educational examiners and curriculum designers have given prominence to the Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational objectives. These educational objectives have been classified into three domains namely:- Cognitive, Affective and Psychomotor.

The educational assessment does not go beyond the realm of these domains. In order to obtain objective and fair judgement of an individual's capabilities, a total and comprehensive assessment ought to be undertaken and must/should include different assessment methods at different levels of educational objectives. Ahman and Glock (1981) maintained that the three domains

*"Represent, therefore, the total framework within which evaluation procedures are functioning. Hence after careful study teachers can classify objectives pertinent to their teaching in appropriate categories and devise a set of measurement procedures, some of which are tests, to obtain appropriate data on the basis of which broadly-based evaluation can be made (page 42)".*

The situation in Nigeria is the fact that one can hardly believe that these educational objectives are taken care of when assessing students. It is also true that

results of paper and pencil examinations are used to pass value judgement. How realistic is it to say that the fate or ability of a student who spends 4 to 5 years in secondary school or University is determined by compelling him/her to sit for 3 to 4 hour examination and expect the result to portray his capability in that area? Other methods of assessing individual skills, personal-social adjustment and discipline are not often utilized to compliment paper and pencil form of assessment.

This paper is however limited to the effects or implications of the present form of examination and the falling standard of education at post-primary school level. This is because examinations taken at the end of this level of education are nationally coordinated and conducted largely by the West African Examinations Council and National Teachers' Institute for the award of SSCE and Teachers' Grade Two respectively. The discussion that follows is further limited to the roles of the examinations conducted by the WAEC and the standard of education at least in Nigeria.

The West African Examinations Council designed a study in 1984 which looked into a more scientific way of awarding subject grades, and from the findings of the study the Council attempt to show one of the roles of examinations in the standard of education (be it falling or rising). In the study, the grade awarded in five subjects were looked into. The subjects were English Language, Mathematics, Literature in English, Biology and Government. Data were collected on candidates' performance and subject grade awarded on each for the period between 1974 - 1983.

The analyses of the data revealed that :-

*"the current practice of awarding grade shows some inconsistencies and followed no laid down principle. The approach followed either a norm or criterion reference principle. The minimum boundary scores for each grade and the percentage of students falling into each group varied from year to year and subject. The boundary score for each grade is also observed to vary by subject (page 6)."*

Furthermore, the analyses showed no significant difference between some proceeding subject grade boundaries so as to need a sub-classification of the grades. For example, there was consistently insignificant difference between grades A1 and A2 in almost all the subjects considered. It was also found that grade A3 did not belong to A group; there was no difference between A3 and C4, and sometimes, C5 and C6 belonged to the same group. The study also observed that determination of subject grades was highly subjective and unstatistical because most of the required statistics of performance were hardly produced for award meetings.

It could be argued that grades awarded in a manner reported upon above could lead to wrong placement of students and create in their minds a wrong impression of their results/ability in the subjects. When such students are placed in a course which demands high intellectual abilities, they may not be able to cope. The public then starts to point accusing fingers, while in reality, the examinations wrongly graded/measured their abilities. The simplest conclusion to a lay man is that there is a fall in the standard of education.

The author's review of the literature has shown other roles which examinations perform in indicating falling standard of education through a research conducted by Adeyegbe and Daramola (1986). In the study they analysed Multiple Choice (MC) objective question papers of WAEC May/June for 1985 GCE 'O/L' to show whether students' potentialities were adequately and appropriately tested. Four subjects were studied. These were English Language, Mathematics, Geography and Physics. The MC items in each of the question papers were categorised into the following cognitive levels

of thinking based on Bloom's Taxonomy: Pure recall of knowledge. Analysis and Evaluation.

Most of the items in the papers were found to have tested lower order level of intellectual ability (See table 1)

**TABLE 1:**  
**PERCENTAGE ACCURENCE OF LEVELS OF THINKING**  
**OF THE ITEMS IN THE YEAR 1985**  
**GCE O/L EXAMINATION BY SUBJECT**

Level of Thinking	English Language	Mathematics	Geography	Physics
i. Recall	8.0	4.0	43.3	25.0
ii. Comprehension	39.0	50.0	4.7	16.70
iii. Application	49.0	44.0	20.0	33.30
iv. Analysis	4.0	2.0	20.0	15.00
v. Evaluation	--	5.0	5.0	10.0

According to their findings, a large proportion of the items tested pure recall of knowledge and comprehension, with few items testing higher ordered intellectual abilities such as synthesis and evaluation. In addition, most of the items in the papers investigated were found to fall within the range of difficult and averagely difficult ones and contained some items which were not within the easy range (see Table II).

**TABLE II:**  
**PERCENTAGE OCCURRENCE OF ITEMS IN**  
**THE VARIOUS RANGE OF DIFFICULTY INDEX**

		Range of Difficulty Index		
YEAR	SUBJECT	0.0-.34	0.35-0.75	0.76-0.99
1984	Mathematics	32%	68%	-
1985	Mathematics	36%	64%	-
1984	Geogarphy	37%	57%	6%
1985	Geography	40%	60%	-
1984	Engl. Language	23%	53%	24%
1985	Engl. Language	36%	58%	6%
1984	Biology	18%	74%	8%
1985	Biology	24%	70%	6%

They also found some disagreement between the subject Officers and Examiners for Mathematics and Geography on the cognitive levels of thinking which the items tested based on Bloom's criteria.

These findings become critical and important when it is realised that these tests only measured cognitive abilities. Perhaps this is why Adeyegbe and Daramola (1986)

gave a rider in their discussion of the findings that even in cognitive tests, items comprising an examination paper should attempt to test all the cognitive levels of thought expected of an examinee. It is on the basis of this that they submitted thus:

*"Where a test comprised items that were of recall type then we may only be testing for rote and not meaningful learning".*

In yet another angle in further explaining their findings, they contended that a situation where the majority of the items in a question paper comprised those in the very difficult range such tests did not appear to provide for fair assessment. It is therefore not unexpected to have had poor results in those papers for examination in those years. In the same study, Adeyegbe and Daramola (1986) also reported that in a situation where up to 40% of the items are in the higher difficulty range, then ability distribution and performance is not likely to show normal distribution.

It is interesting to note that these analyses were based on tests which assessed the cognitive abilities of the students and on which students are classified as either intelligent or idiots. Yet cognitive ability is just one out of the three domains that are equally responsible for students' performance. Even on cognitive abilities, the examiners are often still unable to efficiently assess all the cognitive levels of thinking of students.

What might probably improve the situation of what Adeyegbe and Daramola (1986) have found is to set multiple choice objectives question papers as much as possible following the dictates of Mehrens and Lehman (1978). They strongly believe that is about one third of the items in a question paper falls in each of the easy range, averagely difficult and in the difficult level, it is most probable to give the weaker candidates a taste of success while at the same time strengthening the performance of the brilliant ones. Perhaps our not keeping to this norm in test development efforts has resulted in our failure to tap the potentialities of students through our examination system and hence recording poor performance and the labelling "falling standard of education" for the country.

## I. HOPE RISING

However, hope is not lost for the 6-3-3-4 system of education has given an impetus towards ameliorating the problem by emphasizing the use of continuous assessment in certification process. The NPE (1981 revised) has enshrined that

*"Educational assessment and evaluation will be liberalized by basing them in whole or in part on continuous assessment of the individual".*

The aim of using continuous assessment is to liberalise the dependence on the one-short examination and thus obtain a comprehensive performance of a student, which according to the policy should involve cognitive abilities as well as psychomotor and effective capabilities over a period of time. Unfortunately, a study conducted by Galadima, Kamar, and Kalgo (1994) involving classroom teachers, continuous assessment co-ordinators, and principals of some selected secondary schools in Sokoto State on the practice of continuous assessment showed that majority of the teachers (76 out of 93) use written and/or oral exams. Eighty four (out of 93) teachers claimed to be assessing their students' attitude and interests (affective domain) through oral questioning, student attendance, participation in the lesson, observing their behaviour,

and noting diligently how they carry on their assignments. These are not however recorded so as to contribute to the final continuous assessment results.

ii. **ANY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CURRICULUM AND EXAMINATION ?**

It is necessary at this juncture to briefly look at the relationship between curriculum, syllabuses, and the examinations students sit for. It is a fact that for any curriculum to succeed, no matter how nicely it was designed, it must take into consideration the societal needs, values, aspirations and expectations. It must also provide an avenue through which members of that society can live happily, develop their potentialities and contribute to the development of that society. This is the main essence of any curriculum. If there is problem in the design and construction as well as in its implementation, then undoubtedly, the realization of the objectives and aspirations of that society for which its curriculum is designed will be impaired. By implications lack of this realization, would translate itself into a fall in the expected standard, and consequently a fall in the entire standard of education.

According to Majasan (1989), attempt are made in curriculum development, to include as many details as possible to justify the inclusion of not only subject matter but also what will be expected of a learner after mastering it. It means that the social, political and economic implications of each item in the curriculum is constantly kept in view. Majasan (1989) has pointed out further that there are three referents in the development of curriculum, viz-Man's categorized and preserved knowledge, society, its institution and social processes; the individual to be educated, his nature, needs and development patterns.

From the above, a good curriculum must centre on the subject matter, social frame work and the needs and nature of the individual to be educated. The normal curriculum sequence, therefore starts from national or agreed broad objective of education, then school curriculum and lastly examination syllabus. But one reason or the other the procedure is quite different in most of the member countries of the West African Examinations Council. The "curriculum" these countries follow rested heavily on the subject matter with little emphasis on the societal needs and values, as well as the needs and developmental patterns of the individual being educated (Majasan, 1989).

One can argue that if curriculum does not take into consideration the needs and values of the society as well as that of the individual, then what is the essence of that curriculum ? How can children and youths develop the right values and attitudes and appreciate our culture ? What kind of education do we give to our offsprings if the curriculum does not take care of their needs and developmental patterns ? Definitely a stage has been set-up for the down-ward trend of education, and consequently it becomes valueless as Majasan (1989) has nicely pointed out :-

*"What happens now in WAEC member Countries (for example Nigeria) is that because of the non-existence of secondary school curriculum WAEC has to develop its examinations syllabus from a number of sources other than a school curriculum and because of the importance of WAEC syllabuses the schools get hold of them and use them as "The curriculum" for the school system. The use of an examination syllabus in this way inevitably leads to alot of defects in the educational system. For example a number of important educational objectives will be glossed over or completely neglected while less useful topics in the syllabus are unnecessarily emphasized (page.42)."*

If a curriculum can neglect very important educational objectives, what do we expect examinations to assess? It is therefore not surprising to find out examinations assessing only cognitive domain, neglecting vital objectives (such as psychomotor and effective) which are very important to the individual to be educated. We cannot help education standard from falling when assessment is biased toward one direction and emphasis is shifted from well balanced individual to an individual without sense of direction.

Admittedly, other factors have contributed to the falling 'standard' of education in this country, but our examination system as well as the 'curriculum' in use have contributed a lot to the falling 'standard'. Students should not be blamed outrightly for failing examinations or failing to meet the expectations of the society. When a student is asked to sit for an examination which only reflects what he learns from the 'books' neglecting his needs, interests, aptitudes, norms, the goals of the society, then one expects an educational disaster.

The yardstick for measuring success or failure has shifted from discipline and morality to possession of certificate any how, and anyway. The emphasis is to have a certificate which becomes a sign of success and intellectual bulldozer. The educational evaluators (examiners) have greatly reflected the role of effective and psychomotor domains to the extent that our tests and examinations contain only recall of knowledge and little application of the so-called intellectual abilities contained in the cognitive domain.

The society expects the education system to be an agent of transmitting its values and norms. This requires not only one to sit for three-hour examination but also out of class activities, his relation with his colleagues and teachers, spiritual and social abilities as well as self-discipline and self-reliance. It appears we are yet to develop an examination of 3 to 4 hour that can test the above qualities. Therefore, the one-short examination in use now to assess these and award certificate indicating worthy in character and learning is unjust and derogatory. It is sad to note however that WAEC is not the only one in this business. It is also done to some extent in the Universities. It is therefore true that performance in examinations has become an indicator of 'falling' or 'rising' standard of education in Nigeria. Perhaps that is why Fafunwa (1967) stated that the undue importance accorded to examinations and certificates in English speaking Africa is so alarming that whether what obtains can be called a system of education or a system of examination. In the same vein, Suleiman (1984) was of the opinion that:-

*"It is an educational truism that examinations control the curriculum and whoever controls a country's examination system controls its education. The success in education in Nigeria is judged strictly by the performance of its students in an examination (page 18-19)".*

We should therefore hold our examinations system responsible for the falling standard of education. We should also not stigmatize students as failures but rather it is examination systems that have failed to tap the potentialities of the students.

### 3. SUGGESTIONS

1. The West African Examinations Council should base its examinations on criterion-referenced model. This will pave the way for taking decision on whether or not the standard has fallen. The students' scores will then be measured on that standard.

2. The examiners should use Table of specifications in constructing their tests so as to take care of all domains and levels of thinking. This will also help the examiners to write their test items representing the three levels of difficulty-easy range, averagely difficult and very difficult.
3. The continuous assessment should be pursued with vigour to include a comprehensive assessment of all the domains.
4. The Government should provide a comprehensive curriculum, so that meaningful school curriculum and examination syllabuses could be drawn from it. The curriculum should reflect the values, needs of the society and the individual to be educated.

4. **CONCLUSION:**

The author of this paper has acknowledge the efforts being made by WAEC to uplift the standard of education in the country. However, the criticism or comments are not questioning predictive power of WAEC examinations, but the way and manner in which it assesses the overall abilities (not exclusively cognitive) of our students. The incorporation of CA in determining the final grade for issuing certificates is a good step in the right direction. However, most CA conducted in schools hardly measure psychomotor and affective domains but measures only cognitive ability (Galadima et al 1994).

Hence the paper argued that lack of overall assessment either by the examination bodies or by the continuous assessment has contributed a lot towards the falling standard of education. Other factors that may bring about the falling standard of education include lack of qualified and dedicated teachers, lack of teaching materials, government policies, materialistic tendency among students and parents and lack of incentives for teachers. Although these were not discussed, they are assumed to be a common feature of our system of education and have collectively added their own input to the falling standard of education.

It is hoped that if the points raised in this paper are taken for their worth and giving adequate attention, we may regain the erstwhile high and efficient standard of education of which our great country is known and proud of.



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