

Towards piloting school based continuous assessment at middle basic level

The Zambian approach

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Abstract

Over the years, national school examinations in Zambia have been used for certification and selection of candidates at primary, junior secondary and senior secondary school levels. School-based continuous assessment marks have neither been considered nor used for certification and selection except in some practical subjects.

The 1977 Educational Reforms provided for the use of continuous assessment (CA), but this provision has not been generally applied especially at the Grade 7 level. The Ministry of Education policy document, *Educating Our Future* (1996) stipulates that the Ministry of Education will develop procedures that will enable teachers to standardise their assessment methods and tasks for use as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. The Ministry of Education *Strategic Plan 2003-2007* re-emphasises the need for integrating school-based continuous assessment results with the final examination results for purposes of certification and selection.

This paper discusses the measures Zambia is taking to standardize the school based continuous assessment procedures and the adopted approaches towards piloting of the school based continuous assessment programme. Finally the paper discusses the challenges and the way forward for the programme.

Continuous assessment

Continuous assessment is an on-going, diagnostic, classroom-based process that uses a variety of assessment tools to measure learner performance. It is a formative evaluation measure conducted during the teaching and learning process with the aim of influencing and informing the overall instructional process.

The most important feature of the above definition is that continuous assessment is a **process**. Since it is a process, it must have a product. In order to produce this product there is need to put in place certain necessary inputs.

Background

Over the years, examinations in Zambia have been used for selection and certification. No formal considerations have been placed on the school-based continuous assessment results as a component in the final examinations except for some practical subjects.

The 1977 Educational Reforms explicitly provided for the use of continuous assessment (CA). This provision has not been generally applied especially at the Grade 7 level.

Educating Our Future (1996) and Ministry of education *Strategic Plan 2003-2007* state the need for integrating school-based continuous assessment results with the final examination results for purposes of certification and selection. Furthermore, the policy document stipulates that the Ministry of Education will develop procedures that will enable teachers to standardise their assessment methods and tasks for use as an integral part of school-based continuous assessment.

The current examination system in Zambia consists of final external examinations only. There is no consideration taken with regard to continuous assessment that is done by teachers in schools.

Objectives of continuous assessment

- To provide diagnostic feedback to learners and teachers
- To combine school based assessment results with the final examination result for learner selection and certification.

The continuous assessment programme

In order to set in motion the implementation of the Continuous Assessment programme the Examinations Council of Zambia was tasked to:

- recommend the plan for implementing Continuous Assessment (CA).
- recommend the Training Plan for preparing teachers in implementing the School-Based Continuous Assessment.
- explore ways of ensuring transparency, reliability, validity and comparability in using School-Based Continuous Assessment results.

- agree on Common Assessment Tasks and/or Learning Outcomes to be identified in the syllabuses for School-Based Continuous Assessment.
- consider the development of the Teacher's Manual on Continuous Assessment .
- consider the nature of Summary Forms for the recording of marks that should be provided to schools (recording procedures).

Activities in the continuous assessment programme

Site visits

Site visits to other countries within the sub-region with previous and relevant experience in conducting Continuous Assessment were made. The following countries were visited:

- Malawi
- Namibia
- Tanzania

Training and orientation

In order to set in motion a training and orientation programme for provincial, district, zone and school officials and to produce materials and instruments, a pilot sample of provinces, districts within the provinces and schools within the districts had to be selected. The grade level at which the pilot was to start was Grade 5. This grade level was selected because it is the middle grade in the primary school. Recording of CA marks for integration with the national examination at grade 7 would start at grade 5.

The sample included an urban, peri-urban and rural province, urban and rural district in each province and GRZ, Community and private school representation.

All the Grade 5 teachers, heads of schools, ZIPs, SIPs and guidance teachers in the pilot schools were trained. All DEBS, DESOs, standards officers and statisticians in the pilot districts were oriented on the operations of the CA system. The training and orientation were conducted by a combined team of officers from ECZ, CDC and Directorate of Standards and Curriculum.

Ownership and sustainability of the CA programme

In order to guarantee the success of the programme it was important that the officers that were going to implement the programme had a sense of ownership of the programme and that the instruments and materials to be used were user friendly and built on the existing activities, materials and plans. This would guarantee sustainability. In this regard, the officers embarked on:

Preparation of assessment and monitoring guidelines for CA

This activity was done by a combined team of officers from Examinations Council of Zambia, Curriculum Development Centre, Teacher Education Directorate, Directorate of Standards and Curriculum, University of Zambia, Colleges of Education and District Inset Providers. The objective of the workshop was to prepare draft Assessment and Monitoring Guidelines for the CA programme

Preparation of assessment schemes for CA

A team of officers drawn from Examinations Council of Zambia, Curriculum Development Centre, Directorate of Standards and Curriculum and some Grade 4 and 5 teachers from each of the nine provinces were involved in this task. The officers were tasked to develop draft:

- Assessment Schemes for the CA programme. At Grades 5 and 6 in Mathematics, English, Creative and Technology Studies, Community Studies, Integrated Science and Social and Development Studies
- Assessment Specifications for End of Term and End of year assessment
- Sequential Assessment programme showing the different times when different aspects of the syllabus would be assessed
- Assessment formats for different learning outcomes
- Guidelines on the length and duration of assessment.

Preparation of assessment instruments, tasks, activities and marking schemes for CA

Officers drawn from Examinations Council of Zambia, Curriculum Development Centre, Directorate of Standards and Curriculum and Grade 5 teachers from each of the provinces and from the pilot schools were tasked to:

- Develop draft Assessment Instruments, Tasks, Activities and Marking Schemes in the six Learning Areas (Mathematics, English, Creative and Technology Studies, Community Studies, Integrated Science and Social and Development Studies) in line with the developed schemes and assessment specifications.
- Scrutinise and polish up the assessment tools, tasks activities and test items.
- Prepare assessment tools, tasks and activities to be used according to the developed assessment schemes.
- Develop Marking Schemes for each assessment tool, task and activity to be used by teachers at school level.

The Assessment and Monitoring Guidelines, Instruments, Tasks, Activities and Schemes were produced for discussion, amendment and enrichment by other stake holders.

Orientation of officers and head teachers from pilot districts and schools on the implementation of CA

Head teachers from each of the pilot schools, Provincial Education Standards Officers, Provincial Resource Centre Coordinators, District Resource Centre Coordinators and Statisticians from each of the pilot provinces and districts were targeted. These stakeholders were oriented on:

- Assessment and Monitoring Guidelines for implementing the CA programme
- Assessment Schemes to be used in the CA programme
- Different forms of Assessment Tasks, Guidelines and Activities to be used in the CA programme
- Assessment records and reporting procedures to be used in the CA programme
- Administration and management of the CA programme

Training of Grade 5 teachers from pilot schools in CA procedures

Training of Grade 5 teachers, School Inset Providers, Zonal Inset Providers and Guidance teachers in each of the pilot districts was done by officers from Examinations Council of Zambia, Curriculum Development Centre, Directorate of Standards and Curriculum.

- The objectives of the training were to:
- Orient the officers with the Assessment and Monitoring Guidelines for implementing the CA programme;
- Familiarize the officers with the Assessment Schemes to be used in the CA programme;
- Orient the officers with the different forms of Assessment Tasks, Guidelines and Activities to be used in the CA programme;
- Familiarize the officers with the assessment records and reporting procedures to be used in the CA programme;
- Orient the officers with the administration and management of the CA programme;
- Provide an opportunity for the officers to review the CA materials and give appropriate feed back about the suitability of the material to be used in the CA programme.

Development of parallel forms for Grade 5 pre-test and post-test instruments

The task was to:

- Develop the test specifications in the six learning areas based on the Grade 4 (pre-test) and Grade 5 (post-test) curriculum.
- Develop two versions of the pre-tests and post-tests based on the designed test specifications.

Materials production

Materials to be used in the conduct of CA have been produced by a combined team of officers from Examinations Council of Zambia, Curriculum Development Centre, Directorate of Standards and Curriculum. The materials were developed by teachers from pilot schools and some trained Grade 7 Item Writers. The materials were reviewed by Heads of schools, Standards Officers, District and Provincial Resource Centre Coordinators, Provincial and District Statisticians from the pilot provinces and districts.

The following have been produced and distributed to pilot schools, districts and provinces:

- Teacher's Guide
- Grade 5 CA Tasks in Six Learning Areas
- CA Class Mark Sheet
- CA Final Summary Mark Sheet
- Grade 5 Base Line Tests in the six learning areas
- Grade 5 Post Pilot Tests in the six learning areas.

Piloting

Piloting of the CA system started in January 2006. Baseline Tests in the six learning areas were administered in the second week of January to all grade five pupils in the 24 pilot schools and to all grade 5 pupils in 24 control schools. The pilot schools have received all the materials listed above while the control school only had the tests administered.

Grade 5 Post Pilot Tests in the six learning areas will be administered to the same pupils both in pilot and control schools in November 2006 in order to find out whether there will be any improvement in learning achievement of pupils in the pilot schools as a result of the use of CA as a learning and teaching strategy.

Challenges and constraints in the implementation of CA

The large class size in most primary schools is a major problem. It is common to find classes of 60 and above. Teachers are expected to mark and keep records of the progress of the learners. Work related to CA takes a lot of time for teachers and as a result teachers get concerned that time spent on remediation and enrichment is too much and as a result they would not finish the syllabus. There is a belief amongst teachers that CA involves too much work

CA will not be successfully implemented if there are inadequate teaching resources/ equipment in schools. Teachers need materials and equipment such as stationery, computers, photocopiers and electricity.

Use of the CA data

The data generated from continuous assessment will be useful in assisting teachers plan work for individual pupils. It will also assist teachers in identifying the unique understanding of each learner in a classroom. It will also inform the pupil of the level of instructional attainment. Continuous assessment will help target opportunities that promote learning and help to reduce learner anxiety associated with examinations.

Conclusion

The idea of CA is to have no child left behind and almost every child should shine. CA aims at involving Teachers in assessment. CA will help to reduce pressure on children preparing for examinations as the marks obtained from CA will count towards the final mark for selection and certification. Class sizes should be monitored and reduced to manageable levels. CA focuses on mastery learning and improves holistic education of learners. It is therefore an issue of standards and the success of the programme depends on how Standards Officers apply themselves to its successful implementation.

Training in CA should be continuous and incorporated in pre-service training of teachers.