

**FACTORS INFLUENCING DESIGN OF BUSINESS STUDIES TESTS IN FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT:
A CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MOUNT KENYA REGION IN KENYA**

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Abstract

The current Kenyan education system favours academic certificates from national standardized examinations as indicators of achievement and a major tool for both academic and professional mobility. Consequently, this has a trickledown effect on what happens at the school level on how students and teachers view formative assessment tests. Therefore, this study aimed at investigating the factors influencing design of business studies tests in formative assessment with particular focus on whether the given tests were to aid learning or to offer an opportunity to practice what was tested in the end of secondary education course national examinations. The population of the study included all the business studies teachers in the area of Mount Kenya. The study was based on a case study research design. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select eight secondary schools offering business studies at form four levels and teachers in charge of business studies from these schools were included in the study. A focus group discussion guide was used as research instrument to facilitate collection of the desired data which were analyzed thematically. It was observed that owing to the fact that teachers' professional efficiency and effectiveness was determined by results from national standardized tests given to students, there existed a shift of focus from testing to aid further learning to that of practicing national standardized examinations. Therefore, factors such as testing frequency, sources of question items, need for the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education model examinations, general need for excellent results, language of the examination, compulsory syllabus areas, benefits of excellent results and treats from dismal results influenced the design of business studies formative assessment tests by teachers in the secondary schools.

Key Words: Business Studies, Examination, Formative Assessment, Standardized Tests.

1. Introduction

Formative assessment is vital for gauging students' academic progress as well as aiding the teaching/learning process. This is because results from formative assessment tests enable teachers to determine weaknesses and strengths of the teaching/learning techniques in addition to areas that require remedial work. However, a country's education system's policies regarding utility and perceptions of national standardized examination results may jeopardize this fundamental and functional role of formative assessment tests. Basically, excessive use of national standardized examinations as a basis for a school's academic improvement and accountability as well as teacher efficacy may place new demands on formative assessment test procedures (Harlen, 2007). Students may feel that future personal socioeconomic status purely rests on the grade attained from the national standardized examination and thus focus more on techniques for passing the examination at the expense of acquiring knowledge and understanding of concepts. As a result, inappropriate study techniques such as cramming and rote learning may ensue. Similarly, teachers may specialize on drilling students for the national standardized examination on which professional mobility and efficacy is pegged.

Further, school principals may be tempted to alter school programmes and resources to suit the rigorous test preparation schedules and activities such as teaching extra hours early in the morning and late into the night, taking part of lunch breaks for test taking or group discussions and creating holiday tuitions (Henry, Nyaga & Oundo 2014). Ultimately, the pressure to generate excellent results from national standardized examinations may influence practically every aspect of learning including the design of formative assessment tests. This influence may involve design of formative assessment tests that offer an opportunity to practice what is tested in the end of secondary education course national examinations.

Teachers being rational beings are usually torn between using the results on standardized tests to improve the quality of learning versus using the results to justify their status as teachers in the society. While the students who will have passed or failed the standardized examinations will have gone out of the system, and therefore have no power or influence on the future employment of the teacher, the school management and the public are a perpetual threat to the teacher's employment. This arrangement of the school system is intact: that the learner who has graduated possess less demand for accountability on the teacher than the school management and the public. This situation tends to influence on who the teacher should prioritize his/her works. That is, either to use results to generate teaching strategies that promote meaningful learning no matter whether the learners will pass or fail the standardized examinations or to promote rote learning that will ensure that the learner reproduces the content in the standardized examinations and therefore be accountable to the school management and the public. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the factors influencing design of business studies tests in formative assessment.

2. Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to determine factors influencing design of business studies tests in formative assessment among secondary schools in Mount Kenya region in Kenya.

3. Methodology

This study employed the case study research design which involved collection of qualitative data from business studies teachers on factors influencing design of business studies tests in formative assessment among secondary schools in Mount Kenya region in Kenya. The population of the study included all the secondary school business studies teachers in the area of Mount Kenya. Purposive sampling technique was used to obtain a sample of eight secondary schools that offered business studies at the final year of study from which the teachers in charge of the subject were selected for the study. Basically, custom made focus group discussion guide was adapted as research instrument to facilitate collection of the desired data. To improve on the reliability and validity of data, member checking was conducted. A research permit was obtained from National Council of Science and Technology before visiting the sampled schools for data collection. Thereafter, a focus group discussion involving the eight business studies teachers was conducted and the obtained data was analyzed thematically. Representation of the results was done by prose narration and excerpts.

4. Results of the Study

This section contains the results of the study regarding factors influencing design of business studies tests in formative assessment among secondary schools in Mount Kenya region in Kenya as well as a discussion of those results. The identified factors included: testing frequency, sources of question items, need for the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education model examinations, general need for excellent results, language of the examination, compulsory syllabus areas, benefits of excellent results and treats from dismal results.

4.1 Testing Frequency

The frequency of formative assessment testing depended largely on individual school's testing policy and determined the design of the tests. Two of the participants reported of giving weekly tests with the other participants reporting monthly and termly tests. The frequency of testing also depended on the class, with form four class taking more tests compared to the lower classes. Technically, all participants concurred that most schools required teachers to cover the subject course syllabus by June of the final year of study and thereafter continuously tested students until the onset of the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examinations which were normally scheduled for late October every year. This strategy was aimed at getting students to familiarize with the testing demands of the Kenya National Examination Council meaning that formative assessment tests were designed to practice the national standardized examinations.

4.2 Sources of Question Items

The findings of this study asserted that most school systems demanded formative assessment tests be moderated to meet certain standards. The standards required were in terms of number of questions in the test; time taken to sit for the test; sections in a test; or the nature of the question items presented. This demand for an externally predetermined standard of reference made many teachers find it convenient to source test items from already established test item banks that guaranteed expected quality. In particular, the practice of sourcing question items from test item banks was attested to in

the following excerpt, “I do maintain two test item bank files for paper one and paper two examination formats. I am also careful to include the marking schemes for the question items. This makes it easy for me to sample out test items when designing the formative assessment tests as well as marking schemes for my students”. In agreement, another participant postulated, “I maintain an array of sample papers for every class level and time of the academic year in consideration of syllabus coverage. Instead of designing new formative assessment tests, I recycle the sample papers over a long period of time for the different groups of students.” Generally, the participants were in agreement that District mock examinations, Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examination past papers, national school’s internal mock examinations and Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education model examination booklets were rich sources of formative assessment tests that many students were subjected to.

4.3 Need for the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education Model Examinations

The focus group discussion members consented that schools were spending a lot of money in acquiring Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education model examination revision books which had simple and straight-forward notes and question items on every examinable topic by the Kenya National Examination Council. Information from the participants revealed that titles to these books were well crafted to draw the attention of teachers and students alike. A mention of these titles included: Golden tips, Test it & fix it, Top mark, Highflyers among others and participants attested to frequently having referred to these books while designing the formative assessment tests. Apparently, all the participants confessed that Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education model examinations from external and well known sources were sought by teachers as well as school principals and given to students. The motivation behind these examinations was that sometimes they contained question items that were coincidentally repeated in the subsequent Kenya Certificate of Secondary School Education examinations. Besides, these examinations had time allocation and question item difficulty similar to that of Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examinations which facilitated students in developing a working speed that enabled them to tackle all the questions within the specified time.

4.4 General Need for Excellent Results

Most participants pointed to excellent examination outcomes as a motivating factor with regard to the designs of formative assessment tests by teachers. A participant clarified that many teachers strived to trap those question items which were anticipated would most likely appear in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examination when designing the formative assessment tests. The reason behind this perception is clearly outlined in the following excerpt, “Parents want to take children to schools that are associated with exceptional national examination results. The district education office is interested with good national examination performance at whatever cost. Basically, learning is considered to have taken place only if students perform well in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examination. Further, the examination results are used as the only reference to base the performance of both the teachers and the students.” In support of this idea, another participant emphasized, “A teacher is required to submit the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examination performance records when applying for an interview to be promoted from job group L to job group M. This is one of the reasons why most secondary school teachers in Kenya stagnate at job group L professionally.” Asked whether further studies such as a Master degree or a PhD degree permitted eligibility for promotions, participants disagreed in chorus. Therefore, being the drivers of the education system, teachers developed strategies that helped in achievement of the expected results. Thus, the need for skills and related competences was replaced by need for grades. As such, teaching and testing became integrated to ensure that what was taught compared well with what was tested in the national examinations and the level of detail in the national examination determined the level of detail in the teaching as well as school based formative assessment tests.

4.5 Language of the Examination

The findings of this study disclosed that the language used in setting examinations by the Kenya National Examination Council determined how teachers designed the formative assessment tests. Terms like ‘discuss’, ‘explain’, ‘distinguish’, ‘illustrate’ and many others required students to follow certain ‘rules’ failure to which points were lost. In an effort to ensure that students were conversant with this language, teachers used key words in the question stem similar to those used by Kenya National Examination Council in designing the formative assessment tests. Majority of the participants affirmed that it was not enough to use the terminologies in the formative assessment tests. Most schools invited subject experts to address students on how to handle specific question items and what was expected to attain the maximum points awarded for each question item. To this end, a participant who happened to be an examiner and thus considered a subject expert explained, “Am always invited by other schools to talk to students on what is required in answering Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education business studies examinations. The main areas of interest include: question item difficulty, test language, awarding of marks, frequently examined content and the examiners’ expectations.” It was also reported that after the sessions with subject experts, students were subjected to Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education model examinations aimed at making them practice the learnt skills.

4.6 Compulsory Syllabus Areas

Most participants revealed several content areas in the syllabus that were constantly tested at the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examinations and influenced design of the formative assessment tests. These content areas included the balance sheet, cash book, trial balance among others and were accorded more testing drills by teachers. This means that teachers majored at including such content in the formative assessment tests in order to enhance students' competency in preparation for excellent performance in the summative national standardized examinations.

4.7 Benefits of Excellent Results

The benefits associated with excellent results in national examinations emerged as a major factor that influenced how teachers designed the formative assessment tests. The findings revealed that apart from the general professional satisfaction that students had excelled in the national examination, teachers were hopeful of future promotions in terms of career progression. This is because in Kenya, teachers' upward mobility with regard to job promotions were pegged on students' achievement in one's area of specialty. In addition, a certain participant explained, "Whereas specific subject teachers struggle to post a high subject mean score, school principals put pressure on both teachers and students in order to push for an excellent school mean score that would result in a school being listed high in the league tables. Such pressure cause teachers to simulate the national examination models in designing the formative assessment tests." Besides, it was observed that school prize giving days had become a norm in the country as a means of encouraging academic excellence. Basically, local politicians purported to be the prime movers in such fora pledged financial and material support to performing schools, teachers as well as students. Similarly, the parent teacher associations and board of governors alike were reported to be enthusiastic about teacher motivation with teachers whose subjects posted impressive results being rewarded financially, materially or both amid many generous promises should they post better results in future examinations. A participant said, "It has become most schools' policy that subject teachers get specific cash awards for every grades A, A- and B+ posted by individual students in the subject. School boards of governor also sponsor teachers for tours out of the country owing to excellent academic outcomes." Consequently, teachers make every effort to ensure that students are exposed to formative assessment tests that are similar to summative examinations.

4.8 Threats from Dismal Results

Failure to post impressive academic results in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examinations posed a major threat to the school community and especially subject teachers. A particular participant noted that teachers who posted a mean score less than that of the previous year in the subject received letters of reprove copied to the school Board of Governors from school principals. The participants also observed that the inspectorate arm of the ministry of education was more likely to visit schools that were deemed to be under performing in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examinations. In addition, parents who were disgruntled with the school's performance gradually withdrew students from the school in favour of better performing schools. Ultimately, teachers lost hope in future job promotions that were usually pegged on students' academic performance. There was a participant who lamented, "A prominent politician once publicly complained during a school fund raising ceremony why teachers and principals whose subjects and schools had stagnated or declining achievements were still working in those institutions. While teachers tirelessly work at improving grades, such remarks cause students to relax academically and join the politician as well as dissatisfied parents in blaming teachers for students' dismal academic performance". Generally, such threats were purported to facilitate teachers in devising ways of ensuring students were conversant with the content tested in the summative examinations and those ways included designing closely related formative assessment tests.

5. Discussion of the Results

A Kenyan Business Studies teacher seems in a dilemma as to whom or what they should pay allegiance whether the school management's demands, personal career advancement, the learners' need to understand concepts, good grades at the standardized national examinations or job promotions. Business studies being a technical subject with concepts essential for socioeconomic development, more emphasis should be laid on transferring knowledge to the learner for which formative assessment tests generate feedback to both the teacher and the learner regarding progress in the teaching/learning situation (Kapambwe, 2010). Contrary to this observation, business studies teachers in Mount Kenya region tended to design formative assessment tests as an aid in facilitating achievement of excellent grades in the standardized national examinations. This practice was supposedly perpetuated by pressure from the school management, the requirements for job promotion, threats from parents and politicians as well as disregard for further studies as a basis for salary increment by the employer. In support of this argument, Odhiambo (2005) asserts that the Kenyan government as well as the public demand teacher accountability for students' achievement. As a result, students were pressurized to write numerous formative assessment tests as a measure to gauge whether they were competent enough to excel in the

standardized national examinations. The teaching of the subject was also most likely based on what is examined and how test items should be handled in the examinations therefore enhancing drilling and rote learning. This in effect undermines the inculcation of right attitudes and behaviour for future business acumen since a teachers' view of learning influences students' personality and the world's mindset (Ulug, Ozden & Eryilmaz, 2011). Therefore, students may perceive learning as examination oriented and not for future application in real life situations or benefit for the society and personal enhancement. This demeans the role that basic education should play in developing individuals who can harness the most from resources within the environment (Ministry of Education, 2005).

It was noted that teachers whose students were ranked highly in the standardized national examinations were rewarded in monetary terms as well as in kind. These rewards were meant to motivate teachers in the quest for excellent results irrespective of the composition of students' body with regard to entry behaviour and intellectual quotient. Annual open education days were initiated in every District in the country to reward as well as a lot blame to teachers for students' achievement or lack of achievement in the previous year's standardized national examinations among other objectives. In support of this sentiment, Heck (2009) asserts that performance of both teachers and schools are normally evaluated according to achievement of students in standardized examinations. Hence, an attempt to win awards and avoid blame by teachers in Mount Kenya region influenced leaning which was based on students' achievement instead of learning progress and therefore formative assessment tests were designed accordingly. This practice defies the purpose of formative assessment tests including the diagnostic role that exposes students' weak areas and allowing the teacher to evaluate and adjust the teaching techniques (Black & William (1998). These inadequacies in the design of formative assessment tests may continue to deny students an opportunity to acquire basic business skills necessary for future economic development and personal enhancement.

6. Recommendations

- i. The secondary school course summative examinations should include nonacademic competencies such as character formation, business acumen, organizational skills, team work, aural skills, sportsmanship and project work. This will allow students time to exploit additional potentials other than academic competence which is vainly attained through rote learning. Therefore, formative assessment tests may not over emphasize the content in the national standardized examinations. Instead, more emphasis should be laid on character development as a strategy of solving socioeconomic problems in the society.
- ii. Formative assessment based on summative national standardized examination models should not be allowed to dominate the school curriculum at the expense of classroom activities, understanding of concepts and co-curricular undertakings. To curb this obsession with testing, students should be allowed to own their grades instead of holding teachers accountable for students' academic achievement.
- iii. To facilitate design of formative assessment tests based on students' learning outcomes with the aim of testing comprehension of concepts by students, both teachers' and students' performance levels should be pegged on other factors other than solely on the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education examination results.
- iv. Yearly County, District or Zonal formative tests should be encouraged as an intervention strategy towards ensuring formative assessment tests are pegged on learning and not achievement. In these tests, all concepts as per the syllabus level should be tested disregarding whether the concepts are tested in national standardized examinations or not.

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