

## An assessment of students' performance in national examinations in relation to schools' assessment policies: An inquiry of secondary schools in Trans-Nzoia County, Kenya

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### Abstract

The study explored the correlation between students' performance in national examinations in secondary schools and schools' assessment policies in Trans-Nzoia County. The study involved 143 students, 39 teachers and 13 Directors of Studies in the selected secondary schools. The study used qualitative descriptive survey research design to collect and analyze the data. Data was collected through questionnaires, interview schedule guide and focused group discussion guides. The information from the questionnaires was presented in figures and percentages in tables while the information obtained from interviews and focused group discussions was analyzed using qualitative techniques. The findings of the study found a positive relationship between school assessment policies and students' performance in national examinations. It was, therefore concluded that school assessment policies positively contribute to the academic performance of students in national examinations. The study thus recommended that regulations and policies should be put in place so that all schools can benefit from the practice and a uniform policy should be emphasized.

**Keywords:** school assessment policies, students' academic performance, national examinations, Trans-Nzoia County

### 1. Introduction

Webb and Briars (2010) <sup>[1]</sup> argue that assessment must be an interaction between the teacher and students, with the teacher continually seeking to understand, what a student can do and how a student is able to do it. Yoloye (2013) <sup>[2]</sup> also points out that school assessment policies are only a part of the field of educational evaluation. The author further argues that assessment policies are "a method of evaluating the progress and achievement of students in educational institutions".

This means that school assessment policies could be used to predict future students' performance in the final examinations and the possible success at the work place or on a particular job. Indeed, in secondary schools, assessment of students' learning in the classroom has been an integral component of the teaching-learning process, especially at national level examinations because there is much effort by the teacher to teach a lot of content to students. However, to Kellaghan and Greany (2013) <sup>[3]</sup>, that kind of assessment is subjective, informal, immediate, on-going, and intuitive as it interacts with learning as it occurs. Although the main argument behind the adoption of particular assessment policies is to avoid focusing all efforts, time and energy on just one exam, this is not true in most secondary schools in Kenya. Teachers and students put their focus on final examinations called Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education Examinations (KCSE). This is because KCSE results are an important determinant of future opportunities for higher education and other life chances. Since teachers' assessment of students' learning in the classroom plays a central role in the learning process of all students, it merits our serious attention.

According to Obanya (2015) <sup>[5]</sup>, assessment involves the systematic collection of data on all aspects of an educational endeavor. This means that the data collected about students' academic achievement is used on a continuous basis in a

systematic way, to take meaningful decisions on what should happen. Graume and Naidoo (2014) have also indicated that, "in a global economy, assessment of students' achievement is changing mainly because in an ever-changing knowledge based society, students would not only be required to learn and understand the basics but also to think critically, to analyze, and to make inference for making decisions." It is therefore critical that school assessments utilize strategies that are able to measure the changing students' abilities and attitudes.

### School Assessment Policies and Students' Performance

According to Omoifo (2016), what is termed "assessment in many schools today is summative, final, administrative, rigorous and content-driven rather than formative, diagnostic, private, suggestive and goal oriented, as such can be regarded as grading." Summative assessment entails the focus on final examinations by teachers, parents and students. Surprisingly, formative assessment is geared towards the consolidation of students' performance in the final examinations rather than inculcating students with problem solving, critical thinking, and life skills.

American Association for the Advancement of Science (2012) has categorized the purpose of assessment into internal and external purposes. The internal purposes for assessment include conveying to students' expectations about what is important to learn, providing information to students and parents about students' progress, helping students to judge their own learning, guiding and improving instruction, classifying and selecting students. The external purpose was to inform the education donors including parents, education departments and ministry about what happened in schools.

Performance is defined in terms of results (Madaus 2014). In addition, Kellaghan and Greany (2013) <sup>[3]</sup> note that, "when assessment has important consequences attached to

performance, it is likely to impact directly on teaching and learning and so merit consideration as a mechanism for improving student achievements” (p. 16). Onuka (2016) <sup>[7]</sup> has also found out that in Nigeria there was a comprehensive implementation of continuous assessment and feedback for the improvement of the education system for the accomplishment of learning objectives effectively according to students. This concurs with the finding of Onuka and Oludipe (2015) <sup>[9]</sup> that there was a significant remediation for poor performance as a result of the application of the feedback mechanism resulting from formative evaluation of learners.

Furthermore, Etienne (2011) <sup>[2]</sup> contends that the protest against final examinations by students in France in May 1968 was the perfect opportunity for students to point at the unfair and risky final assessment in their schools. They made it clear that such examinations merely represented the performance of the moment and not the efforts made throughout the year. Students insisted on the risk that even the best-prepared student could have a problem on the day of the examination and came out in favor of continuous school assessment policies in order to reduce the risks though some difficulties are likely to occur during implementation of the recap exercises as well.

Graume and Naidoo (2014) also note that up to high school level, the assessment of students is done through terminal, half yearly and annual examinations at the schools. Carnoy (2012) contends that, when continuous school assessment tools are applied over a period of time, they give an indication whether improvement is taking place or not. Furthermore, Ogunnyi (2014) note that continuous school assessment policies are cumulative in that any decision made at any time about any student takes cognizance of the previous decision made about him/her. Continuous school assessment policies also provide the students with maximum opportunities to learn and to demonstrate from time to time the knowledge, the skills and the attitudes that they have during the teaching-learning process.

However, in secondary schools in Trans-Nzoi County, it cannot be over-emphasized that the measurement of these domains, using continuous school assessment policies, makes it a good tool for improving learning objectives and outcomes. This is so because, in their research, Kalleghan and Greany (2013) <sup>[3]</sup> note a deficiency in the practice of continuous school assessment policies in Africa where Kenya is part. This, therefore, may account for the variance in performance among schools and students in particular in KCSE examinations in the County. Since there is a need to improve students’ performance in our education system as a whole, it is important to establish what school assessment policies are being used by teachers in secondary schools. There is also a need to investigate whether there is any relationship between school assessment policies being used in secondary schools and students’ performance in the final examinations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The increasing realization of the need to promote learning and

improve performance in secondary schools in Trans-Nzoi County resulted into a range of related but different developments in school assessment policies at classroom levels. The resultant feature has been inconsistent performance of students’ in national examinations and performance still varies from school to school. This undermines the future of many students that are in schools that persistently perform poorly. What, therefore, remains disturbing is whether or not school assessment policies adopted by teachers in secondary schools of in the County did indeed influence students’ performance in final examinations.

### **2. Materials and Methods**

The study used a descriptive survey research design, utilizing both qualitative research methods and quantitative approaches. The study targeted Form 4 classroom teachers and students in secondary schools in the County. Teachers were selected because they taught and executed testing and examination of students. Students were also selected because they were the beneficiaries of school assessment policies being used by the teachers in their schools and it was also the students that sat for the final examinations.

Fifteen secondary schools were randomly selected to take part in the study. Among these schools, nine were privately owned and six were public. In each of the participating schools, 3 teachers were randomly selected to participate in the study and 10 and one Director of Studies (DOS) were also randomly selected from each school that participated in the study. Therefore, a total population of 45 teachers, 145 students and 15 DOSs were selected to participate in the study. The reason for this small sample was due to the limited resources and time constraints that the researcher experienced. A smaller manageable sample offered the researcher the ideal information needed and at the same time enabled him to complete this research project in a timely manner.

Three instruments were used in the study, namely questionnaires, structured interviews, and Focused Group Discussion (FGD). All data from the questionnaires were entered into Microsoft Excel spread sheets. The Microsoft Excel program was used to generate descriptive statistics, graphics, tables and charts. The interpretation of the descriptive statistics made it possible to make appropriate inferences in terms of determining the influence of school assessment policies on students’ performance. The qualitative data was analyzed into themes and concepts. Based on the Grounded Theory by Straus & Carbin (1998), plausible relationships among themes and concepts were identified. The Grounded Theory was ideal since the study employed inductive data analysis.

### **3. Results**

#### **Influence of School Assessment Policies on Students’ Academic Performance**

The findings of the teachers and students’ responses about this question are presented in Table 1 and 2, respectively.

**Table 1:** Teachers’ Responses on the Relation of School Assessment Policies (SAP) to Students’ Performance

Contributions	SA	A	D	SD	Total response	Total Sample
Builds the whole mind of the student	18	21	0	0	39	39
Improves teaching-learning process	26	13	0	0	39	39
Helps identify weak students	24	13	0	0	37	39
Students develop a revising habit	18	19	0	0	37	39
Helps students master the contents	23	16	0	0	39	39
Students perform better in final examination	18	17	2	0	37	39
Arouses students’ desire for attention in class	14	19	6	0	39	39
The more the assessments, the more confident and ready students become for final exams	20	19	0	0	39	39
Closes the gap between the students and teachers	24	9	6	0	39	39

Zero (0) means no response.

From the results in Table 1, out of 39 teachers who participated in the study, 26 strongly agreed that SAP improved the teaching-learning processes, 24 teachers strongly agreed that SAP helped to identify weak students and that students easily

mastered the subject content. A large number of teachers also strongly agreed that, the more the SAP used and exposed to students, the more confident and ready the students became for the final exam.

**Table 2:** Students’ Responses on the Influence of SAP on their Performance

Contributions	SA	A	D	SA	Total Response	Total Sample
Help me to revise	18	21	0	0	39	39
I become more confident and ready for final exams	26	13	0	0	39	39
Teacher gives me quick feedback	24	13	0	0	37	39
Improves my understanding	18	19	0	0	37	39
I learn answering techniques and question approach	23	16	0	0	39	39
Helps to master the notes	18	17	2	0	37	39
Arouses my desire to attention and concentrate in class	14	19	6	0	39	39
Helps me to interact with the teacher.	20	19	0	0	39	39

Zero (0) means no response.

From the findings presented in Table 2 above, it was clearly observed that majority of the students felt that SAPs contributed to their good performance. SAPs helped them to revise more effectively and to also gain confidence and become ready for the final examinations. Many students also indicated that when their teachers gave them quick feedback, they felt better placed to identify their weaknesses and therefore they made efforts to improve. It also emerged that SAP aroused students’ desire to pay attention and concentrate because they were expecting to be assessed most of the time. A further analysis of the relationship between school continuous assessment policies (take-home assignments, recap exercises, written tests and projects) and students’ academic performance was conducted and results discussed in the preceding section.

used to questions and examinations. Moreover, according to the teachers, take-home assignments assisted students to develop good revision habits. They also aided in building students’ retention and memory. Therefore, SAPs had a positive influence on students’ performance.

**Take-Home Assignments**

Teachers were asked to indicate the contributions of take-home assignments to students’ academic performance in KCSE. The responses were as summarized in Figure 1 below.

**Table 3:** Teachers’ Response on the Impact of Take-home Assignments on Students’ Performance

Impact of Take-home Assignments	Percentage
Ensure retention and memory of concepts	19
Get used to questions & exams	35
Students research for knowledge	19
Helps master content studied	10
Learn to revise from time to time	24

As shown in Table 3 above, teachers noted that take-home assignments were the best strategy for helping students to get

**Recap Exercises**

The research findings on the role of recap exercises on students’ academic indicate that the largest number of teachers responded that students learnt question approach through recap assignments. Majority of students felt that the recap exercises were useful in increasing their concentration and attention in class as well as building their confidence.

**Written Tests**

The study also sought to establish the influence of written tests on the academic performance of students. Written tests helped students to identify their main weak areas, which helped them to devise ways of improving on their performance. Written tests contained questions selected from various topics already learnt after a given period of time. Therefore, when students failed the questions, they could easily be forced to revise more. Other contributions that came true of the written tests were the increase in concentration, improvement in writing speed and handwriting, and reduction in examination fear. Written tests are neither shown to be reducing the fear of students for final examinations nor reinforcing students to read more. Students’ responses concurred with those of their teachers that SAPs equipped them with the skill and knowledge of question approach and answer techniques. Students also reported that the practice of SAPs made them concentrate on their studies.

This was because they were expectant of a test, an assignment or a recap exercise. Students, therefore, devoted most of their time on revising their books. Students also agreed that SAPs reduced the examination fears and increased their interaction with the teachers. The data analyzed in this chapter finally revealed that there were different SAPs strategies being used in schools that included; written tests, recap exercises, take-home assignments, presentations, observations, and checklists. Teachers and their students all agreed that SAPs strategies contributed to students' performance.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of the study revealed a lot of important insights on the role of SAPs on the academic performance of students. Teachers strongly agreed that SAPs improved the teaching and the learning processes. The argument was that through frequent use of SAPs teachers realized the best ways of delivering their subject content so that students could easily learn and understand it. Teachers also argued that SAP helped them to assess their own performance and effectiveness of their teaching. This is supported by the findings of Onuka (2015) <sup>[7]</sup> who says that if consistently applied in the schools system, it would result into an enhanced performance of students and of course of the teachers, as both of these groups would strive to perform better. This is because the teacher would discover his own areas of weakness and strive to ameliorate them. This is in line with what Black *et al.* (2010) note that all collection of formative evidence must be guided by a strategy for ensuring action.

The distinctive features of SAPs in secondary schools in the study area were that the information was used to modify learning program in order to make it more effective. Most of the teachers indicated that SAPs strongly helped them to identify weak students. Teachers contended that written tests were the best strategy in revealing the students' weakest points. According to Yoloye (2013) <sup>[12]</sup>, scores from SAPs help the teacher to identify the students' difficulties and help them thereby to master those things they are yet to master. When interviewed, one of the Director of Studies argued that, through the frequent use of SAPs like continuous assessments, teachers were informed of how students were progressing and the teachers would give more time to the weaker students to assist them improve.

Similar findings have been found by other studies. For instance, the National Assessment of Progress in Education (2013) in Uganda found out that monthly testing had the greatest positive effect on pupils' achievement. This NAPE study also revealed that perhaps it allows time to plan, test, mark and use feedback to redirect teaching and also for pupils to internalize what they have learnt have found that in Africa homework provides the opportunities for teachers to assess students' proficiency as well as to provide feedback on problems students may exhibit. Greany (2013) <sup>[3]</sup> note that its role is to determine students' current level of knowledge, skills or understanding, to diagnose problems they may be encountering and to make decisions about the next instruction steps to take.

According to this study, the findings implied that SAPs provided a framework in which classroom objectives were set and students' progress chartered and expressed. It yielded a basis for planning the next topic or sub-topic in response to student needs. When questions were asked, whether take-home

assignments, recap exercises, and written tests facilitated development of high order thinking, the research found out that 81.8 percent of students agreed that they learnt answering techniques and question approaches through continuous SAPs. Students explained that when words like explain, identify, describe, state, compare and contrast, to what extent, were used in continuous assessment strategies, they got familiar with their interpretation. They argued that they learnt how to approach a question with such terms, how to organize their answers which helped them to perform better when they sat for an exam.

The DOS observed that these school continuous assessments encouraged teachers to always use terms that were also commonly used by the examiners in the final examinations. To them, this gave enough practice to students as they got exposed to such questions that enabled them to give a good presentation during the final exam. When interviewed, the DOS revealed that oral presentation and group work helped students to develop communication and interpersonal skills and they allowed in achieving course expectation. According to one DOS, "Because the students are afraid of being looked at (observed) and graded as weak students by the teachers and fellow students, students will make an equal and worthwhile contribution in the planning, researching and presenting of the subject."

This statement shows that students involved themselves in self-work, personal research and innovation so that they could meet the required standards in the class. This improved their retention capacity and ability making continuous assessment to have an impact on their performance. While commenting about observation, Cavendish *et al.* (2014) note that some teachers found it surprisingly useful if they suspended their active teaching interventional for a time making clear to a class what they were doing and why to concentrate only on looking and listening. In the study, however, the research found out through a focused discussion with students that some teachers behave differently towards boys and girls and towards students from the different social classes. In each of these cases, students complained that some teachers would rate a particular piece of work more highly if it came from one type of student rather than the other. The research suggests the need to use checklists whenever observations are done. Checklists can be used to record the presence or absence of knowledge, particular skills, learning process, or attitudes. They may be used to record such information in relation to written assignments, presentations, classroom performances, and test-taking behaviours.

#### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

A good application of school continuous assessments is instrumental in accomplishing the learning objectives and restoring greater confidence among students and school systems. Enhanced performance of students would culminate in the reduction of the incidences of examination malpractices as students would have been well prepared for the final examinations. However, the contribution should not only be looked at as improving student performance but also as determining students' current level of knowledge, skills or understanding of content. It is recommended that higher institutions of learning should train teachers on how to use school assessment policies such as continuous assessments for their implementation in secondary schools. It was found out through the interviews and focused group discussions that

teachers complained of the many problems they found as they attempted to implement continuous assessments. Therefore, the training should focus on how teachers can carry out continuous assessment in the different teaching and learning stations with ease.

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