



PERCEPTIONS OF ZIMBABWE'S SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS TOWARDS NORM-REFERENCED ASSESSMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF INCLUSION

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ABSTRACT

At the end of the 'O' Level curriculum, all students sit for a common examination regardless of their different academic abilities. The examination is a norm referenced test intended for selection purposes. The education assessment system is still meritocratic. After publication of results, schools are ranked in order of performance. Schools that will have performed below expectations are requested to account. Powers that be in the education system seem not to be interested in what students can do, but how they perform in the final school leaving examinations. As a result, chances are that teaching becomes examination oriented, with teachers employing unorthodox teaching methods such as drilling to achieve good results in the final examinations. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of secondary school teachers towards the assessment system in use vis-à-vis inclusion.

Keywords: Norm referenced tests, 'O' level examinations, Student assessment, Perceptions of teachers

INTRODUCTION

This paper unfolds as follows: Firstly a brief literature review is given. This is followed by a discussion of the research methodology. After the research methodology section is the results section which is followed by the conclusions and recommendations emanating from the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section we provide a brief literature review with regard to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used in this study. In the views of Hopkins *et al.* (1990), "Norms are nothing more than information regarding the performance of a particular (reference) group to which an

examinee's score can be compared." The idea of a reference group with respect to a norm is echoed by Linn and Gronlund (1995) when they argue that "Test results can be interpreted in terms of the relative position held in some reference group (norm reference)." Furthermore, Hopkins *et al.* (1990), argue that, It is important to distinguish clearly between a norm and a standard, because these terms are frequently misused. The confusion doubtless arises in part because norms are used with standardized tests and the development of norms is part of the process of standardization. According to Hopkins *et al.* (1990), "The word standard implies a goal or objective to be reached. Thus a norm is not ordinarily a measure of what is desired or what ought to be-that is, it is not a goal, but a measure of what is (that is the status quo). These views are echoed by Linn and Gronlund (1995), when they say that "Grade norms have been widely used with standardized achievement tests, especially at the elementary school level." According to them, "Grade equivalents are based on the performance of students in the norm group in each of two or more grades." As such, norm-referenced examinations/tests tell us how an individual student compares with other students who have taken the same examinations (Hopkins *et al.*, 1990; Linn and Gronlund, 1995). This is unlike in criterion-referenced tests interpretation which permits us to describe an individual's examination/test performance without reference to the performance of others. Therefore norm-referenced examinations/ tests do not give room for individual variations in for example ability etc.

There is a view that tests serve a variety of functions (Hopkins *et al.*, 1990). Assessments in education can be for instructional, administrative, guidance and programme evaluation and research purposes (Hopkins *et al.*, 1990). It has been advanced that standardized tests are used mostly for administrative and guidance purposes such as quality control, classification and placement decisions, increasing the quality of selection decisions, accreditation or certification, programme evaluation and research, and can be useful in diagnosing an individual's special aptitudes and abilities (Hopkins *et al.*, 1990; Mapolisa and Muyengwa, 2012). In Zimbabwe, norm-referenced assessments are used for all the above and many other purposes. In the views of Linn and Gronlund (1995), "Tests results can be interpreted in terms of the types of tasks that can be performed (criterion reference). Both types of interpretation are useful. The first describes what a person can do, and the second describes how the performance compares with that of others. Standardized tests traditionally emphasized norm-referenced interpretation, but many now include both types." In this study, the researchers sought to find out the perceptions of respondents towards norm-referenced assessment used for students at the end of the first four years of secondary education in the context of inclusive education in Zimbabwe.

METHODOLOGY

As a qualitative inquiry, the overall aim of this study's design was to understand the perceptions of secondary school teachers towards norm-referenced assessment in the context of inclusion at secondary school level in Zimbabwe, in particular at the "O" level stage. This study focused its

attention on the perceptions of teachers pertaining to the system in which all students sit the same/ common examination at the end of the first four years of secondary education.

Case Study as a Strategy

The data was probed from the sites through the use of a case study strategy. This strategy was used to inquire into the situation existing in three Zimbabwean secondary schools pertaining to the perceptions of teachers with regard to the common 'O' level examinations that are taken by all students at the end of the first four years of secondary education in order to interpret the factors/ conditions in the context of inclusion. In this study, collective case-study type has been used. A collective case-study strategy is adopted in order to understand the perceptions of teachers from a number of secondary schools towards 'O' level examinations vis-à-vis inclusive education in Zimbabwe. This collective nature allows the researchers to identify similarities and differences with regard to the three different school cases. The criteria for selection of the three secondary schools as case studies are spelt out below.

Criteria for Selection of the Cases

This study draws on three institutions. The selection of the three secondary schools for this research study was based on a number of criteria. One of the factors that influenced the selection of the first two institutions was the researchers' prior involvement in the two schools as parents. In this sense there was an element of convenience (Kelly, 2006) insofar as the researchers had negotiated access informally prior to the start of the research study. In the case of the 3rd school, there was the advantage of existing networks in terms of link persons who were willing to link the researchers to individuals who were at the institution and available for the study.

The selection criteria were also based upon the similarities of the conditions existing in these schools for students. The schools selected were all public institutions; as such they have the same conditions of service. They also have similar management structures. Another similarity is that they are all sponsored from the fiscus; as such they have a general poor financial base.

The major limitation of using convenience for selecting the cases is that it is judgmental and may not necessarily include homogenous cases for a good generalization of results (Kelly, 2006). Another limitation of the selection criteria revolved around the management styles as the different Heads of Schools have different approaches to management which may have some effect on both the students and the teachers working within the institutions. The study thus compares the perceptions of secondary school teachers towards norm-referenced tests vis-à-vis inclusive education at institutions with mostly similar management structures, conditions of service and source of funding although there may be a slight effect coming from different management styles in terms of masculinist or feminist styles of management as well as from the different management personalities.

Research Techniques

The face to face interview technique was used in this study to gather primary data from the respondents. This section will address itself to issues of interview processes, question design, criteria for selection, and the actual interviews.

The Design of the Interview Questions

In this study, semi-structured interview techniques were used in the data gathering process. In order to guide the study, the questions were designed in advance. An interview schedule was prepared for use in the interviews. The interview schedule was made up of open ended items seeking for the perceptions of respondents towards norm-referenced tests in the context of inclusion in Zimbabwean secondary schools at 'O' level.

Criteria for Selecting Interviewees

As outlined earlier, the aim of this study was to understand the perceptions of 'O' level teachers towards the 'O' level examinations with regard to inclusive education in Zimbabwe. Towards this end, the three secondary schools were probed in relation to the conditions prevailing within them in terms of the provision of education in the first four years at secondary school level insofar as students write a common examination. It is acknowledged that there are many teachers within the secondary schools, however, for the purposes of this study, certain individuals were purposefully selected in order to represent teachers in the three secondary schools (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005; Kelly, 2006).

Biographical Profile of Respondents

The population of the study was made up of secondary school teachers in Zimbabwean schools. The majority of the teachers were local Zimbabweans. Their work experience ranged from 1 years to 40 years in secondary schools. The study included men and women, married and unmarried. The respondents ranged in age from 26 to 50 years. The study included both ordinary class teachers and Heads of schools. A total of 18 people were interviewed (see table 1 below).

Table-1. Distribution of Respondents by gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	5	28
Female	13	72
Total	18	100

As shown by Table 1 above, there were more female teachers interviewed than males. This can be attributed to the current scenario in Zimbabwe in which the teaching profession is attracting more female than male students. Also due to the current economic situation, more young males tend to track out of the country in search of jobs as opposed to enrolling into training colleges.

Table-2. Distribution of Respondents by Age

Age Range	Frequency	Percentage (%)
26-30	7	39
31-40	4	22
41-45	3	17
46-50	4	22
Total	18	100

According to the above Table 2, most of the teachers interviewed are in the age ranges 26-40 years while there are fewer people in the 46-50 age group.

Table-3. Distribution of Respondents by marital status

Marital status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Married	13	72
Single	4	22
Widowed	1	6
Total	18	100

Table 3, above shows that the majority of respondents are married people. This is in line with the current trend in Zimbabwe in which women migrate from rural to urban areas upon getting married to urban based husbands. As such one tends to find fewer single people teaching in town.

Table-4. Distribution of Respondents by Teaching experience

Experience (yrs)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1-10	7	39
11-20	6	33
21-30	4	22
31-40	1	6
Total	18	100

According to Table 4 above, the majority of respondents were in the experience range 11- 30 years with a few in the 31-40 years experience range. The experience range of 1-10 years had fewer people in line with the current trend in which young people are migrating to other countries in search of greener pastures/ brain drain.

Table-5. Distribution of Respondents by Position held

Position	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Head	1	6
Class Teacher	17	94
Total	18	100

As shown by Table 5 above, the majority of respondents in this study were class teachers as opposed to school heads. The idea was to gather as much data as possible from those who are involved in the teaching of students at 'O' level in order to ascertain the perceptions of schools teachers towards norm-referenced assessment at this level of learning in Zimbabwe.

Table-6. Distribution of Respondents by classes taught

Classes	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Forms 1-4	10	56
Forms 1-6	8	44
Total	18	100

According to the above table 6, the majority of respondents in this study were teaching in the first four years of secondary education while the remainder taught the full range of forms one to six at the secondary school level. This is a reflection of the composition of teachers in the schools that were sampled as these are 'A' level schools.

Sample Selection

As outlined earlier, purposive sampling was used to select the sample of respondents (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005; Kelly, 2006). Therefore, the interviewees came from the secondary school teachers that could be found at an institution during the time of the visit through prior telephone arrangement. Two categories of people were interviewed. These were ordinary class teachers and school heads. This group of respondents made a meaningful contribution to the study through their recorded voices. This group's contribution was highly sought after as people who are involved in the teaching and learning activities of the students. It was felt that their experiences as teachers and managers would be valuable for the study.

The Interview Process

The interviews were arranged once the sample composition at each school had been ascertained. Informants were contacted earlier on through e-mail and appointments were made for interviews. Where leads had been established, the interviews were then re-confirmed shortly before the visit by the researchers through phone calls. The researchers traveled from school to school. On arrival at the place of interview, the researchers introduced themselves to the interviewees and explained the reason of his visit as well as the purpose of the research in a relaxed friendly manner. The researchers also assured the respondents of the confidentiality in which the data they provided would be treated. They also explained that they should feel free to stop the interviews whenever they so wished and that their names were not going to be used or mentioned to third parties. That assured the respondents and they willingly agreed to be interviewed and recorded on a digital voice recorder as well as on paper. The interviews were carried out face-to-face and lasted one hour to one and half hours each. In this study, the researchers used a semi-structured interview technique and recorded the interviews on digital voice recorder for later transcription and coding for emerging themes. Emphasis here was placed on informants as speaking subjects as well as interviewer-interviewee relationship. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews formed the main sources of data for this study. The design relied on the respondents' own responses and narrations as well as the researchers' extensive field notes and voice recordings made during the interviews. The interviews were done across all the departments in four different institutions with a philosophy

to explore the actual and perceived experiences of school teachers with regard to the norm referenced assessment done at 'O' level vis-à-vis inclusion.

The semi- structured face-to-face interview technique to gather empirical data was used because it allowed the respondent to freely give as much information on the subject of research as possible. The face-to-face interview also helped to reinforce validity as the researchers were able to probe further if a response was not clear the first time. The researchers were also able to clarify any issues with the respondents. Furthermore, the respondents were assured of the confidentiality in which whatever they said was going to be held by the researchers. The interviews were carried out at the informants' work places in the privacy of their offices. Neutral settings preserve confidentiality and increase the subjects' confidence in the research process (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005; Kelly, 2006; Smith and Crawford, 2007).

The Interpretation and Analysis of the Data

In this study, interpretive analysis was used. There are a number of qualitative analytic traditions that come under the framework of interpretive analysis. One such tradition is thematic content analysis upon which this study's analysis is based (Blanche *et al.*, 2006). This study explores the perceptions of secondary school teachers towards norm-referenced tests vis-à-vis inclusive education. In particular, it draws on the experiences of teachers in three institutions in Zimbabwe. It is important to state that the presentation and analysis of the data is not in statistical terms but instead what we have done is to surface the ideas that have been highlighted by the teachers. We are interested in unpacking some of the meanings that arise from what it is that the teachers say about the common 'O' level examinations written by all students after four years of secondary school in Zimbabwe vis-à-vis inclusion. In that regard, as outlined earlier, we did not rely on statistical analysis but used an interpretive analytical paradigm (Geertz, 1973). In cases where we raise these, it is not to suggest statistical significance but rather to identify certain thematic areas that are significant for this study.

Results

In this section we present the results of the study. It has emerged from this study that there are a number of perceptions held by Zimbabwean Secondary school teachers towards norm-referenced assessment in the context of inclusion. These perceptions range from maintaining the status quo in which currently all 'O' level candidates write a common exam despite their varied ability levels to suggestions of moving away to a more inclusive system of examination according to variations in the timeframe towards the same 'O' level exam. Of the respondents, 67 % are of the perception that 'O' level students should write the same/ common examination while 33 % are of the perception that the examinations should be of a different nature depending on ability.

Maintaining the Status Quo: ‘O’ Levels of Different Academic Abilities Should Write the Same Examination

In the views of some of the respondents, ‘O’ level students should write the same exam. According to one of the respondents’ the reason for giving the same examination is that,

Same tests are the best thing that ever happened to education. It gives an opportunity to all students with different abilities, backgrounds and culture to be evaluated academically using the same benchmark. It keeps those who are academically challenged to try harder and not to believe in their inabilities or to be content at their level.

A number of issues arise from the above quotation on why students should be given the same examinations. The aspect of the importance of evaluating all students using the same benchmark is raised. In other words, ‘O’ level is a National Examination, hence the importance of a common benchmark for all students who achieve this level. The other issue raised is that, a common examination brings about the aspect of competition and hard work hence is developmental for the students. As such, there is an argument for the maintenance of norm-referenced assessment at ‘O’ level in order to have a common benchmark, i.e. keeping the same standard measure of success for all students nationally at this level. Furthermore, another respondent has the following to say on the same issue of norm-referenced tests at ‘O’ level,

It enables the country to have a common standard applied when selecting pupils for tertiary institutions.

As it is, the second respondent in line with many others echoes the same sentiments as expressed earlier, that there is need for a common benchmark for National examinations which are used for selecting students for higher education institutions.

Maintain the Status Quo but Vary the Timeframe for the Course Offerings and Create Voc-Tech Schools

Some of the respondents while maintaining the perception that ‘O’ level students should sit for a common examination, were of the view that there could be variations in the timeframes to achieving ‘O’ level status dependent on ability levels of students. Such views are reflected in the following quotations from respondents:

There should be common examinations; however, students can choose to write after four years or five years depending on their ability. That will make them focused. If they fail after choosing they can go for tech-voc schools which can absorb them.

The above quotation raises the already mentioned aspect of a common benchmark in addition to the aspect of varying the timeframes to the same examination but taking ability levels into consideration. Here a timeframe of five years is suggested for the less able. Moreover, the aspect of the introduction of voc-tech schools for those who cannot make it at ‘O’ level is suggested. The same sentiments of ‘O’ level as a common benchmark, are echoed by the next two respondents as indeed by more others but like the first respondent, they suggest the introduction of voc- tech schools for the less able.

There should be a standard for selection purposes; however, there should be institutions which accept different 'O' level passes for technical school and other special jobs. Different exams will make the less gifted students feel inferior. All students should write the same 'O' level exam to get basic education and then be placed in schools which cater for their different abilities.

Maintain the Status Quo for Meritorious Selection of Students into 'A' Level but Not for Vocational Training

According to some of the respondents:

'O' level results should always be considered when choosing students for 'A' level but for vocational training maybe we should consider the ability of the students other than their results.

Only those who qualify for 'A' level on the merit of their results should go for 'A' level and those with weak passes should have training for different careers.

From the above statements, respondents echo the view that norm-referenced examinations/tests at 'O' level bring about the issue of merit with regards to selection into higher level studies such as 'A' level which leads to study at university. As a result, they argue for the maintenance of a common 'O' level examination. Respondents are of the view that for other career training, weak passes at the common examinations could be considered.

No to Norm-Referenced Assessment: Discontinue the Current Examinations System

As mentioned earlier, 33% of the respondents were of the view that norm-referenced assessment at 'O' level should be done away with. The following statements show some of the views held by this group of respondents:

Same exams have created anxiety on students and parents. A child repeats several times until they get a full certificate, whereas if they were tested differently they could have passed an examination they are capable to handle. An example is in the Cambridge Exams in which a pupil either writes an extended or a core paper depending on ability. This should be done. Each child should be accorded an opportunity to write an examination they are capable of writing.

Pupils should be tested according to their academic abilities like what used to happen around 1983-1985 when there was NCE and students would take 5 years to complete 'O' level and the capable ones would take for years for the same course. Before independence there were different examinations. This should be implemented rather than putting all students in one basket.

Pupils with different abilities must be treated differently. Those who are not gifted must not be burdened. The examinations must therefore be different.

It is unfair in the sense that some are slow in grasping concepts hence it becomes an advantage to only those who are academically strong.

The above statements surface a number of factors in favour of criterion-referenced assessment at 'O' level. The aspect of different ability student groups is brought up. So is the aspect of slow learners as well as the aspect of parental expectation. Indeed some parents get their hopes raised only for the child to perform dismally at 'O' level. The argument being raised is that we should consider giving different examinations to different ability groups of students at the end of four years of secondary education. In other words, our examinations should begin to move away from the current norm-referenced based system, to a student centred approach. This group of respondents also recommend the re-introduction of an intermediate examination in the form of the National Certificate of Education (NCE), which used to be written by the Former Group A schools before independence and written nationally soon after independence as a way of rationalizing the secondary school sector. This was written after three years of secondary education at which time some of these students went on to train in the Polytechnics in trades such as hairdressing, motor mechanics etc, while others proceeded to do 'O' level in five years instead of four. Furthermore, the aspect of extended and core papers for different ability groups is brought up. Finally, it has also emerged from the study that due to pressure to get good 'O' level passes, teachers resort to the use of both good and unorthodox means of getting students to pass. The following are some of the ways teachers employ: Extra lessons during the holidays and or afternoons, these ranges from free to those paid for by the student. If paid for, the fees are exorbitant. Additionally, private tutoring for special attention is used. Other methods include, spotting and drilling for exams, completion of the syllabus, past paper revisions, compulsory supervised study, class tests and exercises, interventions by school head, remedial work and elaborate note giving, effective marking and E-learning/ teaching.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study has surfaced a number of aspects with regard to the current 'O' level examination system as applied in the Zimbabwean secondary school system. First and foremost, a majority of respondents are of the view that we should maintain the current examination system as it is. They argue for the maintenance of a common benchmark for all students at this level nationally. In their view, this brings about meritocracy with respect to 'A' level selection. They also argue for the creation of voc-tech schools for the less able students as well as the introduction of different timeframes to 'O' levels based on student ability. As discussed earlier, about one third of the respondents, were of the view that the current examination system at 'O' level should be discontinued in favour of a more student centred approach. This group recommends for the reintroduction of an intermediate examination, NCE previously written after three years of high school education. Like the majority of respondents, they also argue for the introduction of a differential timeframe to the 'O' level examination. In order to cater for different student abilities and other orientations as well as improve the quality of teaching so that teachers do not resort to unorthodox ways of teaching the following recommendations are made.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the results of this study, the following recommendations are advanced:

1. Firstly, while maintaining the current 'O' level examination system as it is for the more able students, it is important to take into consideration some of the views raised by respondents such as differential timeframes towards the 'O' level examination based on individual student ability. As such, there is need to introduce a system of grading students according to ability streams and the less able streams write their examinations say in five years as recommended by respondents. An alternative recommendation coming out of this study, is to reintroduce an intermediate examination after three years of secondary school for the less able candidates, after which some of them proceed to Polytechnics for training in the trades, while those less able who may want to proceed to 'O' and eventually to 'A' may proceed to 'O' in five years of secondary school. That way the less able and the slow learners or the slow to mature students will be catered for. This may also help to reduce the school drop out rates and keep children away from the streets and crime while they grow a little more while in school.
2. Secondly, the issue of the creation of voc-tech schools was raised by respondents. Such schools, it is recommended could be created to cater for those students who are not interested in proceeding to 'O' level and any interested student to train in subjects or trades of their choice. These schools could be similar to former F2 schools but based on a different philosophy such as to help interested students to try something different, perhaps something they can do. Parents and students may choose to go or not to go to such schools. They should not necessarily be labeled slow learner schools but schools where those interested in voc-tech education may enroll.
3. Thirdly, the 'O' level examination system could be revised to cater for both criterion referenced and norm-referenced assessment of students. This would give room for the less able students to sit for examinations they can manage and proceed to do something else in life other than academic oriented training.

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Authors Bio-data

Biography of Moffat Chitapa Tarusikirwa (Ph.D.)

Dr. Moffat Chitapa Tarusikirwa was born in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe in 1957. He attended both Primary and Secondary School in colonial Zimbabwe. Dr. Tarusikirwa later studied for a Certificate in Education (University of Bristol UK), Bachelor of Education (University of Zimbabwe) (UZ), Diploma in Business Studies (UZ), Higher National Diploma in Marketing Management (Harare Polytechnic), Master of Education (UZ), Master of Science in Marketing (NUST), and a Ph.D. (University of the Western Cape) RSA. Dr. Tarusikirwa has held several positions as Mathematics and Science Teacher, Deputy Head/ Head at Secondary School level in Zimbabwe. He has also served as National Chief Examiner (Additional Mathematics) for the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC) and External Examiner (UZ Department of Teacher Education). Furthermore, Dr. Tarusikirwa has served as Lecturer and Regional Programmes Coordinator for the UZ and later The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) in the Department of Education Studies for over 10 years. Dr. Tarusikirwa has published and presented widely at local, regional and international conferences over the years. Dr. Tarusikirwa is currently a Senior Lecturer and Chairperson of Department at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU).

Biography of Dr. Onias Mafa

Dr. Onias Mafa is a senior lecturer and Regional Programme Coordinator in ZOU's Bulawayo Region, in charge of PGDE and MEd (Educational Management) in the Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). He is also in the panel of Supervisors for the Higher Research Degrees at ZOU. Apart from research supervision, he takes part in the critiquing and evaluation of MPhil and DPhil proposals. He has published one novel, four poems (Mambo Press, Gweru) and co-authored four ZOU's BEd Management programme modules. A manuscript, in which he was the research coordinator in CODESREA's Comparative Research Network programme, has been accepted for publication in CODESRIA's book series. He has presented several papers at international conferences