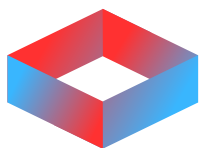


Strengthening Uptake of Learning Assessments in Kenya



A POLICY BRIEF

September 2023

Introduction

Research-based evidence can positively impact quality, design and effectiveness of policies. This is especially true in contexts of extreme vulnerability to climate change and economic shocks where governments are struggling to ensure sustainable development (Goldman and Pabari, 2021). Linking research to policy and practice firstly ensures policy decisions are informed by and anchored on a solid evidence base.

Secondly, it minimises policy failures and wastage of resources on unworkable programmes, and thirdly it can also drive innovations which have the potential for society-wide transformations. However, global literature indicates that the relationship between evidence production and its utilisation may not be linear (Manning, Goldman and Licona, 2020), meaning that data availability is not the main reason for failure to utilise evidence for decision-making.

Assessment of learning is a critical element of any education sector monitoring plan. Globally, governments and key education stakeholders have established practices and approaches for rolling out large-scale assessments and examinations for gauging improvement of learning outcomes and quality of education. Learning assessments not only provide vital evidence and information on a country's educational outcomes but also provide evidence to support inferences on how well students are learning and achieving the necessary competencies at different levels in their educational journey. Therefore, if well utilised, findings from such assessments can contribute to important educational reforms by influencing individual teacher behaviour modification, and improvements in system and school-wide instructional practices, which could translate into better student achievements and learning outcomes.

In Kenya, the 8-4-4 education system, which is now being phased out, emphasises summative assessments at the end of the primary and secondary cycles of learning in the form of the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) respectively. However, there has been a shift in the recently introduced Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) that gives greater weight to

formative assessments throughout the education cycle (60%) than summative assessments at the end of Grade Six (40%). In December 2022, the first cohort of the CBC primary learners sat for their end cycle assessment and subsequently transitioned to junior secondary school.

The Research Process

It draws on literature review and key insights from GESCI's formative study on utilisation of past and present learning assessments in Kenya. The formative study was conducted between April and July 2022. The research covered key education stakeholders including policymakers, education officials, curriculum institutes, examination authorities, teacher educators, civil society organisations, education and assessment experts and teachers.

The research revealed that, several learning assessment approaches exist in Kenya, and they range from national examinations to cross-national and international assessments. They also range from classroom-based assessments, national or public examinations, citizen-led assessments and large-scale assessments mostly administered at the national, regional and international levels are designed for the purpose to assess learning outcomes. While classroom tests can be formative or summative; public examinations are used for certification and selection purposes.

KEY FINDINGS

Barriers to Utilization of Learning Assessments in Kenya

01

Poor conceptualization of learning assessments among key actors.

02

Capacity/Knowledge challenges

03

High-stake examination culture within the education systems

04

Limited resources to conduct and sustain learning assessment efforts

05

Weak institutionalization of research

06

Lack of uniform understanding of life skills and values

Barriers to Utilization of Learning Assessments in Kenya

The research confirmed that learning assessments have been used to influence education policy and practice but not to a great extent.

This study identified several factors that hinder the uptake and utilisation of learning assessments in Kenya:

- **Poor conceptualization of learning assessments:** There is low awareness of the role of learning assessments among the practitioners (teachers) and mid-level officers (county/sub-county level) as most still associate assessment with examinations.
- **Capacity/Knowledge challenges:** There is a strong insider recognition that most officers do not have the capacity to interpret data and knowledge in ways that make sense in their work, thus contributing to the low utilisation of the assessment findings. There is also lack of, or inadequate assessment capacity at multiple levels, i.e. at the personnel, teacher and policy levels.
- **High-stake examination culture within the education systems:** Even with the new CBC curriculum, the national and end of cycle examinations remains to be a more acceptable benchmark for assessing education quality rather than learning assessments.
- **Limited resources to conduct and sustain learning assessment efforts:** Conducting learning assessment was seen as an expensive venture and many of the stakeholders do not have the financial capacity to sustain the endeavour.
- **Weak institutionalization of research:** i) At the MoE level, there appears to be limited capacity in research and data translation among the technical officers and policymakers to go beyond the pre-packaged policy briefs and critically analyse and engage with the data. Linked to the above, is the issue of institutionalization of research. ii) There is no department or unit within the Directorate of Policy dedicated to research though MoE insiders talked of plans to establish a research coordination mechanism or an evidence repository that would provide a platform for analysis, the synthesis of those findings and link this analysis to policy making and see what it is working, what's not working.
- **Lack of uniform understanding of life skills and values:** The measurement of life skills and values has been challenging globally, especially at a large scale. The subject matter is complex - life skills and values are intangible, and the same concepts may be defined differently from one place to another, with nuanced differences even within the same geographical localities, same ethnicities, and religions.

Policy Recommendations

We recognize that there are many reforms that are taking place linked to the competency-based curriculum reform. However, we believe there are several steps that could be done to further strengthen the utilisation of learning assessments.

Borrow from past and present assessments: There are many assessment initiatives that happen, regional and internationally. Assessments teams could work with experts of past large-scale assessments to borrow their experiences on how to analyse the large-scale learning assessment data, disseminate learning assessment findings as well as practical modalities for making closer follow-up after the dissemination.

Create awareness on assessments at all levels of education: There is a need to strengthen knowledge and awareness of assessments, their role and how they could be used to improve learning, teaching, and policy reforms. A stronger understanding, especially among the middle-level officials and teachers, will increase the demand but also support utilization.

Build assessment capacity among key actors: Strengthen the capacity of teachers and other education stakeholders for effective development, utilisation and assessment of life skills at the school level. This is important as the skills are not integrated in the teacher (pre-service) education curriculum as an explicit subject. In addition, there is need to strengthen the capacity of teacher educators and teacher training colleges on life skills and values. so that teachers graduate with knowledge on how to nurture and assess life skills.

Make assessment tools more available: There is a general problem with the accessibility and usability of tools at different levels. There is a need to have some standard and contextually relevant tools for assessments available, especially within the school settings . This will demystify assessment and support rapid data collection, analysis and use of the assessment findings for diverse audiences and end users.

Entrench assessments at all levels: While some aspects of education such as early childhood education are devolved, there is need to reach out to other authorities including the county governments which have the mandate to deliver Early Childhood Development Education (EDCDE) as well as vocational training. This should help the adoption and application of the tools in different settings.

Incorporate assessment of values and lifeskills in the government led-assessments: The new shift to CBC provides an important opportunity for assessment to go beyond just testing numeracy and literacy. There is need to develop complementary and contextual tools to assist in assessing the various 21st Century skills who wholesome assessment of learners. One of the opportunities that exist in the new curriculum would be to include assessment of acquired life skills and values in the final 3 month assessment of community service learning.

Strengthen partnerships and collaboration among key assessment actors: The government could partner with various assessment initiatives focused on these skills to ensure more tools are developed to cover more skills and values. Design a framework and resources to facilitate Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) to share assessment information to more stakeholders.

Have a robust dissemination strategy: Most assessments seem to have weak dissemination strategies therefore hindering their use. For every assessment, there is a need embed a robust dissemination strategy in the conceptualisation and planning stage of all learning assessments processes. This will enable the results to reach the widest cross section of stakeholders and particularly the middle-level and sub-national middle level policy makers who influence what happens at the lowest level such as schools, teacher training institutions and communities.

References and Citations:

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