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EFFECTIVE TEST ADMINISTRATION IN SCHOOLS: PRINCIPALS & GOOD PRACTICES FOR TEST ADMINISTRATORS IN UGANDA

Aloysius Rukundo & Dr. Justine Magambo
University of Science and Technology,
Mbarara, Uganda.

Abstract

To establish academic achievement in any public school, teachers have to construct, administer and score tests or examinations. For a valid and reliable assessment of academic achievement, the tests should yield similar and consistent results/grades for comparable groups of students. The validity and reliability of assessment are dependent on many factors among which are administrations of the measurement. This paper focuses on test administration principles and good practices in schools; highlighting principles and good test administration practices and concluding with a summary of the suggestions that, if followed, lead to successful test administration in a any given public school system.

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INTRODUCTION

Assessing the quality and quantity of learning has been, and always will be, a regular feature of classroom practice in every public school. For teachers to establish whether their pupils have been learning, they have to set, administer, score and grade examinations. Testing provides information about the examinees' abilities and performance. It also enables meaningful observations and comparisons to be made of the kind of behaviour learners acquire during the teaching-learning process (Child, 1997; Farrant, 2000).

Similarly, performance by students should reflect similar grade, in the same test, and similar results should be obtained by groups of comparable candidates using the test on other occasions, even when marked by a different examiner. This kind of result may only be obtained if among others the test is carefully administered; implying that the quality of test management and administration ensures its validity and reliability (Walklin, 1990).

It is, therefore, incumbent upon persons entrusted with the management of tests to learn the principles and good practices of test administration to ensure these qualities of a test are upheld in testing. When test administrators are not conversant with the principles of test administration, the overall aim of examination process fails and more often than not, the examiner and the examinees suffer the consequences.

Across the world, a number of scholars have documented vast and interesting literatures regarding principles of test administration and good testing practices in schools. Gronlund and Linn (1990), for example, suggest that tests can be successfully administered by any conscientious teacher or test administrator, as long as the prescribed testing procedures are rigorously followed. They maintain that test administration becomes simple if:

- I. the pupils are motivated to do their best,
- II. test administration directions are followed closely,
- III. time is accurately kept,
- IV. any significant events that might influence test scores are recorded, and
- V. testing materials are collected promptly.

In Nigeria, different approaches of test administration are adopted by different examination bodies. A number of stakeholders, including the federal state and local governments, Non-Governmental Organizations and concerned individuals amalgamate their efforts for successful test administration in the public schools. In addition, punitive measures for those individuals who commit offences during the examination process have been put in place. The punitive measures range from imprisonment to monetary fines, depending on the type and magnitude of the offence committed during the examination process (Jegade, 2003; Nwahunanya, 2004). Related to punitive measures, according to Adewale (2008); if less emphasis is placed on paper qualification and continuous assessment encouraged, irregularities during examination administration can be eliminated, and consequently, the examination administration process can be more effective.

The situation in Uganda, regarding examination administration does not greatly differ from other countries. However, in Uganda, examination management, national assessment and administration depends on the level of learning and the purpose of the examination coordinated by a national body. At the highest level of learning, universities have the autonomy to manage their respective examinations. It is, therefore, the responsibility of each university to put guidelines for administration of its examinations in place and to follow such guidelines. For secondary schools and colleges, the examination process is entrusted with the examining body, the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB). Conscious of the need to obtain information on what learners actually learn in school, many countries now operate what are variously called national assessments, system assessments, learning assessments, or assessment of learning outcomes (Greaney & Kellaghan, 1996).

In Uganda the Education Policy Review Commission (1989), reported lack of reliable and up-to-date data on educational indicators. The only assessment information that was used for monitoring and evaluation was based on public examinations such as Primary Leaving Examination (PLE), the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) examination results. However, public examinations are done only at the end of a cycle of education and are designed to serve primarily as instruments for certification and selection of learners into institutions of higher learning (UNED, 2010).

In his study conducted on behalf of the UNEB, Ogwang (2007) stipulates that the process of examination administration is an uphill task, as it is sometimes marred by irregularities. This is why the UNEB concedes that tracking down examination irregularities is a management feat: that it requires a lot of additional resources, both human and monetary ones to curb examination malpractices. Kagoro (2008) in his study conducted for the UNEB agrees with Ogwang and contends that an examination supervisor is the overall officer responsible for the smooth and proper conduct and supervision of examinations. He asserts that the examination administration should ensure that the rules and regulations on the conduct and supervision of examinations are followed.

In any case, the examination processes in Uganda is tailored towards achieving high validity and reliability of any examination. This is why effective supervision of examinations is a very crucial element in the administration of public examinations. The officers involved in the administration of examinations must ensure that examinations are conducted in accordance with the laid down rules to maintain credibility of the system (UNEB, 2004).

Principles of Test Administration

The paramount guiding principle in administering any classroom test is that all examinees should be given a fair chance to demonstrate their achievement of the learning outcomes intended or planned. This implies physical and psychological environment in which the examination is taking place has to be conducive for the examinee to facilitate the achievement of the testing outcome. The factors that might interfere with validity of the measurement also have to be controlled. Even though the evidence regarding the effects of physical and environmental conditions on test performance is inconclusive, examinees should be as relaxed as possible and distractions should be eliminated or minimized. Whereas distractions during testing are known to have little effect on the scores of students, they may have profound effect on especially young children (Gronlund & Linn, 1990; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1999; Linn & Miller, 2005).

Another principle is students having positive attitudes towards a test. People are likely to perform better at any endeavor, including test taking, when they approach the experience with a

positive attitude. Unfortunately, teachers frequently fail to help students develop positive attitudes toward tests. Students are not likely to perform at their best when they are excessively tense. Thus, the experience of test anxiety among some students (Thorndike, 1977; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1999; Linn & Miller, 2005).

It is imperative that test administrators are qualified enough and trusted persons. This is to ensure that tests are properly managed to obtain valid and reliable results. Test administrators need to have the opportunity to learn their responsibilities as a prerequisite to accurate test results (United States Department of Labour, 1999). It should also be noted that a well prepared test is easy to administer, and the reverse is true with a poorly prepared test. It is equally important to realize that a successful test administration exercise is a product of test planning. Cheating is most likely to occur in a poorly planned test, thus, proving a challenge to test administration (Fontana, 1995; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1999; Cottrell, 2001; Linn & Miller, 2005). However, a good test administration irrespective of the test preparation is paramount.

Good Test Administration Practices

Good testing practices rest in the hands of the examiner, who should ensure the testing exercise, runs smoothly. The period before the test, during the test and after the test should be effectively managed to realize a highly efficient testing period.

Period before the test

Security of testing instruments: All test materials used in the assessment process, whether paper-and-pencil or computer-based must be kept secure. Lack of security may result in some test takers having access to test questions before the test, thus, compromising the quality, and invalidating their scores. To prevent irregularities, test administrators should, for example, keep testing materials in locked rooms or cabinets and limit access to those materials to staff involved in the assessment process. Test security is also a responsibility of test developers to ensure the test is not compromised over time. To maintain their security, test developers should introduce new forms of tests periodically (Gronlund & Linn, 1990; United States Department of Labour, 1999).

Related to security of tests, testing authorities should endeavor to open cartons containing test materials and inspect the contents to verify that appropriate test levels and quantities have been received. After inspection of the testing materials, they should be securely stored since examination monitors may during unannounced visits inspect these materials to ascertain the seals have not been tampered with before the due date (Gronlund & Linn, 1990).

After securing an adequate number of tests, the following considerations should be part of prior preparation checklist:

- a) examinees and parents have been notified regarding the test date and time.
- b) candidates have been reminded to bring materials necessary for the test.
- c) all students with special needs (e.g. glasses and hearing aids) have been considered before the start of the test.
- d) all adequate invigilation has been planned.
- e) examination administrators have read appropriate test administration procedures such as timing, examination regulations and test modifications.
- f) the rooms where the test is to be conducted have adequate ventilation and lighting and have been properly arranged.
- g) seats are arranged in such a way that candidates cannot look at each other's work.

- h) candidates have been thoroughly prepared for the examination by suggesting to them ways of studying, giving them practice tests like those to be used, teaching them test-taking skills and stressing the value of tests as for improving learning (Gronlund & Linn, 1990; National College Testing Association, 2010).
- i) when all is set for the exam, secure the room, including the writing “Testing in Progress, Do not Enter”.

Period during the Test

The proper preparation for examinations may not produce the desired results if the conditions during the test are mishandled. It is the cardinal duty of the test administrators or institutions to ensure that conditions during testing ensure successful testing (Gronlund and Linn (1990). The following are guidelines that need to be observed to ensure required conditions for successful testing are fulfilled:

- *Observe precision in giving instructions or clarifications.* When an examiner announces that there will be “a full three hours” to complete the test and then talks for the first fifteen minutes, examinees feel that they are being unfairly deprived of testing time. Besides, just before a test is no time to make assignments, admonish the class, or introduce the next topic. In other words, examinees are mentally set for the test and will ignore anything not pertaining to the test for fear it will hinder their recall of information needed to answer the questions. Thus, the well intentioned remarks fall on “deaf ears” and merely increase anxiety toward the test and create hostility toward the teacher.
- *Avoid interruptions.* At times, an examinee will ask to have an ambiguous item clarified, and it may be beneficial to explain the item to the entire group at the same time. All other distractions outside and inside the examination room should be eliminated, where possible. The challenge, however, is that more often than not, the distractions are beyond the test administrators’ reach!
- *Avoid giving hints to students who ask about individual items.* If the item is ambiguous, it should be clarified for the entire group. If it is not ambiguous, refrain from helping the pupil to answer it. The challenge is that at times, refraining from giving hints to examinees who ask for help may be difficult especially for new comers in the field of testing. Nevertheless, giving unfair aid to some students decreases the validity of the test results and lowers class morale.
- *Discourage cheating.* When there is good teacher-student rapport and students view tests as helpful rather than harmful, cheating are usually not a problem. Under other conditions, however, it might be necessary to discourage cheating by special seating arrangements and careful supervision. Candidates receiving unauthorized assistance from other examinees during an examination have the same deleterious effect on validity of test results and class morale as does receiving special hints from the teacher. We are interested in pupils doing their best; but for valid results, their scores must be based on their own unaided efforts.

Careful proctoring of the testing session, such as, periodically walking around the room and observing how the students are doing is also of paramount importance in preventing cheating. The obstacle is that many teachers define proctoring as “being present in the examination room”. They consequently become physically present but spend their time reading a novel, writing a letter or marking and scoring previous tests. The best way to proctor an examination is to

observe students doing the test and not being preoccupied at one's desk (Gronlund & Linn, 1990; Mehrens & Lehmann, 1999).

Another way of discouraging cheating is discouraging students from using any form of communication devices, either in the room where the test is being administered or while on a supervised break, such as a bathroom visit. It would be better if students are reminded earlier that they may not use any devices including but not limited to cellular telephones, pagers, audiocassette players, radios, personal digital assistants, video devices, associated headphones, headsets, microphones, or earplugs while taking an examination.

- *Ensure that no eating takes place in the examination hall.* Students should not be allowed to bring any food items in the examination room, unless it is on proven medical grounds. Under such circumstances, it is advisable that special arrangements are made in advance for purposes of securing a designated area where the food items could be kept, to avoid distracting those who do not require the food items.
- *Identify each examinee to prevent a situation where someone may attempt to take the examination on someone else's behalf.* Students should, therefore, be informed in advance to bring with them their identity cards and/or examination cards (Mbarara University of Science and Technology, MUST, 2008).
- *Handle emergencies appropriately.* If an examinee becomes ill during the examination, and must leave the examination hall, they should not be allowed to return. The test administrator is advised to make a comprehensive report about the candidate's situation to make it possible for authorities to consider a retest for such a candidate, to be scheduled for another time.
- *Inform students on progress of testing.* It is the responsibility of the test supervisor or invigilator to keep the students informed of the time remaining (e.g., writing the time left on the blackboard at 15-minute intervals (Mehrens & Lehmann, 1999)).

Period after the Test

Orderliness is needed for a successful testing process until all the test materials are securely in the hands of the test administrators. After the completion of the examination, the following are expected;

- a) all test materials and documents, both used and unused should be collected and accounted for. They may be kept in a secure and lockable facility.
- b) count through candidates' scripts to ensure their number corresponds with the names on the examination attendance register. Counting also eliminates scenarios where the attendance register shows a student attended an examination but his or her script is not available.

Conclusions

Tests or examinations are among the components of the teaching-learning process in any public school system, and it is conducted at all levels of learning in different institutions in Nigeria, Africa and the globe. Established examination bodies have set regulations and procedures in the administration of the tests or examinations to individuals, whether in the classrooms or designated settings. Just as classroom environment is vital for teaching-learning and personal educational growth and development of the individual, so is participation in examinations. Therefore, during test administration process;

- a) All examinees should be accorded a fair chance through the provision of conducive physical and psychological environment.
- b) Candidates involved in the examination should develop positive attitudes, adhere to the rules, and therefore conduct themselves decently during the examination
- c) The teachers' roles must be recognized because they contribute to the success of examination or test administration.
- d) To realize a smooth test administration exercise, the period before, during and after the test should be carefully managed.

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