Assessment in schools: To what extent is it fit for purpose? The policy context

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Education policy can be as controversial and interesting debate topic as assessment. Public reaction towards examination results testifies this. Newspaper headlines show how emotive and controversial it can be: For example, “Who is in the ‘Top 100 schools? Where are the bottom 100?’ ‘Some schools are doing well because they do not enrol day scholars;’ ‘results are pathetic and disappointing; ranking is not fair.’ ‘League tables are welcome, they help parents decide which schools to send their children to.’ ‘Tests blamed for blighting children’s lives;’ ‘New fears over examination leakages,’ ‘Concern over high failure rate in schools and that the entire education system is examination-oriented.’

High-stakes examinations such as grade Seven, ‘O’ and ‘A’ Levels tend to dominate debate. Yet assessment has other values which some members of the public may not be aware of. For example, good teachers use classroom assessment informally to determine the learners’ progress in understanding concepts learnt for the day. Assessment also provides information on how best learners can be assisted to progress further with learning overall and in specific subjects. We say that the teachers’ decision on the way forward will be informed by results from assessment hence very important for needs identification and personalised learning. It is not enough to get information from assessment, but to make sense of it and be able to use it for the benefit of the learner. When used in this manner assessment has beneficial effects for learning, an important objective of schooling.

The interaction between the various forms of assessment, the uses to which the results of assessment and accompanying judgements are put, and the resulting effects on teaching and learning make assessment an important though contentious area for research, policy-making and public debate. It is, however, important that we all acknowledge that assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning though some teachers treat the two as separate or isolated activities. Consequently assessment should not be viewed, evaluated and debated in isolation. An isolated debate may fail to inform policy formulation let alone implementation. Evidence from research on assessment and related issues can help the generation of future policy on assessment.

Many assessment debates tend to be universal. For example, how assessment might best support learning and teaching, and how assessment is used to provide information on the progress of individuals, schools and countries. This debate includes examples of how these factors affect different schools and even countries. However, in Zimbabwe, most of these questions have stimulated so much debate hence the need to explore tensions in more detail. The observations as stated above will help highlight some of the publics’ concerns even more thereby helping policy makers with additional information for decision making regarding policy development on assessment.

Not only is assessment an area of constant media scrutiny, it is also changing from time to time. Currently Zimbabwe is in
the middle of a curriculum review process of its education system which some people have described as ‘long overdue’. Questions such as: What criteria will be used to make decisions on transition from ECD to Grade One? On the other hand, shall we continue with automatic promotion? What curriculum will be good for the individual and the country? Tricky questions indeed, yet we want to know whether a child is well prepared or has benefited sufficiently to start the next stage of the education system or future in the world of work. This is a very important question which can only be answered more appropriately by reference to assessment data and relevant judgements. If properly done, assessment can provide the required information for parents, teachers and employers to make sound judgements about every child or learner. The only way to ensure relevant information on which to base decisions about every child or learner is an assessment data and policy that provides guidance to every teacher at all the levels. This appears to be missing currently hence it is an important issue to consider during the current curriculum review. This will enable all schools to follow the same assessment framework regardless of where the school may be located in the countryside or urban area. This calls upon the curriculum designers to come up with critical competencies expected of every child at any one given level bearing in mind individual differences. Interpretation of assessment results becomes easier and predictable for those making decisions about the child or learner. Parents will be involved in the learning and teaching of the child at home. They will need to monitor the child and provide the necessary support to complement what the teacher is doing at school. Assessment data can go a long way to guide parents on what assistance they can give their children.

Teacher assessment, though it may be varied from school to school and is regarded as largely subjective in its construction, marking, evaluation and reporting has been found to be just as effective as external assessment. An assessment policy for the country would unify assessment practices by teachers who will follow the same policy guidelines. Such guidelines may include frequency of assessment, nature of activities to be completed, competencies to be assessed among others and the contribution to overall assessment score at the end of a study programme vis-a-vis other criteria. Presence of a policy may help guide teachers, learners and parents. This will provide a uniform playground for the whole country. Children who move from one school to another or part of the country can transfer worth their records hence transfer will not disadvantage anyone. Such a policy will need to be accompanied by a well monitored record keeping practice by every teacher for every child. For this to happen, a policy on assessment for schools is necessary.

This discussion should not be misconstrued to mean an approach that advocates for a strong role of continuous, formative assessment which takes over from the current summative assessment into account only how the child performs only in the examination and totally negates daily performance over a long period of time. In the next series of papers, an attempt to come up with an ideal, but also realistic form of assessment will be made. In order for me to be able to do justice to this proposal, I will have to be mindful about possible implications that the proposed assessment will have on the standardisation of school-based assessment, which need to be addressed in the policy as well as provide enough resources to make it work.

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