

Towards a Theory: The Constraining Hold of High-Stakes External Assessment on Curriculum Implementation

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Abstract

Teachers are expected to implement curriculum, by using the specified guidelines and resources, to ensure fidelity and thus effectiveness. Evidence, however, points at high-stakes external assessment as driving this process, and also becoming a major barrier to the curriculum and its implementation. The purpose of the study was to develop an understanding of why teachers are reluctant in using these guidelines and resources, and instead allow their classroom practices to be driven by high-stakes external assessments. Utilising the experiences of some Senior High School Social Studies teachers in Ghana, this paper employed a grounded theory analytic framework to build a theoretical model, which explains the constraining hold of high-stakes external assessment on teachers' classroom practices. It also emerged from the study that the effective implementation of any novel and transformative curriculum depends on a corresponding change in the external assessment regime, to ensure congruity/balance among the components of curriculum implementation.

Keywords

Curriculum Implementation Theory, Assessment Theory, External Assessment, High-Stakes Assessment, Teachers' Classroom Practices

1. Introduction

For an innovative or updated curriculum to make a desired impact on students' learning outcomes, and also remain relevant and effective, as a tool for social transformation, it must first be implemented with fidelity. This view is supported by Wiles and Bondi (2014), when they argued that the changes that come

along with updated or innovative curricula require teachers with the skills and knowledge to implement the curricula with fidelity. Innovative or updated curriculum is often viewed as something new in curriculum that deviates from the standard practice, and where the innovations are created to reflect changes in the society (Button, 2021). Fullan (1989) is of the opinion that such positive changes or improvements in the curriculum involve changes in various aspects of the educational system, including structural changes; new curriculum materials; change in some aspects of teaching practices (activities, skills, behavior); and change in beliefs or understanding, in relation to curriculum and learning. It can therefore be argued that for a curriculum to be deemed as innovative, it must include some new things that make it different from what commonly exists and must require teachers to change their instructional activities, skills, beliefs and behaviours to deliver it effectively.

Lochner, Conrad, and Graham (2015), cited by Nevenglosky, Cale and Aguilar (2019), further argue that teachers are central to whether a curriculum is delivered consistently, effectively, and with efficacy to enable the support of student progress and growth. This is because curriculum implementation is all about how teachers deliver instruction and assessment through the use of specified resources provided in a curriculum (Nevenglosky, Cale, & Aguilar, 2019). A critical survey of the literature, however, indicates the identification of many barriers to curriculum implementation that affects teachers' ability to deliver the curriculum, to learners, with fidelity. High-stakes assessments, in the form of examinations, have been identified as one such barrier, which has a tremendous effect on curriculum implementation (see Makuvire & Khosa, 2021; Okoth, 2016; Bekoe, 2006).

Assessment of learning outcomes, in theory, is an integral part of the curriculum and instructional process and is supposed to lead to improvements in instruction and students learning (see Gordon, 2008; Crooks, 2001; Black & William, 1998). However, the reality on the field runs contrary to this theoretical model, as many teachers see assessment as an additional task that comes at the end of classroom instructional activities. External/High-Stakes assessment, particularly, is seen as a tool for accountability to hold schools and teachers accountable for the performance of pupils/students (Gray & Wilcox, 1995). Mina-rechova (2012) for instance cites West (2010) as indicating that results of high-stakes testing in England provide the means by which schools are responsible for the education they provide as a measure of accountability. This has resulted in teachers teaching to the test, because of the influence it has on teachers' instructional practices (Harlen, 2005; Grant, 2000).

Furthermore, in the case where the coverage of external assessment is narrow in focus the impact it has on teachers' instructional practices, and curriculum implementation as a whole, is seen as negative, as it compels teachers to also narrow the focus of the instruction to meet the demands of the test. Phelps (2015) in this regard argues that high-stakes testing has resulted in a rigid, unbalanced and narrowed curriculum. Walker (2014) also states that "Over the

past decade, high-stakes testing regime has squeezed out much of the curriculum that can make schools an engaging and enriching experience for students, and teachers have been forced to dilute their creativity to teach to the test” (p. 2).

It is important to note that the impact of external assessment on the instructional practices of teachers, and thus the curriculum, is deemed as negative even in traditional disciplines, which focus mainly on cognitive outcomes. Thus a worse kind of impact is expected in the case of innovative curricula like the Social Studies curriculum, where the outcomes of emphasis have been broadened to include affective and skills outcomes (CRDD, 2010; Caribbean Examinations Council, 2010; Alberta Education, 2005/2007).

Whereas some authors had held the view that the effect of external assessment on curriculum content or implementation, through teachers’ classroom practices, is inconclusive (Mehrens, 1998), high-stakes/external testing “has become the subject of investigation among many researchers (West, 2010; Reddell, 2010; Amrein & Berliner, 2002), who focus on the consequences of high-stakes testing in terms of accountability, teaching and learning” (Minarechova, 2012: p. 87). Minarechova (2012) again, in reference to Reddell (2010) and Blazer (2011) suggests that many studies on the impact of high-stakes testing on students have rather focused on psychological and physical effects like stress, anxiety, tension and exhaustion among others. Despite these debates in the literature, not many studies have specifically examined the systemic effects/impact of external/high-stakes assessment on curriculum implementation, through teachers’ classroom practices (teaching and assessment of learning outcomes) and learners’ curriculum attainment. More specifically, we do not fully understand the theoretical relationship among external assessment, curriculum intents/objectives, curriculum implementation and learners’ curriculum attainment. This thus served as the justification for the study, which resulted in this paper, in addition to the potential contribution it brings to the debate.

High-stakes/external assessment and curriculum implementation

Satterly (1989) defines assessment in education as,

an omnibus term which includes all the processes and products which describe the nature and extent of children’s learning, its degree of correspondence with the aims and objectives of teaching and its relationship with the environments which are designed to facilitate learning (p. 3).

The argument therefore is that since classroom learning, during the implementation of the curriculum, runs the gamut of various kinds and levels of learning or outcomes (Phye, 1997a), so also should the assessment of learners’ attainments cover the gamut of these outcomes. In the same vein, since each of the kinds and levels of learning in the classroom demands different kinds of instructional and learning approaches and strategies so also should the mode of assessment be varied to ensure that the most appropriate assessment tool is selected and use for each of the kinds and levels of learning (Chapman & King, 2011; Cizek, 1997). The above argument is supported by the call to ensure the

collection of a more comprehensive and complete data on students' learning (McMillan, 2002), which is to be ensured by linking assessment directly to curriculum intents (Mager, 1997) and also by covering all outcomes to the appropriate level of demand of the curriculum objective (SQA, 2001).

Unfortunately this seems not to be the case, as external assessment, particularly, is said to emphasise the base/elemental of classroom learning (Bennett, Jenkins, Persky, & Weiss, 2003), concentrating only on knowledge to the neglect of higher educational attainments (Torrance, 1995). To add to the foregoing is the kind of impact external assessment has been reported to have on teachers' classroom practices (Harlen, 2005; Havnes, 2004; Grant, 2000). It is for instance reported, and confirmed in a study by Bekoe (2006), that external assessment has the tendency to define what relevant knowledge is for teachers and learners (Havnes, 2004) and thus making them concentrate only on the aspects of the curriculum covered by the assessment. Polesel, Rice and Dulfer (2014) for instance argued that high-stakes testing regime is leading to a reduction in time spent on other curriculum areas and adjustment of pedagogical practice and curriculum content to mirror the tests.

Although others argued that the evidence of the influence of external assessment on either the curriculum content or instructional process is not clear (Mehrens, 1998), common logic indicates the fact that as external assessment is narrow in terms of its curriculum coverage, so will it eventually lead to a corresponding narrowing of the curriculum by teachers (Grant, 2000). Makuvire and Khosa (2021), in relation to this fact stated, "Due to the great value placed on examinations in most countries, teachers may tend to concentrate their implementation on the aspects usually tested in the terminal examinations" (p. 46). Therefore, as teachers teach-to-the-test, the curriculum, as being implemented in the classroom, will become constricted to only those objectives and content covered by the external assessment (Broadfoot, 1995), and thus affect the broad goals of the curriculum (Fullan, 2007).

This issue becomes even more pertinent when considered within the context of an innovative curriculum, with relatively new and broadened learning outcomes as its major objectives for learners to attain. Such curricula usually depart from the traditional disciplines, whose core emphasis is cognitive learning, and introduce outcomes such as critical thinking, problem-solving, value clarification, disposition to action based on positive attitudes among others. This is seen as a movement from functional literacy to critical literacy (Calfee & Masuda, 1997). Nickell (1993) therefore argues that "if we really expect students to be able to do these things, then assessment instruments must be designed to provide evidence that such is the case" (p. 2). Thus educators must assess in authentic ways outcomes that are considered to be most important in terms of knowledge, skills attitudes and values.

Both the literature and findings of studies conducted by Bekoe (2006, 2007) indicate that agencies responsible for external assessment hardly utilise alternative forms of assessment and also produce items that do not adequately cover the

content and objectives of the curriculum. This therefore gives an indication of the kind of impact such a traditional mode of assessment will have on an innovative curriculum. As noted above, while Mehrens (1998) and others argue that there is no proven cause and effect relationship between assessment and the curriculum content or instructional strategy (and thus implementation), the high stakes nature of external assessment is universally found to compel teachers to focus on the content of the test in their teaching and also adopting the transmission style of teaching (Harlen, 2005). This has led to the loss of creativity in the curriculum and among teachers, narrowing of the curriculum and teachers facing high pressure that is effecting the learning environment negatively (Ritt, 2016), and also devaluing the sense of professional worth of the teacher (Stecher, 2002). It thus becomes clear that there is the need to broaden the coverage of the external assessment in order for teachers also to broaden the objectives of focus in their instructions to ensure students' attainment of broader educational goals and objectives.

It is for this reason that Phye (1997b) argued that it will be improper to develop an assessment system and leave it unchanged in the context where curriculum imperatives, instructional techniques and strategies and knowledge about how students learn are in states of constant change. This position is supported by Cizek (1997) who states, "As the universe of valuable educational outcomes expands, so too must the array of instruments necessary to assess those outcomes" (p. 13). In the event where the system of assessment is left unchanged and thus becomes incongruent with the goals and objectives of an innovative curriculum, Kliebard (1988) postulates that such a curriculum is certainly doomed to a short life. He argues, "As long as criteria of success that are incompatible with the survival of the reform remain in place, the new programme's place in the school curriculum is bound to be short-lived" (Kliebard, 1988: p. 22).

This study therefore attempts to verify Kliebard's (1988) postulation with new data and to utilise issues emerging from the analysis to theorise about the relationships among external/high-stakes assessments, curriculum implementation, by teachers and learners' attainment of curriculum goals and objectives. It is also to fill the vacuum, relating to the inconclusiveness of the impact of high-stakes external assessment, as reported by Mehrens (1998) and Grant (2000).

The context of the study: Assessment of Social Studies learning outcomes in Ghana

Social Studies, as a school subject, in Ghana underwent a radical change in 1998, during its introduction at the Senior High School (SHS) level of the educational system. Not only did this change affect the scope and contents of the curriculum, but also the outcomes or objectives of emphasis in the curriculum (Bekoe, 2006). Hitherto the subject, in the Junior High School (JSS) level and the Colleges of Education had been an amalgam (Kissock, 1981; Barnes, 1982) of discrete topics from the traditional social science disciplines with the goal of changing pupils' attitudes and values. The curriculum then, resembled the General Science curriculum in Ghana and many other countries, where attempts to

integrate science knowledge for instruction at the pre-tertiary level of education, rather amounted to the amalgamation of existing topics from Chemistry, Physics and Biology (Bekoe, 2006).

However with the change in the curriculum, the goals and objectives of the subject were broadened and emphasis placed on learners' acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will enable them solve both their personal and societal problems (CRDD, 2010; CRDD, 1998). Thus many of the important curriculum goals and objectives of Social Studies are now in the skills and affective domains of learning. The content of the curriculum is now multi/trans-disciplinary and based on themes derived from societal needs and challenges (see Farris, 2015; Noddings, 2000; Alleman & Brophy, 1999). It is also problem solving in nature, where students are to acquire the relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes to deal with controversial issues and the contemporary problems of Ghana (CRDD, 2010).

Unfortunately, the organisational arrangements for the implementation of this new curriculum were never modified, to the extent that the external assessment of learning outcomes in the subject is solely based on cognitive outcomes to the neglect of the affective and skills outcomes (Bekoe, 2007). Directly related to the foregoing is the inability or reluctance of SHS Social Studies teachers in Ghana to shrug off the impact and thus the constraints placed on them and their classroom practices, by the demands of the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). This thus makes it imperative to examine the kind of effects this assessment regime is having on teachers' classroom practices and establish whether any relationship exists between the external assessment and the attainment of the curriculum goals and objectives of the subject. Thus the overarching research objective, which was employed to guide the study was to examine the context of external assessment of Social Studies and teachers' classroom practices to establish whether any relationship exist among external assessment, curriculum implementation and learners' curriculum attainment.

2. Methodology

Design

This study was located within the constructionism (Henwood, 1996) paradigm and supported by the ontological assumption that reality is constructed by the individuals in the research situation (Creswell, 2013). Another perspective that contributed to the choice of the research design was the critical theory perspective which states that the end goal of a scientific enquiry might be social theorising, which can be attained through the utilisation of a variety of research strategy (Creswell, 2013). A mixed case study and grounded theory design was therefore adopted to utilise the classroom practices and perspectives of SHS Social Studies teachers in Ghana, about the impact of the WASSCE on their classroom practices, to theorise about curriculum implementation and attainment, within the context of high-stakes external assessment.

Participants

Twenty-five Senior High School Social Studies teachers, who have had not less than three years of teaching experience, were purposefully and/or conveniently selected from schools across five of the administrative regions of Ghana as respondents/participants in the study. Each of the selected participants was provided with an informed consent form, which was part of the interview schedule, to complete.

Data collection

Data was collected using an open-ended interview guide, which sought to find out the experiences and perspectives of teacher-participants on their implementation of the Social Studies curriculum at the SHS level, and the role the WASSCE is having on their implementation efforts. Participants were engaged in a face-to-face individual interview that lasted for an average of one hour fifteen minutes each. The recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed and cleaned for analysis. Secondary data, from the existing literature on the subject, was also theoretically sampled and analysed.

Data analysis

Data analysis involved the use of an adapted grounded theory analytic framework. This framework was adopted with the running contentions/confusion about the grounded theory approach in mind. The contentions on what actually qualifies as a grounded theory study (see Creswell, 2012), have resulted in the emergence of what has come to be known as the Glaserian and Straussian schools of grounded theory (Stern, 1995), and thus the approach being employed in various forms all over the world (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2012; Glaser, 1995; Stern, 1995). In spite of their differences, both Glaser and Strauss define the approach as a method or methodology that applies a systematic set of procedures to develop/generate an inductive theory about a phenomenon or a substantive area (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 2015). Again, what is considered as important is that the purpose of any grounded theory study would be the generation of a theory “using a construct-oriented approach” (Creswell, 2012: p. 34). The proof of a grounded theory is therefore in the outcome (Glaser, 1998). The following questions are therefore to be answered, in order to satisfy oneself about the use of the approach are:

- 1) “Does the theory work to explain relevant behaviour in the substantive area of Research?
- 2) Does it have relevance to the people in the substantive field?
- 3) Does the theory fit the substantive area?
- 4) Is it readily modifiable as new data emerge?” (Glaser, 1998: p. 17).

Although it is held that a typical data collection process in this approach is based on several visits to the field to collect data to saturate the categories of information that emerge (Creswell, 2012), “the number of passes one makes to the field depends on whether the categories of information become saturated and whether the theory is elaborated in all of its complexity” (Creswell, 2012: p. 57). Also, a “secondary analysis of data already collected for other purposes is very

worthwhile for the grounded theorist to theoretically sample and analyse, as it saves the data collection time” (Glaser, 1998: p. 9). This places the data analysis stage as paramount and thus necessary for all the steps in the process to be followed in order for the theory to emerge (see Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 2015). However, since Glaser and Strauss disagree on the exclusion and inclusion of theoretical sampling and axial coding, respectively, in the data analysis procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 2015; Glaser, 1992), a middle ground approach was adopted to include both in the analytic framework.

The adoption of this consolidated approach is underpinned by Charmaz’s (2006) argument that “the guidelines (provided by Strauss & Corbin, 2015) offer a set of general principles and heuristic devices rather than formulaic rules” (p. 2). Thus, although, these procedures for grounded theory analysis are systematic and formal, they are yet flexible enough to allow for its use with twenty-first century assumptions and approaches (Charmaz, 2006). What is therefore of essence is for the procedures to result into a theory, which is well grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006), and meets the four most central criteria; fit, work, relevance and modifiability (Glaser, 1992). Charmaz (2006), again, argues that “grounded theory methods can complement other approaches to qualitative data analysis, rather than stand in opposition to them” (p. 9).

The analysis therefore started with the open coding of interview data, which led to the identification of categories of information about the emerging concepts/phenomena. The next step was the theoretical sampling of existing data, from the literature, based on the initial categories of information that emerged from the data, which was analysed to provide further exposition on the emerging categories of information. This was followed by axial coding, leading to the identification of the central phenomenon and its relationship with the other phenomena, and the exploration of causal conditions for the relationships so identified. The context of the relationship and the intervening conditions were then established and the consequences of the central phenomenon identified. The final step involved the use of selective coding to identify a “storyline” which integrated the categories of concepts in the axial coding leading to the development of conditional propositions and substantive-level theories that attempt to explain the relationships among external assessment, curriculum implementation and students’ attainment of curriculum goals and objectives. The identities of teacher-participants were protected, by adopting pseudonyms (i.e. TP1, TP2, TP3, etc.) in the storyline. A conditional matrix was subsequently developed to illustrate the relationships, theories and propositions.

3. Findings

Curriculum implementation under the constraining hold of high-stakes external assessment

Many innovative curricula (like the Social Studies curriculum in the Senior High Schools in Ghana) include outcomes that go beyond the traditional cogni-

tive learning outcomes and thus call for teachers to use a varied range of activities to ensure the attainment of these worthwhile educational outcomes (see CRDD, 2010). In spite of this, teachers, who are the principal implementers of this curriculum, mentioned the demands and contents of the external assessment (WASSCE) as the main influencer of all their curriculum implementation/delivery decisions and actions. That is, what and how they should teach and assess in the classroom are driven by the nature of the high-stakes assessment. The theoretical model (Figure 1) illustrates how the high-stakes external assessment constrains the implementation of the novel curriculum through the overwhelming power it has over teachers' classroom practices, and thus their implementation of the curriculum.

Analysis of the data revealed an intricate, systemic relationship among some major components of the curriculum implementation process that emerged from the study. These components are the curriculum goals and objectives, implementation of the curriculum through the instructional and assessment practices of teachers, the demands of the high-stakes external assessment and students' learning outcomes/attainments. Ideally curriculum goals and objectives should inform/direct teachers' classroom practices, which will in the end result in students' attainment of these goals/outcomes. External assessment, on the other hand, should be the mechanism/instrument for quality assuring the process by ensuring congruity and balance among the other components. However, the findings rather paint a picture of the nature and perceived/real use of the external assessment (the central/core phenomenon) exerting a powerful influence on the curriculum implementation process (teachers' classroom practices), thereby distorting what should have been the ideal relationship.

It was, for instance, revealed by the study, and depicted in the theoretical model (Figure 1) that the impact of external assessment on participants' classroom practices is an overhanging, compelling and constraining one. Therefore establishing external assessment as the main phenomenon influencing teachers' classroom decisions that cause them to teach-to-the-test, which leads to a narrowing effect on the curriculum and its attainment by students. This influence is made possible through some intervening conditions such as participants' perceptions of accountability, their interpretation of and response to students' performance on the external assessment and their belief of the non-use of students' cumulative internal assessment scores by the external assessment agency. The impact is defined by the restrictions that the demands of external assessment place on teachers' instructional and assessment decisions. In this respect, participants claimed that their instructional offerings and internal assessment demands are as narrow as the demands and coverage of the external assessment. It is thus instructive to note that participants indicated that their instructional and assessment coverage and focus will be broadened to adequately cover all the goals and objectives of the curriculum if WAEC takes the lead in broadening the coverage and demands of the WASSCE.

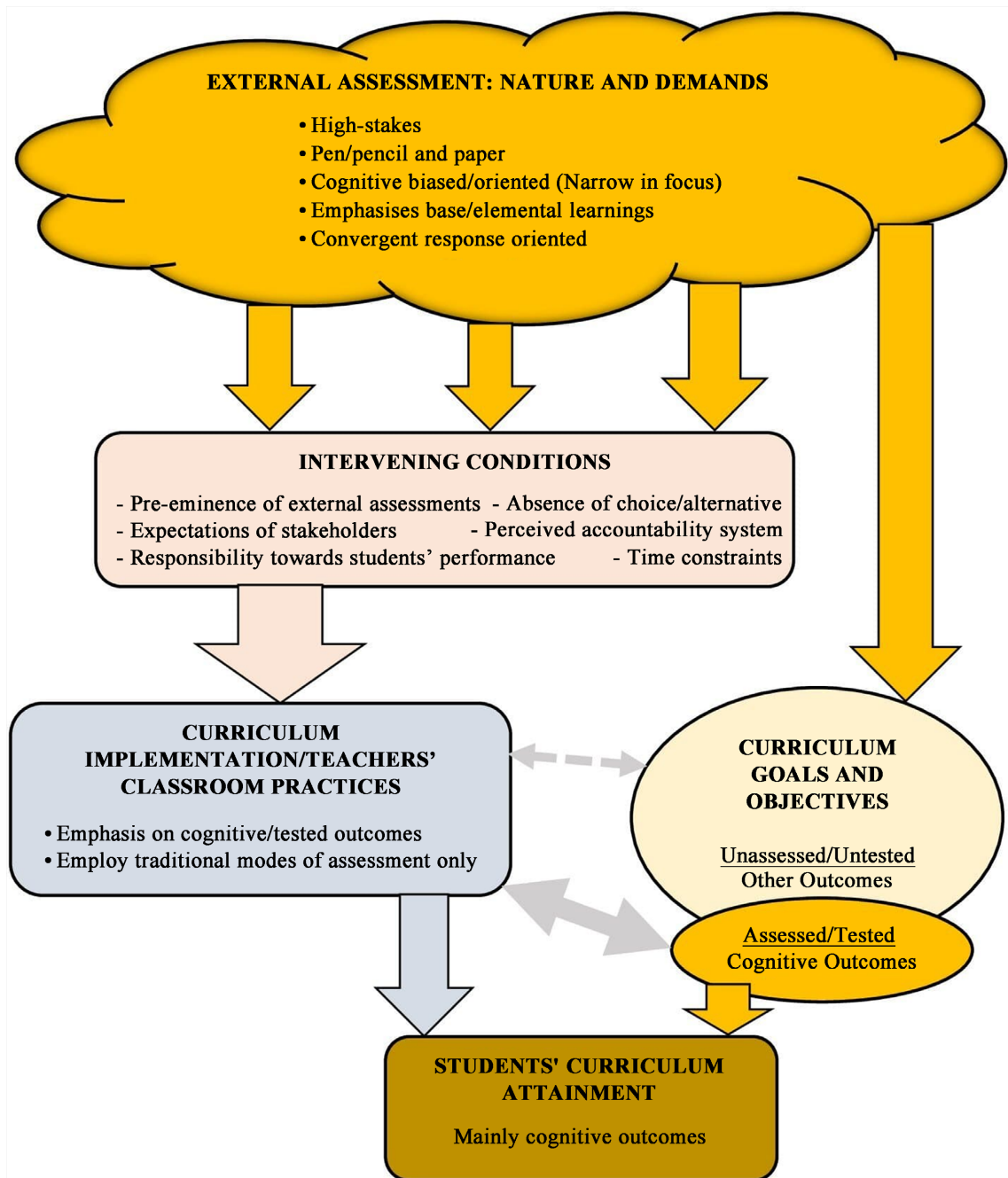


Figure 1. Constraining hold of high-stakes external assessment on curriculum implementation.

Other intervening conditions were also mentioned by participants, as responsible for the reason why their instructional and assessment practices are influenced by the WASSCE. These include the pre-eminence of the WASSCE over the curriculum goals and objectives; the absence of choices for teachers to stick to the curriculum, instead of the WASSCE, as sources of their instructional and assessment objectives and the expectations of other stakeholders about students' performance at the WASSCE. Participants further stated that seeing the nature and demands of the WASSCE as standards set for them to follow, time con-

straints and viewing the traditional modes of assessment as a more familiar tool to use also together contributed to their instructional and assessment decisions in the classroom.

It therefore became apparent that the effect of the external assessment on participants' classroom practices will eventually lead to a narrowing effect on the curriculum (see **Figure 1**). That is, many curriculum goals and objectives will be neglected by teachers in their classroom practices, because they are equally neglected by the external examination. A logical effect of the above is the narrow and thus inadequate attainment of the curriculum goals and objectives by learners and thus jeopardising the effectiveness of the curriculum as a whole. It therefore goes without saying that high-stakes external assessment has a potentially dysfunctional systemic impact on curriculum implementation and the curriculum as a whole. Thus for any novel curriculum to be implemented with fidelity, to ensure its effectiveness, the external assessment regime must be reformed, to ensure congruity and balance among the components of the implementation process.

External assessment and teachers' classroom/curriculum implementation practices

The decision of respondents to make the demands and content of the external assessment the main determinant of their instructional objectives is a strategy they adopted in order to satisfy the expectations of educational authorities and other stakeholders. They, for instance, claimed that their main concern is for their students to pass the external examination. A participant (TP2), for instance, claimed, "*In fact it's about ninety percent or ninety-five percent, because, as I said, we are all tailoring ourselves to the exams. Everything boils down to WAEC, so you tailor yourself to WAEC's questions to enable your students also to pass*". According to the participants the criteria for success, as held by most stakeholders in Ghana's educational sector, is the performance of the students in the WASSCE, and not the valuable outcomes they are supposed to attain and exhibit. One of the participants (TP3), in this regard, claimed that "*many teachers are required under those circumstances to teach in line with WAEC's assessment demands*".

It also emerged from the data that not only are participants' instructional practices mostly influenced by the demands of the external assessment, but also their school/classroom based assessment practices. Participants, in this case, claimed that the WASSCE has a great influence/impact on the way they assess their students. They mentioned the fact that the school's curricula have been made examination oriented/driven. A participant (TP8) for instance intimated,

Because you would want to assess the students, but the interest, in the final analysis, lies on whether they were able to pass. And so school heads...and even now that they are having this, eh...grading system of schools, where emphasis is on the number of students that have passed, it is not how well you have assessed them, using the other methods, but in the final analysis

how they could pass the WASSCE.

Public expectations about the performance of students in the WASSCE was one reason, identified by the participants, as being responsible for their decision and behaviour in replicating only items in the external assessment in their classroom/school based assessment of students. To these teachers,

The influence of WAEC comes in where at the end of the day the public is expecting good output from you. The school, public opinion, politicians...so at times the methods of assessing, from WAEC, influences ours, so that you don't have problems with society (TP9).

The above statement suggests that participants are much concerned about how the results of their students on the WASSCE are interpreted by other stakeholders and how these results are used to judge their competence(s). In this regard, teachers are said to be reluctant to use the full range of assessment tools available to them (Bekoe, 2006; Gross, McPhie, & Fraenkel, 1970), as they only rely on the mode of assessment employed by the agency in charge of the external assessment. This goes to reveal the extent to which external assessment has usurped the role of the curriculum, as to what schooling about and also the extent to which the assessment agency has taken pre-eminence over all that there is to education.

Intervening conditions that make external assessment to influence teachers' classroom practices pre-eminence of high-stakes external assessment

The establishment of the pre-eminence of the external assessment over the curriculum imperatives emerged as one of the intervening conditions that make high-stakes external assessments to strongly influence teachers' classroom practices. Participants, in this regard, claim that between the demands of the WASSCE and the goals and objectives of the curriculum, the former, rather than the latter, mostly influence their instructional decisions. The expectation of stakeholders about the ends of education for students at the SHS level is seen as being responsible for the primacy of the external assessment over the goals and objectives of the curriculum. One of the participants (TP6), in this respect, claimed,

Definitely it is the WAEC, because we ultimately are preparing the students to write an exams conducted by WAEC, and parents and even students themselves don't care much about what they acquire in terms of attitudes or whatever, but being able to pass and pass well.

Another participant stated as follows:

In view of the fact that they issue certificates to students at the end of the programme, we are compelled to go according to their assessment methods. So that's how we are influenced, because sometimes we measure our efficiency or the capabilities of the teacher by the success of the students. When it comes to that then we have to tow to procedures being used by WAEC

(TP9).

Many of the participants also claimed that the WASSCE is for them a kind of a gold standard that they must follow/meet. A participant (TP10) justified teachers' reliance on WAEC's assessment items/demands by indicating that "*It is because of the fact that it is the standard or what has been set out for us by the West Africa Examinations Council (WAEC). So we tend to follow that system, to prepare them for that particular exam*". Others claimed familiarity as the reason for their being stuck with the nature and demands of the WASSCE in their own internal assessment practices. This is voiced by one of the participants (TP11) as "*That is the method that I have been...you know, introduced to, so that is the one we use*". Even where teachers wished to utilise other forms of assessment in the classroom, the class size and the time allotted for instruction on the schools' time-table were mentioned as major obstacles.

What is therefore of importance to participants is the contents of the WASSCE and not the goals and objectives of the curriculum, as "*at the end of the day the best teacher is looked at in terms of whose students have passed with more 'A's and not so much of the students who have acquired that skills with which they are going out*" (TP4). And thus for them, "*the main thing is to help the students to acquire knowledge and pass their examination*" (TP5). Participants further explained that the influence of the WASSCE on their instructional practices is such that they are unable to adequately cover all the goals and objectives of the subject they teach. The foregoing supports the claim made by **Madaus (1988: p. 83)** that "Testing is fast usurping the role of the curriculum as the mechanism of defining what schooling is about".

Teacher accountability system and perceived responsibility towards students' performance in the external assessment

Participants' perception of the teacher accountability system in operation in the country, emerged as a major reason behind their classroom decisions and practices. These practices mainly mimic the nature and demands of the external assessment, which leads to a narrowing effect on the curriculum, if not its abandonment. Teacher accountability was interpreted by the participants as the expectations stakeholders have of them, and thus the resultant pressures being brought to bear on them to ensure that their students do well on the external assessment. These stakeholders were identified, by participants, as parents, students, school heads and their colleagues, and even their own conscience. A participant (TP14), for instance, stated,

Yes, I think so, because if you take the parents especially; most parents believe that they send their children to school because they want good results. And if at the end of the day the performance is not good you don't feel too fine about it. Sometimes your own conscience; you feel that you haven't done enough work.

The school heads are noted, by the respondents, for wanting explanations

from them when their students do not perform well in the WASSCE.

Sometimes you feel accountable. I quite remember after results have been presented, sometimes, you will be asked to explain the performance; whether it's a better performance or a low performance. Especially when the performance is quite low, you are compelled to explain why your students could not perform, so that is where the accountability comes in (TP9).

Many of the participants claimed that the issue of accountability also extends to their professional colleagues; who they feel evaluate them using the performance of their students.

I feel myself accountable to the school administration; that is the authorities, my colleague staff; because if your students perform well they know that you are actually on course. And the students, because they will tell you oh...your students have performed well and therefore you are good or something like that. So, in a way if my students do not perform well, it means I have not done well. It's more or less like a way of trying to shape your...you know...maybe trying to adjust and make some few amendments to make sure that your teaching is helping to...But again if one is not very careful it will also mean that you are preparing the people for only examination (TP2).

The conditions above compel teachers to see the performance of their students in the external examination as their sole responsibility:

...the performance or success of the students rest on the shoulders of the teacher and, you know, your teaching ability, process, can positively or negatively impact on the students' performance... So I do my best to get my students to pass, so that I also get some credit... So when they fail you feel guilty, and there you become quite accountable to the stakeholders, because they might think that you didn't contribute well to the students' success (TP10).

In addition to taking the responsibility of students' performance in the external examination upon themselves, teachers also have some kind of emotional attachment to the students, in terms of their performance at the examination. In this respect the participants claimed that they do feel ashamed, bad, disturbed or sad whenever their students perform poorly in the WASSCE. The opposite is that they do become happy and fulfilled if the performance of their students is good. Participants were of the view that the sense of shame they experience when their students perform badly at the external examination is due to their conscience.

I feel if you are a teacher with a conscience that should be...you will be ashamed, seriously. And knowing very well that you've done something and then people you expect to do well are not able to; to a great extent, you will

be ashamed (TP7).

Perceived non-use of students' internal cumulative assessment records by WAEC

Social Studies teachers in Ghana are encouraged by provisions in the SHS Social Studies syllabus (CRDD, 2010) to use alternative forms of assessment to assess their students, particularly in affective outcomes, during internal assessment. It can therefore be said that these teachers have very little excuse for not using the alternative forms of assessment, as suggested in the syllabus. This position becomes clearer when it is juxtaposed against the fact that the cumulative score of students' school-based/continuous assessments contributes 30% to their total score and thus grade in the WASSCE result. However this is not the case, because participants doubt whether WAEC is really integrating these scores with students' scores at the WASSCE for their final grades.

In expressing such doubts about WAEC's use of the continuous assessment scores, TP9, for instance, claimed;

Yeah, the assumption is that they are supposed to make 70% at the external exams and 30% in the internal. So, having assessed a student who has gotten, say, 25%, then you should not expect an "F", which is below 44%, because the person already has 25marks. So we are saying that in the exams he couldn't even make 20...inclusive...and if somebody has made 25, which is fair representation of the person's mark for the three year period, then we are saying that when the person should go to the exams, at least he should have more than half of the 70% so that he can come out with a "C". But when somebody has gotten "F", then you are tempted to believe that somewhere there is something wrong.

Other participants were of the view that WAEC may rather be scaling down the cumulative internal assessment scores of students, because WAEC believes that teachers are not truthful with these scores and thus may not have faith in them.

They are saying that the teachers are not giving the true reflection of what the student is doing...so they think there is no need for them to use it, but they say they use them. Anyway they seem not to have faith in the continuous assessment, so they scale down whatever we send (TP13).

What will make teachers to resort to curriculum-driven instruction?

Participants, in this regard, claimed that the major thing that will drive them to teach and assess in congruence with the curriculum, is when WAEC restructures its assessment practices with the aim of broadening its coverage to allow for the fair assessment of all curriculum outcomes. Participants also held that teachers should be given some level of freedom in the assessment of students and being allowed to take an active role, with WAEC, in looking for best way of assessing all the learning outcomes in the curriculum.

There should be some level of freedom in the assessment. Then if WAEC could have a way of drawing experts, may be, from the field...and then we can come together and decipher out some of this things then we can have a fair assessment of some of these tendencies students exhibit (TP2).

Participants claimed that their hands have been tied, by being compelled to come under the constraining influence of WAEC. They therefore indicated that they will begin to do what is appropriate if WAEC will review its assessment of students. This is well captured by TP6 as follows:

Once you work, your output at the end of the day is going to be determined by somebody, you tailor yourself to that, but you see, as we are saying it's not only that per se that the students should have. You could digress, bring in more values and what have you.

To TP6, teachers are certainly dancing to the tune of WAEC, thus it is only when the WASSCE begins to emphasise all the curriculum goals and objectives that they will also teach and assess to cover them. A participant (TP15) thus said, "*Well I think the WASSCE examination will be the sole determinant in my teaching*".

It is clear, from the above, that the impact of the external assessment on teachers' classroom practices will have a consequential effect on other curriculum imperatives. That is, if teachers are going to teach and assess, only, according to the content and demands of the external assessment, then it cannot be said that the curriculum will be adequately and effectively implemented. Likewise, neither can it be said that students' attainment of curriculum objectives will be adequate nor congruent with what has been stipulated/planned.

Emerging theories and conditional propositions

As depicted in **Figure 1**, the main theory that emerged from the data is that

- High-stakes external assessments have a compelling and constraining hold on teachers' classroom practices and thus implementation of a novel curriculum, thereby constricting such a curriculum and students' attainment of its imperatives.

The relationships among the components of the curriculum process, which emerged from the data and depicted in the aforementioned figure, allow us to make the following conditional propositions:

- 1) Teachers will broaden the goals and objectives of emphasis in their classroom practices and thus curriculum implementation, if the demands of external assessment are broadened to cover all curricular outcomes.
- 2) Learners' attainment of curriculum goals and objectives is directly proportional to those covered by the external assessment.

Another theory, which apparently emerged from the findings presented above, particularly about the impact of the traditional method of assessing learning outcomes on innovative curricula with expanded goals and objectives, is that:

- The effective and successful implementation of any novel and transformative curriculum depends on a corresponding change in the external assessment regime, to ensure congruity/balance among the components of curriculum implementation.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The picture painted above, describing the relationship between external assessment and curriculum goals and objectives, is largely supported by assertions in the literature that external assessment drives classroom instruction and subsequently influences the curriculum content (Harlen, 2005; Havnes, 2004; Grant, 2000). Furthermore, the propositions enumerated above, which are all verifiable by the data collected for this study, clearly support the argument that external assessment has a narrowing effect on the curriculum (Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1991; Madaus, 1988). This study has also revealed that the nature and demands of external assessment inhibits the pursuit of new curriculum goals (Broadfoot, 1995; Torrance, 1995; Kliebard, 1988).

Kliebard's (1988) postulation about the impact of old assessment regimes on the implementation of an innovative curriculum is also corroborated by the evidence produced by this study. The results of the analysis of the primary data, together with the secondary theoretically sampled data, from the literature, allow us to theorise about the relationship between external assessment and teachers' classroom practices. The theorisation also extends to the relationship between external assessment and the implementation of an innovative curriculum. However the findings indicate that for the theories to apply, the external assessment in question should be of high-stakes. That is, students' performances on this assessment should be used to make important and far reaching decisions about their future educational and career progression. As shown by the findings, the high-stakes nature of external assessment will make stakeholders, especially parents and students insist that teachers comply with the demands of this assessment.

In arriving at the theories and propositions listed above, sight was not lost of the fact that other equally important factors exist to either hinder or promote effective instructional practices and the attainment of the curriculum goals and objectives. However, responses from the teachers indicate that whereas they might be able to deal with some of these factors by devising strategies that will ensure that students still attain the levels of performance that the curriculum stipulates for them, this option becomes limited or non-existent when it comes to external assessment. For instance, although teachers complained about time allocation and unavailability of teaching materials for them to effectively implement the Social Studies curriculum for the SHS, they still did find strategies that enabled them to deliver on the results that were expected of them. Teachers however believe that any attempt to drift from the focus of the external assessment to the intended curriculum will result in their students failing or not doing

well on the examination.

Consequently, while other conditions could easily be handled by teachers, it will be very difficult for them to focus on only the actual/intended curriculum and still expect their students to do well in the examination. The discussion thus indicates that the theories and propositions developed in this paper are well grounded in the data collected for the study and the literature. These theories and propositions therefore fill the vacuum, in the literature, about the absence of such a relationship as argued by Mehrens (1998).

It is however important to indicate that this study is not without limitations. One of such limitations is the complexity involved in the grounded theory design (see Suddaby, 2006), especially having to do with the saturation of data. Another limitation lies in the data collected and analysed for the study. Since the Theories and Propositions developed emanated from the data collected from this limited number of respondents/teachers handling a particular subject, the generalisability thereof of the Theories and Propositions to other subject areas and across different contexts cannot be vouched. This therefore calls for further studies, involving teachers of different subjects and in different contexts, so as to contribute towards the building of the theories and propositions that will enable us describe/explain/predict the effects of high-stakes external assessment on teachers' classroom practices/curriculum implementation and learners' curriculum attainment and the relationship among them.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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