

ASSESSMENT AND TESTING IN SECONDARY SCHOOL AND ITS CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of assessment and testing in enhancing the quality of education in secondary schools. Education remains a critical instrument for national development, and effective assessment is central to achieving its objectives. The study conceptualizes assessment as a systematic process of collecting and interpreting information about students' learning outcomes, emphasizing its diagnostic and feedback functions in improving teaching and learning. It highlights the importance of continuous assessment, as advocated in the National Policy on Education, as a comprehensive and cumulative approach to evaluating students across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. The paper further explores various forms of testing in secondary schools, including achievement, teacher-made, standardized, formative, and summative tests, alongside their purposes in measuring students' performance and guiding instructional decisions. It underscores the essential qualities of good tests, such as validity, reliability, discrimination, appropriate difficulty level, and efficiency, as well as the relevance of tools like the table of specifications in ensuring balanced test construction. However, several challenges affecting assessment practices are identified, including poor test quality, inadequate feedback mechanisms, student unpreparedness, assessment bias, teachers' inefficiency in marking, and the absence of structured question bank systems. These issues undermine the effectiveness of assessment in achieving educational goals. The paper concludes by recommending practical strategies such as capacity building for teachers, adoption of question bank systems, improved feedback practices, and enhanced supervision of assessments. Addressing these challenges will strengthen assessment practices and ultimately improve students' learning outcomes and overall educational quality.

Keywords: Assessment, Continuous Assessment, Testing, Secondary Education, Educational Quality

Introduction

Quality education is widely recognized as a vital instrument through which societies achieve meaningful growth and sustainable development. It serves as a foundation for enhancing the intellectual, social, and economic capacities of individuals, thereby enabling them to contribute effectively to national progress. Education equips people with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required to navigate life's challenges and participate actively in societal advancement. For this reason, education occupies a central and strategic role in the development of a nation's workforce. The importance attached to education is evident in the persistent efforts of governments around the world to ensure that their citizens have access to learning opportunities and are adequately educated (Gina, 2023). In the educational process, the assessment of learners' performance holds significant importance. Evaluating what students have learned is a critical aspect of ensuring that the goals of education are achieved. Assessment helps to determine whether learners have acquired the intended knowledge, skills, and attitudes outlined in the curriculum. Without proper assessment, it would be difficult to measure the effectiveness of teaching or the extent to which educational objectives have been realized. Therefore, assessment is not merely an optional component but a fundamental part of the educational system (Baku, 2008).

Moreover, assessing students' learning outcomes serves several essential purposes. It provides a basis for making informed decisions about instructional placement, ensuring that students are grouped or advanced according to their

abilities and level of understanding. Assessment also communicates clear expectations to learners, helping them understand what is required of them and guiding their academic efforts (Oni, 2019). In this way, it acts as both a feedback mechanism and a guide for improving learning outcomes. Teachers, as facilitators of learning, rely heavily on assessment to evaluate the success of their instructional practices. According to Durowoju, Onuka, and Onabamiro (2010), an effective teacher is naturally concerned with determining whether teaching has genuinely taken place and whether students have mastered the content delivered. After the teaching and learning process, it is essential for teachers to verify that learning has occurred. This verification helps teachers identify areas where students may be struggling and make necessary adjustments to their teaching strategies. Without such evaluation, teaching efforts may be rendered ineffective, as there would be no clear evidence of students' progress or understanding. In essence, assessment ensures accountability in the teaching and learning process. It provides both teachers and students with valuable insights into performance and progress. When assessment is absent, the educational process becomes incomplete, as there is no reliable way to measure success or identify areas needing improvement. Thus, incorporating consistent and meaningful assessment practices is crucial for maintaining the quality and effectiveness of education.

One of the primary methods used to assess students in the classroom is testing. Tests are structured tools designed to measure students' performance in specific tasks or subject areas. They help to determine the extent to which learners have understood the material taught and can apply their knowledge effectively. In school settings, testing is commonly used for various purposes, including evaluating academic achievement, assigning grades, and ranking students based on their abilities (Almaleki, 2021). These outcomes often influence important academic decisions, such as promotion to higher levels of education or placement in specialized programs. Quality education and effective assessment are closely interconnected elements that support the success of any educational system. While education provides individuals with the tools necessary for personal and societal development, assessment ensures that learning is measurable, meaningful, and aligned with educational objectives. Together, they form the backbone of a functional and progressive educational framework.

Concept of Assessment

In an educational context, assessment is the process of describing, collecting, recording, scoring, and interpreting information about learning. The assessment aims to discover the ability and success of students in achieving predetermined learning outcomes (Almaleki, 2021; Anderson et al., 2001). Assessment plays a key role in developing students' confidence in their ability to learn, and its goal is to bring about improvement in the teaching and learning process. It will be professionally unethical to teach without assessing the extent to which students have learnt a particular task. The process of education is not complete without the component of assessment. Therefore, assessment is a powerful diagnostic tool that enables learners to understand the areas of strength and weakness (Oni, 2019). Mainly, assessment is meant to identify areas where learners are having challenges to enable teachers to concentrate efforts on those areas. Educators need to understand that assessment goes beyond generating scores and grades to provide feedback for students' improvement. This was emphasized by Safarath and Kingtin (2014) that the fundamental role of assessment is to provide authentic and meaningful feedback for improving student learning, instructional practice, and educational options. Quality and effective assessment can improve student performance and boost their mastery level. Many scholars have described assessment in several ways. For instance, Baku (2008) describes assessment as a means of determining the extent to which education has achieved its goals and objectives, while Joshua (2004) asserts that assessment is one of the key processes in the teaching and learning cycle, as it

provides important decision-making information to teachers in the classroom. Assessment is provided as a reference to improve learning quality (Laila Puspita, 2019; Putra, Syamsurizal, Lufri, & Zulyusri, 2021). Without assessment, teaching will be worthless. Assessment serves many purposes, such as determining the performance of pupils at the beginning of instruction, monitoring the learning process during instruction, diagnosing learning difficulties, and determining students' achievement at the end of instruction. Assessment could either be formative or summative. Formative assessment entails evaluating learners' performance during the teaching-learning process. This allows teachers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of learners at an early stage for remedial action. Summative assessment involves measuring learners' performance at the end of a given period through testing or examination.

For assessment to be effective and worthwhile, it has to be continuous, comprehensive, systematic, guidance-oriented, cumulative, and objective. That is why the National Policy of Education (1977, revised 1998) introduced the concept of continuous assessment to eradicate the shortcomings of the former practice of 'one-shot' testing. The core objective of continuous assessment is to enhance student learning as it involves gathering information from various sources, such as assignments, demonstrations, projects, performances, and tests, to accurately assess students' progress in meeting the curriculum expectations for each subject (Gina, 2023). Continuous assessment involves regular and systematic evaluation of students' learning progress throughout the academic year, benefiting both students and teachers (Adebayo, 2021). Continuous assessment allows teachers to tailor their instruction to individual students' needs and receive feedback on their teaching methods. Students, on the other hand, receive ongoing feedback on their progress, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and improve their learning strategies (Adeoti, 2022). Some of the reasons for continuous assessment practice, particularly in secondary school, include: prevention of examination malpractice, self-assessment for teachers, guidance for learners in their learning process, among others. Some of the features of continuous assessment include: it is systematic, comprehensive, cumulative, and objective. The focus of assessment in secondary schools is on the three domains of educational objectives as proposed by Benjamin Bloom et al (1956), which are: Cognitive, Affective, and Psychomotor domains. However, research has revealed that the emphasis has only been on the cognitive domain, while other (Affective and Psychomotor) domains are not given much attention. Also, many aspects of assessment are usually neglected in most secondary schools. Areas such as: group project, subject notes grading, Supervision of daily classwork, Students' participation in class lessons, frequency of class tests, and group assessment work, among others. Some teachers in secondary school deliberately run away from some of these activities because of their laziness in marking and recording. Meanwhile, all these aspects are very necessary as it covers the general abilities of students.

Testing in secondary schools

One of the duties of a teacher is to determine the extent to which the students have mastered what was taught. The only way he can achieve this is through the use of some evaluation instruments. These instruments are not limited to the students only, but also to a wide variety of people. A test is one of the instruments used by classroom teachers to examine learners' knowledge to determine what he/she knows and what he/she has learnt during the course of instruction in the class. A test is a series of questions or exercises for measuring the skills, knowledge, intelligence, capacities or aptitudes of an individual or group. A test can also be referred to as a collection of terms that can be used to determine whether or not the desired changes (or outcomes) have occurred in a learner. The test involves creating a questioning situation to assess the amount of knowledge (cognitive), character(affective), and skills(psychomotor). There are different types of tests which are commonly used in secondary schools, these include:

- i. **Achievement test:** Achievement tests are good in evaluating students and the curriculum. They provide information about the level of learners' academic ability. They are useful for the purpose of selection, promotion, and certification. Achievement tests are useful in evaluating teaching and learning processes. Osadebe (2015) asserted that it is not uncommon for senior secondary school students to score poorly in SSCE Economics. He stressed that they are often assessed with poorly prepared Achievement Tests. The content areas of their tests in Economics are not spread out to cover the content of the Economics curriculum. Consequently, such tests limit students' scope of reading, and this leads to poor achievement in Economics.
- ii. **Teacher-made tests:** This is commonly used in secondary schools. It is a locally constructed instrument by the teacher, based on his teaching. It is a type of test where a teacher wants to determine the level of mastery of their students. This test could be valid and reliable, but without possessing a table of norms.
- iii. **Standardised Test:** Standardised implies uniformity. Is a test that is both valid and reliable. Moreover, it has a table of norms. Is it a paper-and-pencil test?
- iv. **Formative Test:** This type of test is administered to the students during the course of instruction. The purpose of the test is to use its results to improve learning. This kind of test enables teachers to identify the weaknesses of the learners and to provide remedial measures.
- v. **Summative Test:** This type of test is administered at the end of the course of instruction. The purpose is to take a final decision as regards the course.

There are many reasons why tests are carried out in secondary school, which include: identification of individual differences so as to discriminate between weak and strong students. Also, to determine the extent to which the behavioral objectives have been achieved. Again, to award a certificate to learners at the end of the schooling. Then, to also assess a teaching methodology and to enable the school to give a report of the students to their parents on the performance of their children.

It has been observed that most teachers are not good at constructing tests in their various subject areas (Osadebe, 2001 & 2012). A committed and dedicated teacher in secondary school is supposed to have established that the test he wants to administer to students possesses the qualities of a good test. A good test instrument is required to measure students' academic abilities (Murti, Heri, & Eri, 2022). The teacher should have taken care of these before administering the test. The following are the characteristics of a good test:

- i. **Validity** - This refers to how accurately a test measures what it purports to measure. For instance, a test is designed to measure intelligence; that test should measure intelligence only. However, if the test measures knowledge of mathematics instead of intelligence, such a test would not be valid. Some of the teachers in secondary schools are not aware of this fact.
- ii. **Reliability** – Reliability is another quality of a test that teachers in secondary schools need to pay attention to. It refers to the precision and consistency with which a test instrument measures a sample of behaviour. Osadebe (2015) claimed that the construction of valid and reliable tests in various subject areas has not been given enough attention in the senior secondary schools in Nigeria.
- iii. **Discrimination** - It is a well-known fact that most of the classroom Achievement Tests are norm-referenced. Norm-referenced tests are those that measure differences among students. This involves comparing a person's score with the average score of some relevant group of people. Such tests would be expected to differentiate the high achiever from the low achiever.

- iv. **Difficulty Level** – This refers to how appropriate the test is in the sense of its difficulty with respect to the learners. The teacher may want to know how many students can answer the test item correctly. Ideally, we expect that a test should not be too difficult or too easy for students.
- v. **Efficiency** – This is another quality a teacher in secondary school should put into consideration. Teachers should consider the time taken, the administration of the test, the cost of planning, and reporting the test results.

Tests are of various types, such as objective tests (True-False, Fill-in the Gap, Matching, and Multiple-Choice), and essay-type. But the Essay and Multiple-Choice types are commonly used in secondary schools. It has become very necessary for teachers in secondary schools to pay attention to the test construction of these items so that students will not face difficulty in passing external examinations (SSCE and NECO, etc.). In test construction, teachers must be aware of subjecting his/her questions to the Table of Specification. He needs to consider questions that go with both higher and lower orders of the cognitive domain. A table of specifications is a two-way table that represents along one axis the content area/topics that the teacher has taught during the specified period and the cognitive level at which it is to be measured, along the other axis. In other words, the table of specifications highlights how much emphasis is to be given to each objective or topic (Shafaat, 2015). The following are some of the general guidelines that can help secondary school teachers in the construction of essay questions:

- i. Questions that can be answered within a limited time should be considered
- ii. Essay items should not be ambiguous
- iii. Items that are too general should be avoided
- iv. Items that are too difficult or too easy should not be considered at all, and
- v. Learners' response to the items should be marked using a well-prepared marking scheme, among others.

When constructing Multiple-Choice items, the secondary school teachers should bear some of the following rules in mind:

- i. There should be a very clear problem in the stem of the item. Shafaat (2015) asserts that stems and choices are the two parts of a multiple-choice item. A stem should be clearly described and should be complete in itself.
- ii. The problem should clearly point to the theme of the correct alternative.
- iii. The incorrect alternatives should be reasonably related to the problem
- iv. The correct alternatives should be grammatically consistent with the stem of the item
- v. The incorrect alternatives should be framed such that they are thoroughly wrong but reasonable enough to catch the interest of the weak learners.
- vi. In the problem statements, negatives should be sparingly used, and
- vii. Alternatives such as 'none of the above', 'Both A and B', or 'All the above', should be avoided among others. Shafaat (2015) emphasised that we should refrain from "all of the above," "none of the above," or other special distracters (use only when an answer can be classified as unequivocally correct or incorrect). None of the above should be restricted to the items of factual knowledge with absolute standards of correctness.

Challenges of Assessment and Testing in Secondary Schools

In an educational context, there are a lot of challenges associated with assessment and testing practices in secondary schools, which demand the attention of all and sundry who are concerned with the quality of the teaching and learning process. Some of the challenges are as follows:

- i. **Poor Quality of Test:** Some of the tests administered in secondary schools lack some psychometric properties. Areekkuzhiyil (2021) asserted that many tests used for educational assessments are not standardised or prepared by undergoing the systematic test development procedure and applying psychometric principles. Such a test does not possess the good qualities and fails to perform its functions and purpose. He further stressed that one of the reasons for the poor quality of tests is that the construction of good quality tests requires expertise, it is a time-consuming process, and it has to undergo a series of sequential procedures.
- ii. **Poor Feedback Mechanism:** The role that feedback plays in assessment cannot be overemphasised. Feedback from the instructors brings about changes in teaching strategy, which result in improvement in learning. Therefore, poor feedback from the teacher will affect the purpose of testing.
- iii. **Lack of preparation by students:** Many at times, teachers are less concern on the readiness of students before the assessment is conducted. This often resulted in examination malpractice. It is therefore required to certify that students have achieved a minimum level of learning and are fully prepared for the task.
- iv. **Bias:** Existence of bias in educational assessment may jeopardize the essence of the exercise. Assessment bias that leads to students' low-test performance can discourage them from learning. Many researchers have claimed that most assessments conducted are culture-biased and discriminate against certain ethnic groups. Blatchford and Cline (1992) suggest that the assessment process should be free of bias with respect to gender, social class, ethnicity, language use, and religion.
- v. **Teachers' laziness in marking tests:** In some secondary schools, many teachers fall victim to this challenge. Some teachers love teaching and giving out assignments to students. But very lazy when it comes to marking those tests, particularly if it is a large class.
- vi. **Poor Question Bank Systems:** Many secondary schools do not have a question bank system where a large number of questions from each topic or unit of the syllabus are prepared in advance, which, at the time of examination or test, are taken out from the pool. Such questions could have been standardized ahead of time. Failure of this question bank system in schools may prompt teachers to submit low-quality questions, particularly when it comes to deadline submission.

The Way Forward

In recent times, teachers and students are faced with many challenges in the teaching and learning process, and assessment plays a key role in developing students' confidence in their ability to learn and to bring about improvement in the teaching and learning process. For assessment and testing to be well conducted in secondary schools, the following suggestions are made:

- i. There should be regular in-service training and workshops for secondary school teachers on item construction, scoring, and grading of students' scores.

- ii. Secondary schools should be encouraged to run a question bank system where questions submitted by teachers are subjected to proper moderation ahead of examination.
- iii. Teachers should endeavor to give a sizable number of questions or tests to students. This will enable them to mark quickly and give feedback to students.
- iv. Thorough supervision of examination should be ensured, and notice of assessment should be given ahead of time to discourage examination malpractices.
- v. Bias of assessment should be discouraged by teachers.

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