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Masvingo Province Secondary School Pupils' and Teachers' Views on the Educational Value of Zimbabwe Junior Certificate Examinations

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Abstract

This study sought to establish secondary school pupils and teachers' perceptions towards Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC) examinations in light of the proposed re-introduction of the ZJC examinations that were discontinued in 1999. The study employed the descriptive survey design. Data were collected through interviews. A purposive sample of 50 pupils and 30 experienced secondary school teachers from five schools representing five different responsible authorities, using quota-sampling technique, participated in the study. Data were presented in direct quotes and analyzed thematically. The results show that the majority of secondary school pupils and teachers see the ZJC examinations as useful if the results were to be released timeously for streaming pupils and channeling them into various subject areas, to make pupils take their work seriously, to prepare pupils for 'O' Level examinations, among other reasons. Some pupils and teachers, however, view the examinations as a waste of time and resources, chiefly because the certificate cannot be used for employment purposes. In view of these findings, the researchers recommend that if the examinations were to be re-introduced, the results should be released timeously so that they could be used for purposes they are purported to serve.

Key words: Teaching, Learning, Junior secondary, Examinations, Students and two-pathway structure

Background to the Study

In Zimbabwe prior to 1999, after two years of secondary education, pupils used to sit for the Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC) examinations. These largely formative examinations were then discontinued in 1999. The Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, through Policy Circular Number P77 of May 2006 directed all secondary schools to implement the two-pathway structure of education, a move that would see the re-introduction of the ZJC examinations. The directive, a response to one of the recommendations of the 1999 Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (CIET) urged "the use of secondary school as time to identify and develop students' abilities and traits and to set them on the path for future learning, be it academic, technical or vocational, through formal or non-formal

means" (CIET, 1999:318). The success of this two-pathway structure would hinge on, among other things, fair and properly informed 'streaming' of the students at post Form Two level. The reintroduction of the ZJC examinations, purposely "to facilitate effective channeling of the students into the appropriate pathways in conjunction with continuous assessment" (Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture Policy Circular Number P77, 2006:2) was bound to be received with mixed feelings, especially when the country's examinations council (ZIMSEC) was experiencing credibility problems, especially with the timeous sitting and processing of other examinations such as 'O' and 'A' Level. It was against this background of the vitality of the cherished two pathway system in the face of the reintroduction of the junior certificate examinations that the researchers decided to assess the views of junior secondary school pupils and teachers

from Masvingo Province, on the ZJC examinations. The study sought to investigate these stakeholders' views on ZJC examinations, with a view to establishing whether junior secondary examinations were regarded as either a superfluous or an educationally fruitful exercise. Zimbabwean students, like others globally, have a right to relevant education and to sitting relevant, purposeful examinations. Zimbabwe's policy on ZJC examinations has tended to be contradictory and inconsistent. Policy directed the re-introduction of ZJC examinations by 2006 but practice so far has been to 'regionalize' or 'clusterise' the junior secondary 'tests'. This scenario has tended to trivialize these examinations. Before they were discontinued, ZJC examinations would be released well into the first term of the following year when those who had sat for them had already been streamed basing on school based criteria such as mid- year examination results or continuous assessment, thereby putting into doubt the relevance of the ZJC examinations.

Commenting on the need to exorcise the frightful ghost of the Zimbabwean academic examinations in general, the CIET (1999:315) notes " the urgent need for a paradigm shift from this academic examination driven secondary education system to a more utilitarian education that views each learner as having potential to develop and contribute positively in society." However, the success of the two-pathway structure rests on some informed consideration of students' overt academic performance (in examinations) and preferences at exiting junior secondary school.

Statement of the problem

There is an apparent policy dilemma on ZJC examinations and so the researchers sought to establish if the apparent policy dilemma has affected the overall views of pupils and teachers, regarding ZJC examinations. The research should put into perspective the place of ZJC examinations in the implementation of the two pathway structure so that examinees are smoothly channeled into either the Commercial Skills pathway (with general academic subjects) or the Vocational Skills pathway (with general academic subjects) (CIET,1999; Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture Policy Circular Number P77, 2006).

Purpose of study

The study sought to establish secondary school pupils' and teachers' views towards ZJC examinations and their reasons for these.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- a) What are the views of Zimbabwe school pupils and teachers towards ZJC examinations?
- b) What reasons do the pupils and teachers proffer for these views?

Justification of the Study

Globally, examinations are of national importance, carrying political, economic and social implications. Results of national examinations affect whole futures of millions of boys and girls yearly. Research evidence suggests that examinations may be used for both noble and ignoble purposes (CIET, 1999; Torrance (1986) in Cuttance ,1992 ;Petty, 1998). Public examinations are used, among other purposes, for discrimination or selection in the uncertain job markets and training or certification and matriculation for higher and tertiary placement (Taiwo ,1995; Rao, 2004; Kellaghan and Greaney , 2004). In the USA, Britain and India, results of examinations have been used to assess teachers and school program effectiveness and accountability (Armstrong and Savage, 1998; Cuttance in Reynolds and Cuttance, 1992; Rao, 2004). In Africa, examinations were used and are still being used to ensure that both private and public schools taught /teach to same standards (Kellaghan and Greaney ,2004). Kellaghan and Greaney (2004) also say examinations in Africa are useful in the allocation of the scarce educational benefits, certification function for both continuing education and job opportunities and training. Also, examinations can be used to underpin changes in curriculum and teaching methods and to maintain national standards. Examinations in Africa also help make teachers and schools accountable and legitimate members in the global society through facilitating international mobility (Kellaghan and Greaney, 2004).

Commenting on the mounting pressure for evaluation at lower secondary school, the

World Bank (2005: 31) notes the stress and pressure that evaluation and examinations exert on lower secondary learners: secondary students have to deal with public evaluation of their academic achievements, sometimes in the form of high stakes public examinations. This can alienate students, resulting in significant negative impacts on the motivation and self – perception of adolescents.

World Bank Report (2005) shows that examinations in Zimbabwe are viewed so seriously that even at Grade 7 level pupils receive private tutorship to avert the fear of failure. Given the generally high levels of literacy in Zimbabwe (by 1986 secondary education enrolment had quadrupled, CIET 1999; Brown, 1991) perhaps scanty or cursory attention has been given to research on junior secondary education, more focus being given to ‘O’ and ‘A’ level and college /university education (Gatawa,1998). The world over, for a policy to succeed, it should be accepted by all involved: politicians, practitioners, pupils and the society at large (Rao, 2004). This study, therefore, sought to establish the views of junior secondary school teachers and pupils on ZJC examinations, in light of the fact that the Ministry has directed the reintroduction of ZJC examinations and professes to depend upon their results in the determination of the two pathway education structure .

Literature Review

Examinations, an important aspect of assessment, should not only be seen to measure “the breadth and depth of learning” that has already taken place (Petty, 1998:401) but should also be seen to make education accessible to all potential examinees; positively influencing the present and the future learning of students, their developments and achievements. Generally, assessment involves collecting and interpreting relevant information about an individual or subject in order to guide decision-making involving the individual or subject (McLoughlin and Lewis, 1986). Brown, Bull and Pendlebury (1997:8) say “Assessment consists, essentially, of taking a sample of what students do, making inferences and estimating the worth of their actions.” Examinations and teacher-constructed tests constitute samples and

it is through assessment that they derive meaning. Brown (1997) in Huddleston and Unwin (1997); Petty (1998), and Lockett and Sutherland in Makoni (2000) identify the purposes of assessment as inter alia, diagnostic, formative, summative and quality assurance. Diagnostic assessment unearths the causes of success or failure, strengths and weaknesses and determines whether a student should be admitted to next learning programs and remediation before admittance (Brown in Huddleston and Unwin, 1997; Lockett and Sutherland in Makoni, 2000). Formative assessment is a way of motivating students to learn through providing feedback to them about their progress, helping them improve their learning through consolidation of work done and providing accounts of what has been learnt (Brown in Huddleston and Unwin,1997; Lockett and Sutherland in Makoni, 2000). According to Brown in Huddleston and Unwin (1997), summative assessment is used to judge if the aims of a course or program have been achieved for example, through the setting of a final examination. In summative assessment, in which ZJC examinations clearly fall, students’ achievements at the end of a program can be established through grading, ranking or certification to either proceed or exit from the educational system (Lockett and Sutherland in Makoni 2000). In addition, it can be used to select students for further learning or employment, predict future performance in further study or employment and to underwrite a ‘license to practice’ (Reece and Walker, 1992).

Lockett and Sutherland in Makoni (2000) further advise that it is through summative assessment that educators exert their greatest power over their students and it is vital that educators exercise this power responsibly and accountably by ensuring that assessment is both valid and reliable. Lockett and Sutherland in Makoni (2000) identify quality assurance as another role of assessment by providing judgment on an educational system in order to avail feedback to staff on the effectiveness of their teaching, assess the extent to which the learning outcomes of a program have been achieved, evaluate the effectiveness of the learning environment and monitor the quality of an educational institution over time . It cannot

be denied that ZJC examinations can also be used for quality assurance.

Luckett and Sutherland in Makoni (2000:102) further say “assessment therefore serves social as well as educational purposes, and ...different stakeholders want different things out of assessment.” More importantly, students want assessment to tell them what is expected of them, profiles of their progress and recognition of their achievements while teachers want assessment to tell them whether students are mastering concepts and skills and whether their teaching and assessment are effective and comparable with the others. Luckett and Sutherland in Makoni (2000) refer to research by Entwistle (1981) and Ramden (1992) to acknowledge the role of assessment in students’ learning and how assessment methods influence learning approaches.

A good assessment has characteristics of validity, reliability, objectivity of scoring and power of discrimination. Validity is concerned with the content, accuracy and construct appropriateness of tests. According to Standards (1985) in Gronlund (1990:150) validity “refers to the appropriateness, usefulness and meaningfulness of the inferences made from the test scores.” The reliability of assessment refers to the extent to which it consistently measures what it is supposed to measure (Reece and Walker, 2003).

Research Methodology

The study was a survey, which utilized a qualitative technique to collect data. The research involved obtaining information on lower secondary school teachers’ and pupils’ views on the educational value of ZJC examinations through interviews.

Population and sample

All Masvingo Province’s secondary school teachers and pupils constituted the population. Thirty (30) ZJC teachers and fifty (50) pupils made up the total sample.

Sampling Procedure

Using quota-sampling procedure, out of all Masvingo Province’s secondary schools, only five schools were purposively selected to

represent private mission, government, and urban and rural schools. Bailey in Cohen and Manion (1994) describes quota sampling as the non-probability equivalent of stratified sampling which attempts to obtain representatives of various elements of the total population in proportionate form. From each of the five selected schools a total of six (6) teachers were selected for interviewing, on the basis of their experience of teaching junior secondary school classes. Ten (10) pupils from each of the five schools were also selected for interviewing.

Data collection

Thirty (30) lower secondary school teachers and fifty (50) pupils were interviewed, taking advantage of the interview’s more direct approach, more open and less structured manner to obtain information. Being sought were the interviewees’ views on the educational value of ZJC examinations.

Presentation and Discussion of Results

Of the fifty pupils interviewed, forty (80%) saw the ZJC examinations as being of value and advocated for their return, while ten (20%) viewed the examinations as valueless and suggested that they remain discontinued.

Below are excerpts from the pupils’ responses:

Excerpt 1: “The ZJC examinations are very important to us as pupils because we will develop a reading habit as we prepare for them. By the time we sit for ‘O’Level examinations, we will have got a taste of what exams are like and so we will not develop exam phobia. Another point is that the best candidates are selected for ‘O’ Level and this will improve the pass rate at ‘O’ level”

Excerpt 2: “I go for ZJC exams because they will make me have a good decision on what subjects to do at ‘O’ Level.ZJC examinations will tell me whether I am good or not at Science, commercials or arts. For me to go to Form Three without knowing the subject I am good at will be disastrous.”

Excerpt 3: “I am in support of these (ZJC) exams because I don’t want to waste my parents’ money by proceeding to Form three yet I am not good at school. ZJC exams will shed

some light on whether I will really make it at 'O' Level or even 'A' Level. Moreover some of our colleagues failed the 'O' Level examinations due to fear because it was long since they last wrote the previous exam which was at the end of Grade Seven."

Excerpt 4: "I'm in favour of bringing back the ZJC exams because they encourage pupils to study in preparation for 'O' Level. They are also important for screening purposes so that those who are not capable will either repeat ZJC or drop out of school. The exams create a culture of effective study rather than relaxing for four years after their grade seven exams."

Excerpt 5: "ZJC exams are necessary for many obvious reasons. They give pupils room for perfection. Surely, spending four years without sitting for an exam of national importance will result in one rusting in the mind. Regular exams provide pupils with the right environment to practice and hence see where they are weak. I think JC exams act as a valuable springboard for initiating pupils into the 'manhood' of 'O' and 'A' Level. In addition, ZJC exams will instill discipline in Form One and Two pupils. They will not make noise as they prepare for the exams."

Excerpt 6: "I would rather agree that ZJC examinations be brought back because practice makes perfect. ZJC exams will give pupils the necessary experience to tackle 'O' Level exams. ZJC exams will also reveal a pupil's true potential because they are bound to be taken more seriously than school-based tests in which cheating is the order of the day. It would be fair if a different teacher (examiner) assesses your work, because at school some teachers have a tendency to hold grudges against their students and some teachers practice favouritism. It is also too long a period from Form One to Form Four without being nationally tested."

Excerpt 7: "I guess that's a great idea to bring back the ZJC exams because they motivate junior secondary students to read rather than relax and wait for 'O' Level exams. Some ZJC concepts will be met again at 'O' Level exams. For example, I ignored simultaneous equations at Form Two because I knew there would not be a ZJC exam, only to meet them again at 'O'

Level. If there was a ZJC exam I would have taken the equations seriously at Form Two. So my point is ZJC exams will motivate pupils to take their work seriously. Also they will gain experience in writing exams."

Excerpt 8: "Bringing back ZJC exams is not necessary. It will result in lots of school dropouts and lots of juvenile delinquency. Crime and prostitution will increase. These exams will need to be paid for yet the certificate is useless. It is never considered for employment. I support that secondary exams should start at 'O' Level."

Excerpt 9: "ZJC exams are an unnecessary distraction to learning. They are not even used for screening and channeling purposes because usually by the time they are released pupils would already be in Form Three. Even if the results were released early enough, it would be unfair to screen students on the basis of these exams because some pupils who do badly at ZJC level may do well at 'O' Level. At ZJC level pupils are too immature to appreciate the importance of exams."

Excerpt 10: "ZIMSEC is an incompetent organization which is failing to administer Grade Seven, 'O' and 'A' Level exams. Re-introducing ZJC exams would worsen the situation. Also, this is a useless certificate that cannot get you a job. So for parents and the government to waste money on such exams would be unwise. The money that would be spent on ZJC exams should be used on something else, such as books."

Teachers' Views

Of the thirty teachers who were interviewed twenty-two (73%) saw the ZJC examinations as valuable and thought they should be re-introduced, while eight (27%) thought the examinations are of little or no value and so should remain discontinued. Below are excerpts from teachers' responses.

Excerpt 1: "The importance of ZJC exams cannot be overemphasized. If professionally administered and if results are released timeously, the exams could be used for the successful implementation of the Ministry's proposed two pathway structure of education.

Apart from being an indispensable form of continuous assessment, ZJC exams are thus very important in 'streaming' pupils into subjects where they can perform well. Relying on school or cluster-based tests for streaming purposes is not prudent because pupils don't take them seriously. Besides, the current scenario whereby pupils are automatically promoted to Form Three is untenable as it results in those who are not academically gifted wasting resources on a fruitless venture."

Excerpt 2: "ZJC exams are a necessary bridge between Grade 7 and 'O' Level. Besides, before they were discontinued, I found them to be modeled along ZIMSEC 'O' Level exams. Therefore, I find them to be of value in that they would give pupils the necessary exam experience. This, I'm sure, will remarkably improve the pass rate at 'O' level. ZJC exams would also offer pupils useful guidance on what subjects to take at 'O' Level."

Excerpt 3: "ZJC exams are very necessary in light of the lack of seriousness displayed by junior secondary pupils these days. At my school at JC level, absenteeism, truancy and noise-making have become the order of the day because pupils don't see the need for hard work when they will only sit for a national exam after three or four years. I also find the exams a necessary form of formative assessment that can help diagnose individual pupils' weaknesses before they enter 'O' Level."

Excerpt 4: "ZJC exams have become unnecessary, an absolute waste of parents' hard earned cash and national resources, given that nowhere is the certificate asked for in a pupil's after-school life. The certificate is not even being used for streaming and channeling purposes because ZJC results are routinely released late. A case in point were the 1999 ZJC exams which were only marked a year later, and the results released another year later. This is ridiculous to say the least. All the human, material and monetary resources that were deployed in this worthless venture could have been used for more worthy causes."

The results show that the majority of interviewees, both pupils and teachers, feel that ZJC examinations are of value and should be re-introduced. One of the most recurring

arguments advanced by both pupils (80%) and teachers (73%) was that ZJC examinations prepare pupils for 'O' Level examinations and this should help to improve the national 'O' Level pass rate. The researchers are inclined to agree with this view, as an analysis of ZJC examinations shows that most are indeed modeled along 'O' Level lines. It could, therefore, be true to say the re-introduction of ZJC examinations might help improve the national 'O' Level pass rate. The researchers, however, feel there is need for research into whether the national 'O' Level pass rate was better before ZJC examinations were discontinued. The researchers also feel that ZJC examinations would be a good way of checking continuity in learning skills in various subjects from Form One to 'O' Level.

Another view by both pupils and teachers was that ZJC examinations would instill discipline and a sense of seriousness in lower secondary pupils as they prepare for the examinations. Again, the researchers agree with this view, since experience has shown that when pupils are preparing for an examination, especially one at national level, they tend to work harder than when there is no examination at hand or when the examination is merely school, cluster or region based. Examinations in Zimbabwe are viewed very seriously (World Bank Report, 2005). Though this may exert undue pressure and stress on the learners (World Bank Report, 2005), the examinations are an important source of motivation. A further view shared by pupils and teachers was that ZJC examinations would be an important form of continuous assessment. Indeed, it cannot be denied that ZJC examinations should serve diagnostic and formative purposes but can also be summative, and can be used for quality assurance as observed by Brown in Huddelston and Unwin (1997), Petty (1988), and Lockett and Sutherland in Makoni (2000).

The ZJC examinations proponents also agreed that ZJC examination results can be used to assist pupils to choose subjects to do at 'O' Level. This view is in line with the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture's envisioned two-pathway structure whereby pupils would be channeled into the Commercial Skills pathway and the Vocational Skills pathway (CIET, 1999;

Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture Policy Circular Number P77, 2006). A related view is that ZJC examinations can be used for streaming purposes. It is the researchers' contention that though streaming has its merits and demerits, ZJC examinations, if released early can indeed be used to stream pupils into classes of different abilities. Since the ZJC examination included practical subjects such as Agriculture, Woodwork, Fashion and Fabrics and Metalwork, it is the researcher's view that even if a pupil dropped out at ZJC level, he or she would have been examined in practical skills that would be useful in formal or informal employment.

Those pupils (20%) and teachers (27%) who were against the idea of bringing back the ZJC examinations gave two main reasons. The first view was that the examinations are useless since they cannot be used for channeling and streaming purposes because ZIMSEC is an incompetent organization which has never released the results early enough for these purposes. This view seems to be justified since experience has shown that before ZJC examinations were discontinued, the results were always released long after those who had sat for them had proceeded to Form Three. This, indeed, defeats the examinations' purported purposes of streaming and channeling pupils. However, if ZJC examinations were to be reintroduced, this time around they could be released early enough, given the marked improvement in the running and processing of examinations by ZIMSEC in recent years.

The other view shared by those who do not see the value of ZJC examinations was that the certificate is useless since it cannot be used for employment purposes, so running these examinations is an unnecessary waste of parents and national resources. While it is true that the ZJC certificate is no longer competitive on the job market, perhaps doing away with these examinations on that basis alone would not be very prudent, since the examinations also play important diagnostic, formative, and quality assurance purposes. Furthermore, the researchers feel that today, education is no longer solely for employment seeking purposes but also for employment creation using the skills learnt and examined, even at ZJC.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper has established that a greater percentage of secondary school pupils and teachers view ZJC examinations as necessary for streaming, screening and channeling purposes, and for instilling a culture of hard work in the pupils, among other important aspects. Other pupils and teachers, however, feel that ZJC examinations are useless since they have not served their purported purpose, as the results have been perpetually released late. These other pupils and teachers also feel that the ZJC certificate is worthless since it cannot be used for employment purpose. Therefore, they view the ZJC examinations as an unnecessary waste of resources.

In light of these findings, the researchers recommend that, since the majority of pupils and teachers and these researchers feel the ZJC examinations are necessary, the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture should expedite their return rather than make the policy to this effect sound mere rhetoric. Should the ZJC examinations return, however, the researchers exhort ZIMSEC to ensure that the results are timeously released so that they serve their important purpose in the Ministry's proposed two-pathway structure of education and preparing those who opt out of school with skills for life.

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