

Opinion Article

## Continuous Assessment in Malawian Primary Schools: An Effective Policy on Paper\*

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**Abstract**

Education reform is a catchword in academia particularly now that the world is becoming more complex. The Ministry of Education in Malawi revised its primary school curriculum in the early 2000 to address educational challenges. Two key aspects of the reform were a paradigm shift from teacher to learner-centered teaching approaches and the integration of continuous assessment in the teaching and learning process. The obvious anticipation of the primary curriculum and assessment reform (PCAR) was that the education challenges facing the primary school sector would be addressed. This paper argues that the emphasis on the use of CA to address the learning challenges in primary education remains a far-fetched dream if there is no radical reform in the system and operating context.

**Keywords:** Continuous assessment, outcome-based education, continuous testing

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Conceptualization of the Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR)

The deterioration of the Malawi education system characterized by high dropout rates, repetition, and general apathy in schooling led to the conceptualization of the primary school curriculum and assessment reform (Kambankadzanja, 2005; MoEST, 2006). It was further revealed that the curriculum was characterized by teaching for examination, hence the need for a new curriculum and a new approach to teaching and learning (Chakwera, Khembo, & Sireci, 2004). A national consultation process began leading to the conceptualization of the national curriculum and assessment framework in 2003. Having considered input from various stakeholders and experiences from other countries, Malawi considered the adoption of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) as the main reform. The key feature in the PCAR is the paradigm shift from teacher to learner-centred approach to teaching, and the introduction of continuous assessment as an integral element in the teaching and learning process.

However, before embracing the use of continuous assessment in primary school, there was a feasibility study conducted on the Improving Educational Quality Project (IEQ) funded by USAID (IEQ, 2003). The results of the longitudinal study by IEQ revealed that there was an improvement in the performance of the majority of pupils who were initially unable to read, write or perform simple mathematical tasks. In the year 2000, a team of IEQ project members started meeting education officials in Malawi to devise classroom based intervention in order to improve the teaching and learning. This led to the launch of continuous assessment feasibility study in 21 primary schools of Ntcheu district in 2002.

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**Received Date:** 24/05/2022**Accepted Date:** 06/08/2022**Publication Language:** English

*To cite this article:* Chiziwa K.M.C, W. (2022). Continuous assessment in Malawian primary schools: An effective policy on paper. *International e-Journal of Educational Studies*, 6 (12), 105-109. <https://doi.org/10.31458/iej.1120483>

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The findings of the feasibility study were positive for both teachers and learners. It was revealed that pupils who were not literate coming to standard 3 learned how to read and write, and their achievement in mathematics improved. Teachers were reported to have gained new skills and new knowledge which made them better teachers. Among the skills teachers gained was the creative use of locally available resources (TALULAR) to support learning. In addition, teachers were said to have learned new concepts such as remediation, enrichment, and curriculum-based assessment. Teachers realized that assessment is no longer meant to test. Further, it was observed that teachers used CA to inform their teaching. This is a departure from the way assessment was perceived in traditional education.

The positive lights provided by the feasibility study conducted by IEQ provided a ray of hope to the challenges of the education system. This was manifested by the eventual conceptualization of the national curriculum and assessment framework in 2003 (Mchazime, 2003). The introduction of CA in primary education was with a purpose. One important element was to use CA to support learning. The previous assessment regime was dominantly summative which did not give room for any support. CA, therefore, was meant to address the learning gaps of learners by providing an avenue for a support system during the teaching and learning process. CA had a dual purpose of assisting teachers in improving their teaching on one hand and learners in addressing gaps based on feedback, on the other hand. Subsequently, the introduction of CA was meant to suppress the high stakes of national examination which bred undesirable results. But how sure are we that CA would result in improvement in teaching and learning? Will the introduction of CA bring meaningful change? Will the implementation context be favorable for CA? these were some of the unanswered or unattended questions that probably lingered in the minds of curriculum specialists. This paper attempts to show that the implementation of CA in primary school is fruitless as it is still operating in a hostile environment.

## 1.2. Critical Examination of CA in Malawian Context

The National Education Standards (NES) highlight the importance of constructive use of assessment to achieve excellence in the teaching and learning process (MoE, 2020). The effective practice portrays the ability of the teacher to use formative assessment to monitor the learning process and be able to help learners improve their work. Another important aspect is the provision of constructive feedback so that they improve their work. But the assessment practice in Malawian schools is characterized by periodical administration of tests made every fortnight or monthly to have two continuous assessment grades as a requirement (Chiziwa, & Kunkwenzu, 2021). These practices do not represent the change from continuous testing to assessment that informs learning (Susuwele-Banda 2005). These continuous assessment practices do not serve the purpose of either assisting to fill the learner's gap or enrich their potentialities but to portray to the authorities that they carry out a continuous assessment by having records available for supervisory services.

Another critical element in the PCAR is the need to provide feedback after assessing learners. It is envisaged that once feedback is provided to learners, there could be an associated desire to close the learning gaps. Despite the instrumental role of feedback towards learning, teacher's feedback in primary school is found wanting. Teachers are interested in providing numerical grades and statements of either approval or disapproval with no effort of explaining why they are wrong and what they can do to improve their learning gaps (Chiziwa, & Kunkwenzu, 2022). Such feedback is meaningless as it does not inform learning (Sadler, 1989). Feedback must be able to explain to the learners why they are wrong and possible suggestion for improvement (Fautly & Savage 2008; Vu, & Dall'Alba, 2007). The unproductive feedback prevailing in primary education is very disturbing as it does not support the aspiration of the integration of assessment in the teaching and learning process.

Furthermore, the challenge to the effective implementation of CA in Malawian primary school is large pupil-qualified teacher ratio. Although there has been a tremendous improvement in the number of pupil-qualified teacher ratio in primary school (PQTR) from 92:1 in 2009 to 70:1 in 2018 against the target PQTR of 60:1 (MoE, 2020), this change is not meaningful to bring any desirable change. This only shows that the primary school sector is still grappling with shortage of qualified teachers to effectively support the emerging educational reforms, implying that there is still a shortage of qualified teachers in primary schools. Even if Malawi attained the 60:1 pupil-teacher ratio, the numbers cannot drive effective continuous assessment agenda. Worse still primary education is still reeling with high Pupil Permanent Classroom Ratio (PCR) of 120.9:1 in 2018 from 124:1 in 2014 (MoE, 2020). This shows that improvement is at a very snail's pace to support any significant change.

While the emphasis on CA was considered as an instrument to promote quality learning, to the contrary, the state of affairs has worsened. The 2018 figures showed that there were 5,187,634 learners in primary school representing a Net Enrolment Rate (NER) of 90% in that year. However, the primary completion rates were as low as 51% and 53% from 2014 to 2018 respectively (MoE, 2020). The monitoring of the learning achievement survey undertaken by MoE in 2015 revealed that the majority of learners failed to reach the threshold of 40% mark in the national primary curriculum performance standard. This is a revelation that the primary education system is still suffering from systemic challenges unlikely to be addressed in the short term. Therefore, the contribution of CA towards improvement remains a daunting endeavor.

Among the reasons for the dismal performance are inadequate teaching and learning materials (TLM) with the learner textbook ratio per subject reaching as high as 10:1 in some schools; Underutilization of learning materials with books locked up as a care measure; The curriculum is not designed for the large numbers of students who leave for whatever reason or are pushed out due to low performance; High absenteeism by both learners and teachers; among others. Ironically low quality of teaching and assessment is among the challenges (MoE, 2020). Assessment which was supposed to enhance quality is to the contrary experiencing gaps in the implementation context.

The new assessment culture introduced in the primary school education system requires teachers to change their assessment practices. Calderhead and Shorrock (1997) argue that new ideas introduced in the education system need to have a framework to support long-term teachers learning, otherwise the absence of such efforts tends to reinforce the status quo. In this regard, teachers are supposed to be assessment literate in line with the current demands of the curriculum. However, a study done by Chulu (2013) observed that most teachers in Malawi lack the ability to formulate valid assessment tasks. In a study on primary school assessment practices, it was found that teachers dominantly carried out continuous testing with questions aimed at eliciting correct responses with little or no effort in cultivating critical thinking skills (Chiziwa, & Kunkwenzu, 2021).

Traditionally, teachers used questions intending to elicit the correct responses from learners. The new era of assessment with constructivist approaches provides many opportunities of assessment that are collaborative as well as centred on problem-solving (Fautly & Savage, 2008; James, 2006). This shift calls for change in the form and content of assessment to reflect the new thinking (Shepard, 2009). Assessment must reflect problem-solving skills that apply to the real-world situations (Shepard, 2009). The present education reform is aimed at creating a generation of critical thinkers to suit with ways of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century context. The main pillars of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century knowledge are critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, creativity and communication (Kivunja, 2015). This calls for the migration of the traditional assessment practices to suit the present thinking. While CA is being emphasized in the PCAR, it has not been followed up with the re-education process of the paradigm shift. The current teacher assessment practices in Malawi primary school renders the effort of CA to address learning challenges meaningless.

### 1.3. Way Forward

Given the confounding factors in implementing CA in schools, this paper suggests three key aspects that the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders need to consider to bring about meaningful use of CA;

#### 1.3.1. Assessment Literacy

MIE and MoEST need to advance CA literacy programs in schools so that implementers are conversant with the demand of the curriculum regarding CA. Assessment literacy programs should focus on the development of quality assessment tasks that are beyond memorization. In addition, teacher education institutions need to emphasize assessment literacy in their teacher education programs to ensure that prospective teachers are well grounded in matters of assessment, both formative and summative.

##### 1.3.1.1. Workload and Class Size

The context of implementing CA is shrouded by a high workload in terms of the number of learners in class and subjects allocated to teachers. This situation impedes the administration of a variety of CA tasks. This climate diverts teachers from providing the necessary support to learners as they are tempted to cover content. The overall effect of large class sizes is that few or not all learners benefit from individual support that is expected as a result of CA. This implies that there is a need to deploy more teachers to reduce teacher class size.

##### 1.3.1.2. Support System

While supervision is an important aspect in trying to address the implementation gaps, sometimes these supervisory activities are done superficially. Complementing supervisory activities, there is a need to develop channels of deliberate peer networking as it is very crucial in sharing experiences on how to resolve professional challenges. Schools should therefore facilitate meetings that should provide an avenue for interaction among teachers from the same school and other schools.

## 2. CONCLUSION

The primary education system in Malawi is still having an unresolved constellation of issues making it impossible for a meaningful realization of the reform goals. In the current education state, the use of CA remains a good policy on paper. It remains a farfetched dream to assume that an introduction of CA into the system will automatically bring improvements in terms of learning outcomes. It is only when a favorable context has been established that learners may reap the benefits of continuous assessment. Comprehensive teacher re-education in CA and resolving issues which prevent the implementation process in the education system would result in narrowing the gap between the intended and the actual implementation of the education reform in Malawi. The Ministry of education must therefore come up with both short and long terms strategies to meaningfully benefit from continuous assessment.

#### *Acknowledgement*

*Due to the scope and method of the study, ethics committee permission was not required.*

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