

Perceptions Of Secondary School Teachers On June Public Examinations In Zimbabwe

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Abstract: Examinations, when done appropriately, are essential aspects of education at secondary school level for they are reliable evaluation tools of an academic achievement of a student and they also mark a transition to higher education. The study investigated the opinions of secondary school teachers in Zimbabwe on “O” and “A” levels June public examinations. It focused on the impact of these examinations on the school, the teachers, the students and the parents as viewed by the teachers. The researchers took the advantage of those teachers that are engaged in Bachelor of Education holiday studies at Solusi University and randomly selected a sample of 81 “O” and “A” teachers from all the 10 provinces of Zimbabwe. The researchers collected data during the August 2015 study session and they analyzed it using SPSS. Findings showed that the writing of public examinations at both “O” and “A” Levels in June is associated with more disadvantages than advantages: It negatively affect the performance school ranking which is based on November academic results; the school authorities and teachers spends extra time preparing for the June examinations which can deprive them of time with family and students. They are also put under pressure when preparation for June examinations. These June examinations are also costly to parents. Advantages of June examinations include the easing of the November load for both teachers and students. Due to the overwhelming disadvantages over advantages of June public examinations, the researchers concluded that June examinations should be kept to a minimal, that is, to be written as a supplementary exam by those who would have failed the November public examinations and to be written by outstanding students who can only write those few subjects they excel in.

Key Terms: public examinations; perceptions; “O” and “A” level students

I. INTRODUCTION

Examinations are at the foundation of the education system of most countries in the world. This is because of their qualitative merit, that is, diagnostic, placement and quality control characteristics (Emiloju and Adeyoju 2012). In Zimbabwe, the education system is examination based. It is characterized by nine years of Primary education; two years of pre-school, that is grade Zero A and grade Zero B and then seven years of grade one to grade seven, all in English Language. This is so because, at political independency in 1980, Zimbabwe continued the colonial policy of using English as an official language (Gotosa, Rwodzi and

Mhlanga 2013). There is a public examination at the end of grade seven that makes an entrance to secondary school level.

The secondary school education comprises six years, that is, four years of Ordinary “O” Level and two years of Advanced “A” Level. Musarurwa and Chimhenga (2011) pointed out that Zimbabwe, like most Commonwealth countries, inherited an examination model of the United Kingdom (UK) which is characterized by “O” and “A” Level. Both levels are concluded by public examinations which are valued very much for they mark an end of an educational stage and an entrance to another stage (Musarurwa and Chimhenga, 2011). They also argued that examinations play a major role in assessment of learning. Mashanyare and Chinamasa (2014) propounded that examinations are used as tools for objectively

evaluating and assessing students learning outcomes; ability to demonstrate knowledge as well as understanding some employment skills development. Due to these aspects, most countries consider examinations as one of the most important aspects of the education system (Emiloju and Adeyoju 2012). The Zimbabwean education system is therefore examination driven as well as highly competitive as Kurebwa (2012) propounded.

The external examinations are currently run by the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council (ZIMSEC). Soon after independence in 1980, Zimbabwe reformed its education system to align it with new national goals (Kanyongo 2005; Mashanyare and Chinamasa 2014). It should be noted that before independence, the then Rhodesia's public school examinations were controlled by the United Kingdom (UK) based examinations boards. To be specific, the Ordinary and Advanced level examinations were under three external examination boards namely the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES), the University of London Schools Examinations Board (ULSEB) and the Associated Examinations Board (AEB). Mashanyare and Chinamasa (2014) further highlighted the country had its own Examinations branch under the Ministry of Education, Division of African Education, which played an administrative role for external examinations as well as administered the terminal primary school grade seven (7) examinations, the Junior Certificate examinations, the F2 grade nine (9) and grade eleven (11) examinations which were meant for African students.

Different examination boards were for different students, for instance, Associated Examination Board (AEB) was meant for whites while University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) was mainly for African students (Musarurwa and Chimhenga 2011). It is obvious that the discriminatory purpose of the assessment system was meant to disadvantage the majority of the African population, thus it failed to instill good work habits and ethics and did not prepare African school leavers for the world of work (Nherera, 2000). This is why Zimbabwe was eager to take control of its examination system soon after independence in 1980 in order to address this disparity. Jenjekwa (2013) propounded that it is an uncontested fact that strides were made soon after independence to redress issues of quality and assessment in education.

The ZIMSEC Official website (Undated) stated that ZIMSEC is an autonomous parastatal under the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture which was set up as a result of the 1994, Zimbabwe School Examinations Council Act. It was a move to localize the examinations and to ensure the end of colonial curricula (under the UK Cambridge University) in Zimbabwe. The first localized O-Level examination was written in 1990, four years before the first board (ZIMSEC) was appointed. Later, in November 2002 the first ZIMSEC A-Level Examination was also written.

ZIMSEC Official website (Undated) further states that ZIMSEC is an internationally accredited examinations board whose syllabuses have been evaluated by the National Academic Recognition and Information Centre (NARIC) in the UK and were found to be equivalent to the General Certificate of education standard offered in several English

speaking countries including the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and United States of America. Thus, the internationally recognized qualifications conferred by the Council. It should be noted that there are some private schools in the country that still offer Cambridge curriculum and examinations to date.

A school year in Zimbabwe runs from January to December and examinations are written in November (usually stretching to December) but they are generally known as November examinations. There are also examinations that are written in June; originally the June examinations were meant for those who had failed the November examinations in the previous year. However, with time, the brilliant students, both at "O" and "A" Levels grabbed the opportunity and wrote part or all of their examinations in June of their final year. This has seen some students, instead of going for the third term at high school, going for their university first semester. Such an occurrence has lured many students to try their luck; also some examination class teacher saw it as a better way to relieve their work-loads since those who pass the examinations in June will not bother them during the third term.

Some headmasters also fell for the June examinations for their own advantages including relieved budgets because some of the students who pass the examinations in the June will not come back for third term. Due to these advantages associated with the June examinations, the researchers observed that some schools have now made it a rule for every examination candidate to write their examinations both in June and November.

However, there seem to be some associated challenges; Tshuma (2015) revealed that some school heads have banned pupils from writing examinations in June (except for those who are supplementing) which the heads say have a negative effect on their schools' pass rate. The school heads argued that parents use the November academic rankings to choose which schools to send their children putting schools that allow June examination seating at a disadvantage.

Some school heads in Zimbabwe have told their "O" and "A" Level candidates not to register for June examinations while others advised the candidates to write only a few subjects in June so that the schools still stand a chance for a good positions in the November rankings (Tshuma 2015). The ranking scale used by ZIMSEC was confirmed by the Matabeleland North Provincial Education Director who said, "ZIMSEC is still using the November exams for ranking schools. It is not combining both June and November examinations and this does not give a proper picture of how schools are performing. But, there are modalities that are being worked on to ensure that both sittings are taken into account" (NewsdzeZimbabwe 2015). Parents are also concerned with this June examination issue; Tshuma (2015) pointed out that a number of parents agreed to the idea of banning June examinations for they argued that the June examination process disturbs pupils' learning and may result in incomplete syllabi. This is also in line with Ebeuwa (2014)'s concern that failure to complete the syllabus before examinations may lead to examinations malpractices.

There are advantages for "O" and "A" Level candidates to write examinations in June; among them are relieving of

pressure to candidates. Due to this reason, the Deputy Minister of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe urged school heads to allow pupils to write examination in June as the exams are important to both the education sector and pupils since the ministry does not have a policy which allows school heads to ban or bar pupils from writing examinations in June (NewsdzeZimbabwe 2015). The Deputy Minister is said to have explained that in the event that pupils are not prepared enough for the exams, the school heads should explain to pupils that they cannot write an examination. The same source said that the ZIMSEC public relations manager said that the examination mother body, that is ZIMSEC, did not have a say on school heads conduct. Later, the same year (2015) rumours were circulating on social media platforms and in schools that the ZIMSEC had suspended 2015 June “O” and “A” Level examination session which the ZIMSEC director dismissed as false (Chakanyuka 2015). Such rumour should ring messages to the responsible authority on what could be improved.

It can be seen that the writing of June public examinations by examination-first-sitters is a controversial issue since the examination was designed to be a supplementary one; the interested parties have mixed feelings about it. This is because there are both advantages and disadvantages associated with the system. This can therefore be a fertile area of research, however, none has been done yet, (at least in Zimbabwe) mainly because this phenomenon is relatively new. This research therefore wants to fill in this gap by finding out the opinions of secondary school teachers on this “O” and “A” Level June examinations issue.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- ✓ What were the demographic characteristics of the participants?
- ✓ What are the problems and benefits associated with the November “O” and “A” Level candidates writing their final examinations in June?

III. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The researchers used a survey to investigate the opinions of secondary school teachers in Zimbabwe on “O” and “A” levels June public examinations. Questionnaires for teachers which concentrated on their opinion on the involvement and impact of these examinations on the school, the teachers, the students and the parents were drafted. The researchers distributed and collected the questionnaires to a randomly selected sample of 81 Zimbabwe’s “O” and “A” Level teachers from all the 10 provinces of the country who were engaged in Bachelor of Education studies at Solusi University in 2015. These are part-time students who study through what is known as Block Release; they take their studies at the mentioned university during the holidays. The researchers collected data during the August 2015 study session and they analyzed it using SPSS.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The table below shows 81 participants of the study who were both male and female in almost a balanced state, that is, 45.7% male teachers and 46.9% female. Balance in the composition of research participants is important for it affects the results of the study. This is because opinions are affected by gender. Therefore the implication of this participant composition on participants-responses for this research can be said to be balanced and fair.

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	male	37	45.7	49.3
	female	38	46.9	50.7
	Total	75	92.6	100.0
Missing	System	6	7.4	
Total	81	100.0		

Table 1: Participants distribution by gender (N=81)

However, six of the participants did not fill in the gender section represented by “missing” on the table above. The six constitute 7.4% percent of the participants, which means that 92.6% rightfully filled in this section making the information remain valid.

The table below shows the provinces from which the participants were teaching. They were drawn from all the ten provinces of the country, hence, a fair coverage of the country. The results of this study can therefore be generalized for the whole country.

Provinces	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Manicaland	7	8.6	9.0
	Mashonaland East	5	6.2	6.4
	Midlands	20	24.7	25.6
	Mashonaland West	3	3.7	3.8
	Matabeleland South	11	13.6	14.1
	Matabeleland North	10	12.3	12.8
	Masvingo	12	14.8	15.4
	Harare South	1	1.2	1.3
	Bulawayo Metropolitan	4	4.9	5.1
	Harare East	1	1.2	1.3
	Mashonaland Central	3	3.7	3.8
	Harare	1	1.2	1.3
	Total	78	96.3	100.0
Missing	System	3	3.7	
Total	81	100.0		

Table 2: Participants distribution by province (N=81)

On the table above, Harare Province has been split into three sub-provinces due to the participants who were specifying the parts of Harare they came from, that is, Harare South, Harare East and Harare (Central) hence the 12 slots

shown. Three participants did not fill in their provinces hence the “missing” on the table. However, three is such a small number that its effect on the results of the study can be ignored.

Participants were from various departments of their schools, that is, from 15 taught subject areas at both “O” and “A” levels as shown on table 3 and 4, respectively. These are also other indicators of fair representation of the participants that can make the generalization of results authentic.

Subjects taught	Responses	
	N	Percent
English	19	23.5%
History	18	22.2%
Commerce	3	3.7%
Geography	6	7.4%
Intergated Science	4	4.9%
Isindebele	5	6.2%
Divinity	3	3.7%
Bible Knowledge	1	1.2%
Religious Studies	5	6.2%
Agriculture	5	6.2%
Mathematics	5	6.2%
Literature in English	4	4.9%
Food & Nutrition	1	1.2%
Accounts	1	1.2%
Computer Studies	1	1.2%
Total	81	100.0%

Table 3: Participants distribution by subjects taught

Academic level taught	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
"O" Level	54	66.7%	66.7%
"A" Level	27	33.3%	33.3%
Total	81	100.0%	1000%

Table 4: Participants distribution by level taught (N=81)

The fact that there were more “O” level than “A” Level teachers who participated in this study as shown on the table above is a true representation of the situation in the country; there are more “O” Level than “A” Level teachers and students in Zimbabwe. Whilst a large number of students can proceed from primary school to the secondary school (“O” Level) only a few who would have been passed “O” Level can be enrolled for “A” Level.

Respondents agreed that the writing of public examinations at both “O” and “A” Levels in June affect the performance school ranking as shown by a high mean of 3.5750 on the table below. This means that the majority of the respondents realized that fact that the annual ranking of school (both at “O” and “A” Level) which is done according to

academic performance is based on November public examinations. The rationale behind this decision is that originally public examination were scheduled for November; however, those who fail during that particular time have been given an opportunity to make-up in June, so June public examinations cannot be used for school rating. Even though some schools have decided to let their student write public examinations in June as first seaters, the ranking rule hasn’t changed and the implication is that, those schools that are associated with June examination writing are at a disadvantage as far as the performance ranking of the schools are concerned.

These findings tallies findings by Tshuma 2015 that ZIMSEC is still using the November examinations for ranking schools so some school heads argued that parents use November rankings to choose which schools to send their children putting schools that allow June examination seating at a disadvantage.

School factors	N	Mini	Maxi	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Writing examinations in June affects the school's ranking	81	1.00	5.00	3.5750	1.47361
2. The school spends extra time preparing for the June examinations.	81	1.00	5.00	3.4938	1.43286
3. Students who are not taking "O" and "A" levels are neglected while the school concentrates on the June examinations.	81	1.00	5.00	2.9506	1.54030
4. June examinations affect the overall running of the school.	81	1.00	5.00	3.2716	1.32299
5. June examinations save the school on their budget.	81	1.00	5.00	2.8148	1.26601

Table 5: School factors (N=81)

The other disadvantage of writing public examinations in June revealed by the study is the extra time that is spend by the teachers preparing for the June examinations when they are yet to prepare for the November public examinations. This is indicated by a high mean of 3.4938 and a low standard deviation of 1.43286 which shows a fairly homogeneous response. Again, June examinations affect the overall running of the school as shown by a high mean of 3.2716 and a low standard deviation of 1.32299 which is an indicator that responses were relatively similar, that is, the majority of the respondents were in agreement on the negative impact of the June public examinations on the day-to-day running of the schools.

However, a relatively fewer number of respondents (mean of 2.9506 and standard deviation of 1.54030) ascribed to the

fact that non-examination classes are neglected while the school concentrate on the June examination candidates. This means that generally, non-examination classes usually continue learning during the preparation and writing of the June public examinations. Likewise, the idea that June examinations save school budgets was not a popular one as indicated by a generally low mean of 2.8148. This is mainly due to the fact that the majority of the students who write examinations in June do not write all the subjects; some vernacular subjects like Shona and Ndebele and practical subjects like Agriculture and Fashion and Fabrics are only offered in June but only in November. Also, some students just choose to write few subjects in June, especially those they excel in.

The table below shows the impact of June public examinations on the associated teachers which seems to be more on the negative side than on the positive one. The respondents concurred that teachers are pressurized to finish the syllabus before June examinations as shown by a high mean of 3.7625. The pressure for the teachers is caused by trying to finish a syllabus that was designed for two years in four months less the time. This finding tallies that by Ebebuwa (2014) who found out that failure to complete the syllabus before examinations may lead to examinations malpractices.

Teacher factors	N	Mini	Maxi	Mean	Std. Deviation
6. The teachers are pressurized to finish the syllabus before June examinations.	80	1.00	5.00	3.7625	1.51151
7. The teachers have to teach examination classes during the evenings in order to prepare the students for June exams	81	1.00	5.00	3.2469	1.47081
8. The teacher spends less time with their families.	79	1.00	5.00	3.3038	1.37145
9. Writing the examinations in June means that teachers have less work during the third term.	80	1.00	5.00	2.7625	1.47763
10. The teachers prefer their students to write the examinations in June to ease their load during the last term.	81	1.00	5.00	2.5432	1.32334

Table 6: Teacher factors (N=81)

Another pressure related impact of June public examinations on teachers is that the June examination

preparation compels them to teach the examination classes during the evenings in order to cover the syllabus and to adequately prepare the students for examinations. This is shown on the table above by a high mean of 3.2469 and a low standard deviation of 1.47081 which is an indicator that there was homogeneous response from the respondents. A high mean of 3.3038 also shows that his pressure automatically deprives the teachers their time with their families. However, a relatively high mean of 2.7625 shows that writing the examinations in June can be positive in that teachers may have less work during the third term and teachers may prefer their students to write the examinations in June to ease their load during the third term as shown by a mean of 2.5432.

Table 7 illustrates the impact of June public examinations on the students; again, the negative impact outweighing the positive one. The negatives comprise the notion that students are put under pressure when preparation for June examinations as shown by a high mean of 3.8642 and low standard deviation of 1.34864. It should be understood that these students, though the write examinations in June, they also write other examinations in November. As a result of the June examinations, student's learning is compromised as students concentrate only on examinations and some students no longer attending other lessons as elaborated by a high mean 3.6543 and low standard deviation of 1.30538. The respondents also echoed that students are deprived of time to relax and play when preparing for June examinations as a high mean of 3.8947 and low standard deviation of 1.14983 suggest. June examinations also rob students of sleeping hours in the name of preparation time as indicated by a high mean of 3.5733 and low standard deviation of 1.33734.

Student factors	N	Mini	Maxi	Mean	Std. Deviation
11. There is much pressure exerted to the students in preparation for June examinations.	81	1.00	5.00	3.8642	1.34864
12. Student learning is compromised as students concentrate on examinations only.	81	1.00	5.00	3.6543	1.30538
13. There is limited time to relax and play in preparation for June examinations.	81	1.00	5.00	3.8947	1.14983
14. Students prefer to write some of the examinations in June to lighten their study load in	81	1.00	5.00	3.5733	1.33734

November.				
15. Students sleep less hours in preparation for June examination.				

Table 7: Student factors (N=81)

However, there is also a positive aspect on the part of the students which is associated with writing public examinations in June as displayed by the table above. It is concerned with lightening the November load, high mean of 3.5733 and low standard deviation of 1.33734. These findings are very similar to NewsdzeZimbabwe (2015) claim that the Deputy Minister of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe has urged school heads to let pupils write examination in June because the June public examinations are important to both the education sector and pupils themselves.

The table below shows the impact of June public examinations on the parents and it implies that the June examinations are not favourable to parents for it is costly for them to pay examinations fees twice, that is for June and for November examinations as shown by a very high mean of 4.2432 and very low standard deviation of 1.21419. In fact, 59.3% of the respondents strongly agreed to this idea, an indicator that the response was homogeneous. However, despite the costs, parents prefer their children to write the examinations in June and November as illustrated by a high mean of 3.2973 and very low standard deviation of 1.34194.

Parental Factors	N	Mini	Maxi	Mean	Std. Deviation
16. It is costly for parents to pay examinations fees for the same subjects that would be written in June and Nov.	81	1.00	5.00	4.2432	1.21419
17. The parents prefer that their children write the examinations in June and November.	81	1.00	5.00	3.2973	1.34194
18. Students passing June examinations save their parents tuition that they would have paid for the last term.	81	1.00	5.00	3.4054	1.42309

Table 8: Parental Factors (N=81)

There are few cases of students, especially at "A" Level who write and pass all the subjects in June, and for these few, they do not come back for the third term session. For these, the respondents agreed, June examinations save their parents

tuition that they would have paid for the last term, high mean of 3.4054 and low standard deviation of 1.42309 as indicated on the table above.

A. CONCLUSION

It can be seen that study collected data from a reliable source of respondents who were from all the provinces of the country; from different disciplines of the curriculum and fairly distributed according to gender. This makes the results of the study authentic and reliable.

On the findings of the study, respondents exposed more disadvantages than advantages of students writing public examinations in June at both "O" and "A" Levels. The disadvantages includes: June public examinations negatively affect the annual school ranking which is based on November academic results; the school authorities and teachers spend extra time preparing for the June examinations which can deprive them of time with family. Students, as well, are put under pressure when preparation for June examinations. June examinations are also not favorable to parents who find themselves paying examination fees twice a year (for June and for November) making the process costly. However, there are some advantages of the June public examinations, for instance, easing the November load for both teachers and students.

Due to the overwhelming of the disadvantages over advantages of June public examinations, the research concludes that June examinations should be kept to a minimal, first and foremost, being limited to its original purpose: to be written as a supplementary exam by those who would have failed the November public examinations. Secondly, the privilege of writing examinations in June can also be extended to outstanding students who can only write those subjects they excel in for they can tackle the June examination with little pressure and minimal guidance from their teachers.

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