

Improving learning for all: Developing assessment policy and changing practice

This is the fifth of six results papers documenting the experiences and lessons learned from the support provided to the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) by the Zambia Education Sector Support Technical Assistance (ZESSTA) Facility.

Key messages

- 1** Involving stakeholders in developing national policy documents provides powerful leverage for change;
- 2** Assessment is not just about measuring outcomes, it is a tool for improving outcomes;
- 3** Learner outcomes are a product of the effective use of formative assessment information to continuously improve learning.

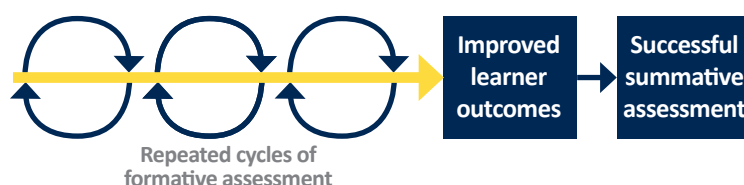
The challenge

At the heart of the challenge is how to ensure that the assessment system is fully exploited to promote learning and improve outcomes.

The Zambia Education Curriculum Framework 2013 (ZECF) is underpinned by two guiding principles: that the curriculum should be **learner-centred** and **outcome-based**. These two principles have far-reaching consequences for teaching and assessment.

In a learner-centred outcome-based system, teachers need to be proficient users of formative assessment (assessment for learning) so that they constantly gauge learners' understanding and tailor their teaching to ensure that barriers to learning are overcome. Thus, the effectiveness of assessment for learning (AfL) will require a successful paradigm shift away from the traditional teacher-centred approach common in Zambian schools.

Figure 1: Formative and summative assessment



An indicator of the degree of challenge involved in bringing about this change is the extent to which many practitioners regard assessment as synonymous with formal tests and examinations (assessment of learning/summative assessment). Discussions about assessment often ignore the importance of formative assessment and refer only to the skill of writing good questions for tests and examinations.

Another key practice that has a negative impact is the substantial amount of time that is spent revising for and sitting tests and exams; this is time that could be spent learning.

"Weighing the cattle doesn't make them any fatter."

This metaphor is appropriate for Zambia as cattle ownership plays an important role in the economy. The metaphor can also be applied to assessment to illustrate the problem of educational systems that have a heavy reliance on tests and examinations. Just as being in the fields eating grass fattens the cattle; it is regular nourishing feedback that leads to learning.

The response

Figure 2: Process used in Zambia to support the strengthening of assessment practice in schools



The Zambian Education Curriculum Framework (ZECF) set out what learning is expected to take place in schools in Zambia and the next step was to develop a framework that established how that learning should be assessed. The response of the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) was to request ZESSTA’s support to develop the National Learning Assessment Framework (NLAF). This national policy document was recognised as a means to ensure that the necessary change in assessment practice would be underpinned and accelerated by policy imperatives.

The first step in developing the NLAF was the production of a detailed background paper exploring assessment in relation to the Zambian context. This document highlighted the existing challenges and the need for change. A writing team for the NLAF was identified from MoGE Directorates, the Examinations Council of Zambia and the Zambia Qualifications Authority. The team produced a clear and comprehensive framework, using plain English and covering the whole spectrum of assessment from daily formative assessment in the classroom through national examinations to international tests.

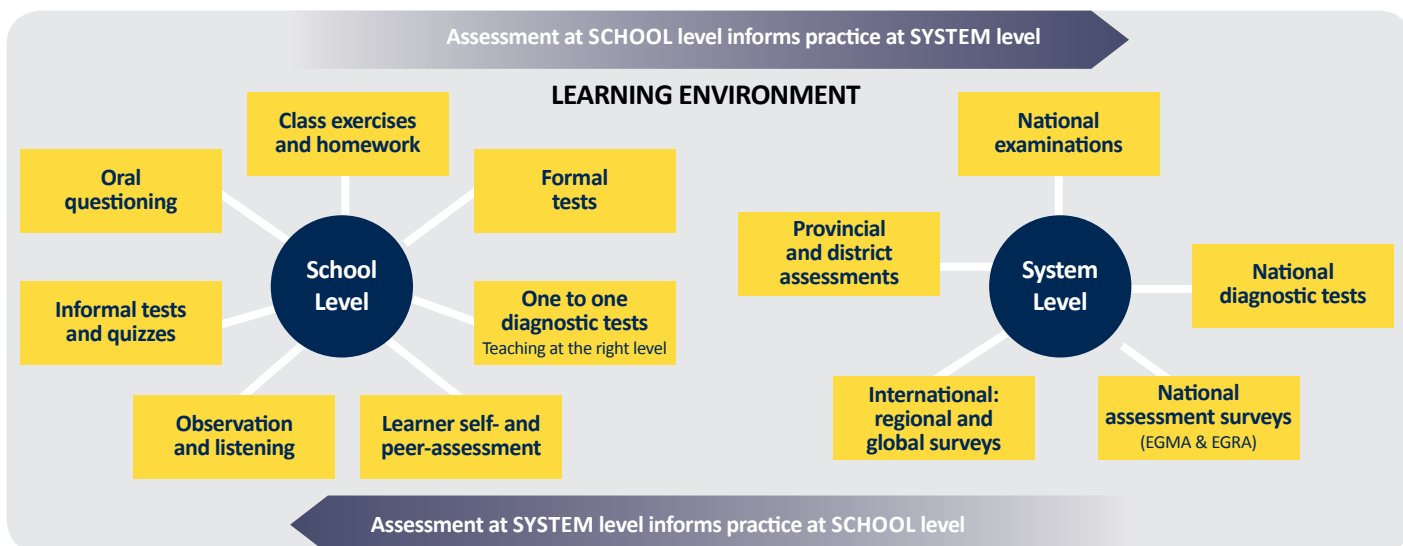
The effectiveness of the assessment framework depends on teachers having a good understanding of what is expected of them and being skilled in assessment techniques. Therefore, once the NLAF was approved, the next step was to ensure teachers were trained and capable of meeting these expectations.

A pre-service training module for assessment was developed by representatives from the colleges of education and universities responsible for teacher education, as well as MoGE officers from the Teacher Education and Specialised Services (TESS) Directorate.

The pre-service module has been piloted in seven colleges and two universities and has now been redrafted taking account of meaningful feedback from teacher educators and trainee teachers. It has been approved for national roll-out by the Director TESS. The next steps are to develop an in-service programme for teachers and an implementation strategy for the NLAF to address all aspects of assessment at both the school and system levels. The overall aim of this strategy will be to ensure that all assessment serves the purpose of improving learning and raising standards achieved by Zambia’s learners.

Figure 3: All assessment should support teaching and learning and contribute to improved learner outcomes.

Assessment should not only be used within each school but should be used to inform strengthening of the whole education system. Similarly, the assessment data generated at system level should be used by teachers and administrators to improve practice at school level.



The results

The full impact of the NLAF will be felt only after several years when all teachers have had training in assessment and sufficient time and experience to develop their skills and confidence in the use of formative assessment techniques.

However, initial feedback from stakeholders to both the NLAF and the pre-service module has been strongly positive. During the development phase, one of the teacher educators said:

"This is just what our teachers need and the time is right."

This sentiment was endorsed by others involved in developing the module and by colleagues in colleges and universities who used the module during the piloting stage.

Both teacher educators and trainee teachers reported that they found the NLAF and pre-service module easy to follow and that the NLAF in particular is understandable to the general public as well as to education professionals. The fact that concepts are explained not only in text but are also clarified with simple, clear diagrams made the documents more easily understood by both tutors and trainees.

All serving teachers have already had some professional development in assessment for learning as part of the training on the use of the Teachers' Curriculum Implementation Guide. This was very well received around the country and one teacher commented:

"So this is what we should have been doing all along."

Similar reactions were reported by teacher educators and trainee teachers involved in the pilot of the pre-service module. The training was described as 'eye-opening' and colleagues from colleges and universities stressed that they themselves had learned a lot. They also reported that their trainee teachers had engaged in some deep and interesting debates and discussions.

"These (debates and discussions) had opened their minds and resulted in changes of mind-set with respect to the nature and importance of assessment and the role of the teacher."





"Teachers need data that gives them a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses of each of their learners. This information enables teachers to provide learning activities that suit the needs of individuals and groups of learners. As a result, teachers are equipped to ensure that no-one is left behind, no-one is held back and all learners make progress at every stage of their education."

National Learning Assessment Framework

Lessons learned (and possible options for future action)

Teachers need adequate access to the key policy and guidance documents to support them to successfully implement assessment for learning.

Concepts that are explained not only in text but clarified with simple, clear diagrams make documents more easily understood.

Changes to assessment systems at national level are required in order to encourage teachers to adopt classroom approaches which provide learners with an appropriate balance of formative and summative assessment.

A close partnership between the various MoGE directorates and departments is essential if assessment data is to be processed and fully utilised to lead to improvement at all levels.

The engagement of all key stakeholders through the National Assessment Steering Committee (NASC) will enable relevant colleagues to work together in driving improvements in assessment.

Implementing partners need to be well informed and engaged in initiatives so that they can complement the effort required.

ABOUT ZESSTA

The Zambia Education Sector Support Technical Assistance (ZESSTA) Facility supports the Government of Zambia to strengthen the education sector and improve learning outcomes for children. We focus on capacity strengthening as sustainable support to improved service delivery in the education sector. Our work is demand-driven and linked to ministerial annual planning processes, focused on education sector priorities and responsive to current and emerging needs. The ZESSTA Facility is funded by (i) UK aid from the UK government and (ii) the Global Partnership for Education, and delivered by the British Council.



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