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**Beyond Primary Education:  
Challenges and Approaches to Expanding Learning Opportunities in Africa**

**Parallel Session 7A**

**Assessment**

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Improving the efficacy of assessment, certification  
and curriculum in the African education systems

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Educational assessments and credentialing systems are part of all education systems in the world over. These systems have also been the focus of discussion and introspection in many countries for a long time. The reason for this prolonged focus on assessments and certification can be attributed to the key and central role assessments and certification systems have in the whole education system. Both assessments and certification are central in every educational system as they direct and legitimize the social and political goals of each educational system (Broadfoot, 1996). Even though there are often debates on their desirability and impact on education, it is also very difficult to imagine an education system without them. Both not only control the purposes of education, but also the nature of rewards to be accorded to citizens. It is therefore in this context of acknowledging the power wielded by assessments and certification systems that we have to understand their social purpose in order to understand their potential role in constructing an expanded secondary schooling in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA).

There are many challenges that face the continent as well as its education system, including the lack of availability of resources to fund an extended education system for most individuals. However, there does not seem to be a lot of choices but to find the resources needed, or else the continent will buckle under sheer pressure of prolonged lack of access to advancement for the individuals and the nations. It is noted that unlike high and middle income countries, SSA education is characterized by:

- A syllabus-based curriculum, whilst most other countries often adopt a combination of syllabus, outcomes-based and standard-based forms of curriculum;
- SSA curriculum tends to be geared toward the selection for university instead of providing for diversified pathways and is also not differentiated to cater for a wide range of learners;
- Many SSA countries still present hurdles in the education system in the form of external examinations at the end of primary education;
- There seems to be very little innovations in the examination systems of both the Anglo and Franco phone countries as they continue to pursue the systems which were left at the time of their independence;
- School-based assessment capacity is extremely undeveloped and this in turn tends to reinforce the over reliance on external examinations, whose backwash effect on classrooms is not really positive;
- The performance of countries that have participated in national and international tests shows that many students in SSA countries are not learning or performing to the level of their counterparts in other continents;
- Within countries, there seems to be a widening inequality gap which should be a source of concern. This inequality gap is caused by a lack of access to learning opportunities and sometimes by inequality in the quality of education provided.

There are many lessons which can be gleamed from the countries that have already attained the goal of mass education, where universal school, not primary education is the norm, have a lot of lessons to offer to SSA countries. These lessons are instructive in the quest for extending primary education to the end of junior secondary education in order to increase the number of school education to be attained in SSA countries, and also form the bridge toward senior secondary education schooling for most individuals. From these lessons, the following suggestions are made in this paper:

- To provide for universal access to education beyond primary education by removing the hurdles caused by an end of primary education external examination system, introduce sponsored mobility through teacher assessments and present the first external examination at the end of basic education (8 – 10 years ) of education;
- Attempts to phase out early selection in education should include a curriculum that caters for a wider range of abilities and leading to different further learning opportunities. The issue of introducing a foreign language, like English and French, before cognitive skills have developed sufficiently in the education system, must be addressed as well as capability of teachers to teach in a second language should be developed sufficiently;

- There is a need to establish and refocus the curriculum function in educational systems of many countries. This function must not only be seen as one driving engine for educational reform, but must be adequately designed with appropriate linkages to other monitoring functions such as assessments and inspections.
- Instead of extending what is on offer in the curriculum of basic education, it is suggested that a core curriculum in mathematics, natural and social sciences as well as the foreign language applicable to a particular country should be pursued. A syllabus based curriculum seems to yield more advantages for a weaker education system than to introduce a considerable amount of flexibility. However, even in this form of curriculum, it is suggested that more attention should be paid to the development of deeper levels of cognitive skills;
- Examination Councils should use the resources previously used in primary education examinations, in assisting schools to develop better capacity to assess their students, through the training of teachers, development of exemplars, etc.. Capacity in examination councils needs development and support.
- Suggestions are made on how to make the examinations at the end of basic education ‘light touch’ instead of being one more hurdle in the system. What is useful to report on is also recommended;
- There is a need to intervene at the Examinations Councils level of many SSA countries. Two types of interventions are suggested,: (a) to diversify their exposure to other assessment systems beyond the “O” or “A” levels of the Cambridge University system, and the French Baccalaureate; and (b) to further develop the capacity of these examination systems.
- The quality of teachers is central to any attempts to expand and improve an education system. Two areas of improvements are suggested in this paper: (a) deepening the subject knowledge of teachers at the overlapping phases of primary education and basic education; and (b) improving the capacity of teachers in their knowledge of the pedagogy of their teaching subjects;
- The monitoring of key points in the basic education system of different countries needs to be encouraged. Current national and regional assessment systems need to be further developed and cooperation amongst countries encouraged. Instructional oversight, which is generally weak in most systems, needs to be strengthened, in the form of inspections and school leadership.
- Although SSA countries could learn from other countries on what an appropriate and adequate curriculum in basic education should be, there is reason to consider relevance in SSA curriculum which addresses issues uniquely faced by SSA such as: (a) the need to support fledging but yet fragile democracies; (c) support informal economies into which many individuals may ultimately lend; and (c) nurture and preserve the cultural and artistic inheritance, including languages of SSA in the face of western invasions;
- Caution needs to be exercised and not to rush and implement all international experiments in education, such as the recent focus on National Qualifications Frameworks in many countries. These detract from laying good foundations of a solid education system.
- Lower income areas, e.g. rural and densely populated areas, tend to be poorly served by the current SSA education systems. This inequality to access and quality education is one potential threat to social instability and must be addressed soon.
- Lastly, it is imperative that a basic education system must also cater for those who are still and will fall out of the education system in order not only to establish a wide base of an educated citizenry, but also to produce a large pool of human capital foundation in all countries quicker.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Sub-Saharan (SSA) is still experiencing a population boom. This means that in contrast to the high and medium income countries, SSA has the record number of young people to educate. Whereas industrialization in many countries brought about the emptying of rural areas, in SSA countries, the rural areas are not being depopulated. On the economic front, there are several production systems which exist side by side. Agriculture, based on family farms, remains the age old foundation of the African economy. Alongside this a modern capitalist economy has evolved to varying degrees in various countries. The capitalist economy is characterized by an array of forms of business which can be as capitalist as in industrialized countries or represent what is now called the ‘popular’ economy, which is neither traditional nor capitalist but provide livelihood for a large segment of the population. In terms of governance, Africa has survived several forms of power and authority from the slave trade, colonization, neo-colonization, globalization, and many countries have experienced internally sponsored forms of violence (Sall, 2003).

Education in high and middle income countries has provided the human capital foundation to grow the economy and supported the democratic political dispensations. In fact, education, as a source of knowledge and skills, is now recognized as the main force driving economic growth in most high and middle income countries (Caillods, 2004). However, the African education systems in the main has not been able to rise to the role of supporting economic development and fledging democracies in Africa. On one hand EFA and other attempts to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have resulted in the unprecedented growth of the primary education in SSA, but on the other hand secondary schooling still remains limited (King, 2007; Bregman, 2004). Yet, evidence shows that the contribution of education to economic and development and competitiveness starts to kick in at the higher levels of education (Lewin, 2006). Not having enough secondary education provision in the SSA education system is not only going to be detrimental for the region’s ability to meet the MDGs, but the region’s chance to compete globally and also to support the growing democratic trends will be frustrated.

This paper in particular focuses on the role that should be played by curriculum, assessments and certification in growing the SSA education systems, as this is no longer a luxury but a must. The primary schooling system needs to be extended so that as many as possible young (and old) learners acquire higher levels of education in SSA. The current lower junior secondary education system should be seen as the bridge to cross over to a growing secondary education system. However, the goal of increasing participation levels and making basic education a universal right in SSA should not result in compromising quality in education. The main thesis of this paper is about improving the efficacy of curriculum, assessment and certification to:

- Increase the completion rates of primary education;
- Increase the completion rates of secondary education; and
- Broaden access to senior secondary education.

This paper provides some insights on experiences of countries that have succeeded in massifying school education systems and thus glean lessons which could be applied in the SSA context. Suggestions will be made on improving the body of knowledge and skills to be taught and learned in basic education. Ways of addressing the crippling wastage caused by a highly selective system will be addressed in this paper. Some reflections on how the certification system of an extended basic education system should look like will be tabled. Finally, further suggestions on monitoring and evaluation systems which would need to be introduced in SSA education systems, will be presented.

The paper is limited in as far as it is mainly confined to secondary sources of information about the systems described and evaluated here. Secondly, the writer acknowledges that any meaningful transformation of the education system requires a wider scope of intervention than the topic dealt with in this paper, including the availability of resources and capacity in the system. The narrow focus of the paper is taken in the spirit that curriculum and assessment issues are at the heart of education provision, and therefore worth of discussion on their own right.

### **3. PURPOSE OF CURRICULUM, ASSESSMENT AND CERTIFICATION IN EDUCATION**

A study of social phenomena in education gives us insights to the policy options we now take for granted in the use of assessment. Assessments and certification can be understood as the interplay between three different concepts, namely competences, competition and control (Broadfoot, 1996). There is no better time to understand this phenomenon than to examine the industrialization period regarding the role of assessment and certification played in directing the shape and size of education in first industrialized countries. Industrialization has had a lot to do with the massification of education, moving away from an apprenticeship system, and using assessments as an ‘objective’ way of enabling mobility of individuals. Broadfoot (1996) asserts that mass scale education in Europe for example finds its roots in the combined growth of political democracy and industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century. The transition from a feudal to an industrial society brought about changes in the family’s economic and educational role. According to many sociologists, there was suddenly a need to set up social institutions which would socialize individuals for their roles in the new labor market (Weber, 1947; Durkheim, 1977). This need to educate people at such a large scale to support the political institutions of democracy and the economic institutions of industrialization necessitated profound changes in defining bodies of knowledge, the way that large numbers of children were to be inducted to the new forms of learning and also developed a new concern for competence. Alongside this preoccupation was the rising need to provide for meritocratic competition on the basis of equality of opportunity. Assessment and certification systems were established and soon became part and parcel of education systems as a way of evaluating individual’s competences as well as credentialing competences which would be matched with subsequent requirements in opportunities either for further learning or in the labor market.

### **4. TRENDS IN HIGH AND MIDDLE INCOME COUNTRIES**

Massification of education during industrialization countries brought about a number of important reforms in the education systems of many countries. These reforms touched on curriculum, assessment and certification as well. In terms of curriculum, there was a need to establish an undifferentiated or general curriculum for as long as possible and for the majority of learners in the education system. This meant that the rigid boundaries of the academic and vocational streams became more porous, and where they still existed they were prolonged for the senior secondary schooling phase, which was seen as the end of schooling now instead of the primary school phase (Caillods, 2004; Bregman, 2004; Broadfot, 1996). For newly developed countries, the impetus seems to have been purely the development of the human capital for the labor market. Verspoor (2007) for example demonstrates how the growth of education in these countries has particularly supported the economic growth of the East Asian tigers.

#### **Curriculum and competence trends**

In a new education system, intended for the masses and not a select few, it has been important to redefine what would be considered as critical competences for allocating life chances and admitting individuals as future active participants in these societies. To this end, Calloids (2004) points us to some common features that have emerged as trends of curriculum transformation in high and middle income countries, and these are:

- Curricula that meet the needs of all students
- Curricula that comply to the learning requirements of the future and contain both knowledge and skills as well as relating to ethical and social skills
- A convergence between countries which emphasize the basics (numeracy, literacy, scientific knowledge and foreign languages) and the more traditional approach of giving equal importance to other traditional subjects in addition to the basics.
- Curricula that emphasize the basics as well as transversal competences (communication, problem-solving, reasoning, ability to learn, and motivation) at the lower secondary phase by all countries.



- A diverse curriculum which is not exclusively academic, but vocational education is increasingly being recognized as a valid form of provision, especially at the secondary levels.

As a result we now find curricula that can be categorized into generally three groups: (a) syllabus-based; (b) standards-based; and (c) outcomes-based (Donnelly, 2005). A syllabus-based curriculum is typified by details of prescriptions in the learning environment. Syllabuses are often established by ministries of education or one form of authority, outside of the school system. They also have been associated with high-stakes examinations where competition has a major role in the education system, and for the upper level provision, e.g. senior secondary education, universities are often involved in syllabi development. On the other hand, standards-based curriculum is characterized by a bottom-up approach where teachers contribute significantly to the establishment of standards. This form of curriculum prescribes required knowledge and achievement levels. An example of a well nuanced form of standards-based kind of curriculum can be found in the USA, where there is an attempt to establish some uniformity from the provision of the federal states. This form of curriculum tends to be sponsored by governments instead of universities as is the case with syllabus-based curriculum. An Outcomes-based curriculum is slightly different from the first two, as the emphasis here is on what students should be able to do at the end of the course. Again, an outcomes-based curriculum generally favors industry and community based sponsorship. Schools in high and middle income countries will generally adopt a mixture of these different forms to varying degrees because in these countries there is often greater flexibility and leeway given to the teacher in the classroom.

### **Box 1: Translation of a policy in the USA**

Even though there is nothing that can be considered to be standard in the Federal education system of the United States of America, the “No Child Left Behind” policy seems to have had significant impact on how basic education came to be viewed in that country. Whilst the standards for graduation requirements were raised, this pressure was felt more at the middle level of the system (Grades 4 – 8), at the point of switching between primary schooling to middle school. More subject knowledge was introduced at this level and the quest was to establish the right balance between teaching the subjects and teaching children. Broad subjects were unbundled into separate subjects, e.g. Social Sciences into history, geography, etc. Requirements for teacher preparation and on-going professional development became closely tied to the school curriculum and its pedagogy. The philosophy behind this was to ensure that in this form, it would be expected that all children would experience the same kind of curriculum and this not left to the discrimination of schools and teachers. Secondary school curriculum has seemingly been pushed down the middle schools and this is where the foundations for academic knowledge and skills are supposed to be laid

Source: Georgia Professional Standards Commission

### **Selection trends**

Again, developments from countries that have attained high secondary participation rates show us that there has been a merging of elementary and secondary schooling into a more comprehensive form of provision. Many countries have extended elementary education to the statutory school leaving age, which often coincides with the employment age for many countries. This change has therefore made selection before the school leaving age unnecessary. Learning opportunities beyond the general and basic education, which is often at age 15 or 16, are also getting to be more diverse in many education systems of developed countries. The option for employment take up at age 15/16 seems to be theoretically a possibility, but an option that does not seem to be taken up by many young people in these countries. Many young people stay in one form of upper secondary education system and attempt to complete schooling. There has been a realization in developed countries that:

In the information age of today – and increasingly in the future – all students, not just college-bound students, need high academic skills and knowledge to succeed. In the past, some high school graduates could find high-wage jobs that did not require a rigorous high school education, but these types of jobs are increasingly scarce. (Woodward, 1999:19).

This in high and middle income countries has meant that even a diversified upper secondary system, in which vocational education becomes a strong alternative to academic education; both will still contain as its foundation general education to allow for that completion and proficiency in higher levels of cognitive skills and knowledge. Also, many of these countries provide for a range of post-secondary education systems as further alternative learning routes to university tracks. All this has direct implications on how selection is therefore structured at that crucial initial stage of end of compulsory or basic education.

The next problem that has risen about the postponement of school leaving age is that of certification procedures employed at the end of basic education. In other words the purpose of certification at the end of basic education changed its purpose and form and ceased to be seen as a serious selection tool as it was now assumed that most young people will continue to the next level of provision, being upper secondary schooling. The increased levels of provision in other countries can now be seen to have contributed to what Dore (1997) has come to label as ‘the diploma disease’, or a qualification inflation. In other words, the more widely education certificates are used for occupational selection, the faster the rate of qualification inflation.

The postponement of selection in many countries has had two major implications: a review of the explicit link between general and vocational education; and certification procedures employed at the end of key stages of education systems – basic education being the first stage in most developed countries. The first problem was illuminated in many countries by the notion of a school leaving age or basic education. The question was: ‘where to?’ Many countries have responded differently to this question. Wolf (1995) for example traces the developments in Europe, which have yielded different responses and results to the question of post-basic education. The United Kingdom for example has opted for some forms of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) in which different forms of qualifications would be included, albeit with different results, and would create a parity of esteem between the general and vocational tracks. NQFs were first established in the United Kingdom (Scotland, England, Wales, and Ireland); followed by Australia and New Zealand and followed by South Africa. A recent study by Young (2004) for the International Labour Organization (ILO) reveals mixed results and achievements of the NQFs. Young attributes this to the nature of institutions which have taken responsibilities for the development of these qualifications frameworks as well as the legitimacy of the education bureaucracies in the different countries. The net effect has been that the more there is some national consensus on the nature of the qualifications brought about under one ‘roof’ and the more these qualifications have remained educational in purpose, designed for young people in full-time schooling, the more successful the notion of a National Qualifications Framework seems to be. Again, this has direct implication for how selection at the end of basic education is conceptualized as it would lead directly to a system where different choices are to be made.

### 4.3. Control trends

Examinations have remained a key feature in regulating and controlling educational practices of many industrialized countries. However, in most high and middle income countries, the high stakes (public) examinations have moved up the school ladder and tend to be at the end of high school. Caillods (2004) notes only two countries which still have an entirely external examination at the end of school-leaving age or end of basic education and these are France and Ireland. Even for high-stakes examinations, there has been a lot of flexibility introduced in these examinations, making it possible to:

- Include teacher-based continuous assessments in the results certificated;
- Vary the number of subjects the students are examined on;
- Vary the type of examination questions (e.g. essay types, multiple-choice, short response, etc.)
- Include various forms of assessments (e.g. oral, practical, written, portfolio based projects).
- Accommodate for multiple examination takes during the year instead of limiting this to just one sitting.

So, whilst examinations are still valued as a major means of controlling standards in education, the form and content of examinations have changed over the years in these countries.

Some educational systems have introduced control through expressions of accountability in the form of national assessment and inspection systems. National assessments, where they exist, have taken the form of administering to all learners at key stages of the system tests to all or a carefully selected sample. These assessments are carried out by teachers but often reported to parents, authorities and sometimes to the public. This form of control has met with a degree of resistance from the teaching corps in some countries, who complain of the burdensome responsibility of these assessment activities (Wolf, 1995).

Another form of control, which is often considered to be unrelated to assessment, is that of inspection. National inspectorates where they exist are meant to regulate and rationalize educational provision and thus

control educational practice. The English inspection system for example has a very long history which dates as far back as the early nineteenth century. Grub (2000), evaluating the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) has found that the English inspection system tends to tangentially touch the assessment system and often found not be a very useful system to teachers in the classrooms although its control function is generally accepted by government and the public. Therefore there still seems to be a disjuncture between the assessment and inspection function in most countries.

## 5. A SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT SUB-SHARAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Education For All (EFA) has inspired decision makers and donors alike in the Sub-Saharan region that the question about life after EFA is generally accepted as not only being valid, but also urgent. EFA has created an unprecedented need for provision after primary education in most countries. In fact Bregman (2004) has defined the problem as being one of finding solutions to ‘cope with the success of primary education’ in Africa. However, the policy landscape and the resources available for education in the different countries make it difficult to have a one-size fit all prescription for the urgent need to transform the education system which has been transpiring over the years (Lewin, 2006). This section will focus on how curriculum; examination; classroom; national and international assessments, certification; and inspection, have been handled in SSA. Inherent in this discussion is the understanding that, without putting more resources in the education system, improvement in curriculum, assessment and certification alone will not bring about the desired changes. However, as it has been noted earlier on, this discussion is limited by the fact that all sources are secondary and their validity still has to be problematized.

### 5.1. Curriculum

On the surface, most of the SSA countries’ curriculum does not differ significantly from that of the high and middle income countries. School curriculum in general in both primary and junior secondary education covers what has come to be regarded as acceptable general education: languages; Mathematics; Social and Natural Sciences (verspoor, 2007; Bregman, 2004). However, the similarities are only skin deep, as there are deeper differences that manifest themselves between the two systems. First, the SSA curriculum can largely be described as mainly syllabus-based curriculum. The majority of countries have remained with the curriculum form inherited from the colonial countries, in spite of the changes that have ensued in the curriculum of the former colonizers over the years. With the exception of South Africa, both Anglophone and Francophone SSA countries have not changed their curricula significantly over the past decades. Also, the curriculum is still by far geared toward secondary education which leads to university (Bregman, 2004).

#### **Box 2: The South African Curriculum**

In South Africa for example, one of the first things that the new government did was to embark on an extensive curriculum reform, to purge it of all apartheid undertones. South Africa initially adopted an ambitious model, that of a purely outcomes-based curriculum. Very soon after the implementation of the outcomes-based curriculum, it became clear that the new curriculum was problematic and had to be reviewed. Problems had to do with under-specification of knowledge and concepts, poorly qualified teachers, poorly resourced schools, an excessively complex curriculum (Chisholm, 2004; Howie, 2004?). The review resulted in a new South African curriculum which in form is still outcomes-based but now has specification of content. The new curriculum attempts to combine an outcomes-based model with a syllabus – based model.

Whilst the new curriculum presents vast improvements on the old syllabuses and is regarded as contemporary, Umalusi’s recent review reveals that even this new form is not without its problems as the reviewed curriculum has now resulted into unwieldy documents. The curriculum is characterized by long and multiple documents with poor articulation between them. This has a potential to create difficulties for teachers who have to be familiar with all sets of documents.

Source: Umalusi Report (2007)

The stagnation of curriculum in SSA has not been the only problem with the curriculum in these systems. The second characteristic which makes SSA curriculum different from that of other countries is that in the main the former has remained strictly subject based and not embraced the transversal skills which have been enthusiastically embraced by others, especially OECD countries (Rychen , 2005). Also, whilst the OECD countries experiment in varying degrees with vocational or pre-vocational curriculum from anywhere during the last years of basic education to senior secondary education, in a more comprehensive way, when vocational education occurs in SSA curriculum, it tends to be a separate track relegated to those considered to be of lesser abilities. Cameroon for example reports a direct link of the vocational education to the world of work and teach post-primary learners the crafts. Namibia and Swaziland report an inclusion of some pre-vocational subjects in the curriculum of the junior secondary system  
<http://www.members.aol.com/sucord/camed1.html>: accessed 30<sup>th</sup> October 2007).

At the time when England was changing its curriculum to introduce a qualification known as the General Education Certificate (GEC) at the end of its basic education system (age 15/16), the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES) also introduced a new qualification for its international markets, named the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). This qualification has been introduced first to Namibia when it looked around for a new curriculum to free it from the South African apartheid curriculum. Swaziland is now piloting the new curriculum as a way of localizing its examination system which has been strictly the “O” and “A” level system in the past. So, for different reasons, two SSA countries have changed their curriculum, but still adopt an externally controlled system. As desirable as it is, vocational education tends to be difficult to implement. These difficulties have been poignantly outlined in studies that argue against the vocationalisation of education in some selected African education systems, especially post-primary education (Eisemon, & Schwille, 1991; Psacharopoulos, 1987). The curriculum development function seems to be ineffective in many countries, in spite of the existence of varying forms of curriculum structures and functions in these countries.

**Box3: Examples of curriculum functions in selected SSA countries.**

Many SSA countries have Curriculum development organizations or centers. For example both the Kenya Institute of Education and the Kenya Examinations Council work together in developing teaching and assessment syllabi. Similarly in Ghana, the West African Examinations Council is involved in the curriculum development process, and in Zambia, the Examinations Council of Zambia is involved in the work of the Curriculum Development Centre. South Africa is an exception where there is no distinct centre which is responsible for curriculum development. The big curriculum transformation that has just happened in South Africa was a project, managed by a temporal Ministerial Committee. South Africa also does not have an examination curriculum but the curriculum documents contain assessment guidelines. Umalusi’s recent evaluation of the senior secondary curriculum of Ghana, Kenya, Zambia and South Africa, revealed great variations in how the curriculum aims or outcomes were articulated; pedagogical methodology; coherence, sequence, progression and pacing; and content coverage by cognitive demand. The one area where there seemed to be greater overlaps was with the content coverage or what is prescribed to be taught, and this is typical of syllabus-based curricula. Only South Africa seems to have a differentiated curriculum (Umalusi, 2007). This evaluation points to a serious flaw in the curriculum function - that of not paying enough attention to the development of cognitive and transversal competencies and not providing for differentiation for the students of lesser abilities in the curriculum.

Source: Umalusi Report (2007).

The difference in SSA curriculum and other countries has to do with the curriculum structure. Many SSA countries still have a curriculum system that clearly delineates three levels of school education.

**Figure 1: Curriculum Structure in selected SSA countries**

Country	Structure
Angola	4+ 2+ 2+ 3
Botswana	7+5
Cameroon	7 + 5

<sup>1</sup> Website references will be detailed in the bibliography

Comores	6 + 5 (or 6)
Congo DRC	8 + 4
Kenya	5+ 4 + 3
Madagascar	6 + 5 + 2
Mali	6 + 3 + 3
Mauritius	6 + 5 + 2
Mozambique	7 + 3 + 2
Namibia	7 + 3 + 2
Nigeria	6 + 3 + 3
Seychelles	6+4+2
South Africa	9 + 3
Swaziland	7 + 3 + 2
Uganda	6 + 4 + 2
Zambia	7+2+3
Source: (Purvis, 2004) and country websites <sup>1</sup>	

There is much hope that this structure could soon come to an end, as almost all the country websites surveyed report an intention to move to a basic education system, which extends the primary education systems to incorporate the lower secondary education system. Only Kenya and South Africa from the countries above seem to have taken these concrete steps already and have structured their systems into 8 and 9 years of education respectively. If these intentions are true, then there are four things that need to be done: (a) to provide a place for every child who comes through the primary education system and (b) to extend primary schooling to basic education; (c) to increase completion rates for the whole basic education phase; and (d) to broaden access to secondary education.

## 5.2. Assessments

Four kinds of educational assessments stand out in the SSA education systems, namely examinations, classroom assessments, national assessments and international assessments.

### 5.2.1. Examinations

Examinations continue to play a major role throughout the history of contemporary education in Africa. African countries have invested heavily in examination systems. Even countries that previously have had weak or freer progression systems (depending on how you look at it), like Rwanda and Mozambique, they have now started to invest in developing their examination systems. In most countries there are three kinds of examinations which are administered by a national authority in Anglophone countries and by the ministry of education in francophone countries (Kelleghan, 2004). These examinations are usually administered at the end of the primary school cycle, end of the junior school cycle and end of the senior secondary school cycle. The positioning of transition hurdles in any education system is very important. Examinations still play a major role in engendering competition and selection in SSA. Countries which are restructuring their systems to a longer basic education term, and yet still use an examination at the end of traditional primary school levels, have created contradictions in their systems and this needs to be addressed. Moving this barrier has produced notable and positive results in some countries already. For example, by removing the examinations at the end of the lower primary education system, participation rates in the South African education system grew within a very short period to a record 103% Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in 2001, and in Kenya to 107% by 2006 (Department of Education, 2006; Mutahi,2007).

Both Anglophone and francophone countries' examination systems have heir origins from the English and the French education systems of more than half a century ago. This system has been described by Bregman (2004) as being subservient to an academic selection process. Even though many countries have subsequently localized their systems, there are still varying degrees of reliance levels to the Cambridge examination system. Small countries bear the brunt of the difficulties brought to bear by relying on an external agency for such an important function. Brain and Steward (1999) enumerate these difficulties as

being: high unit cost; staffing difficulties; susceptibility to political pressure. Also, the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES) tends to advocate for a strong separation of curriculum and assessment functions (referee and a player) and these rigid divisions have persisted in most Anglophone SSA countries.

Examinations are not always useful in measuring standards in a system as they their backwash effect in the classroom, especially in lower levels tends to be limited. However, public examinations continue to be used as the main indicator for quality in the SSA education system, in spite of the inherent weaknesses in examinations (Kelleghan, 2004; Bregman, 2004; Yadidi, 2006). Examinations persist because in the SSA systems, characterized by large classroom sizes, poorly resourced schools, and under-prepared teachers, they are probably the only means to control disparate elements of the education system. Even though examinations have traditionally been associated with what are known as ‘high stakes’ examinations for university entrance where the emphasis is on maintaining a national (and increasingly, international) standard for all who gain a particular qualification, these have almost been the only means of ‘objective’ assessments available to the SSA countries, taking into consideration their constraints. The typical mode of assessment within this model is a centrally prescribed syllabus for each subject with recommended texts and model exam papers taken by students at the end of a course, which works well with the curriculum forms in place in SSA. The key to the dilemma is not whether to use or not to use examinations, but when to use, how much, and what kind of examinations. Many countries in SSA have been pondering<sup>2</sup> the question of how much external examinations and how much classroom assessments should be used in making important decisions like promotion to subsequent grades, retention or failing.

### 5.2.2. School- based assessments

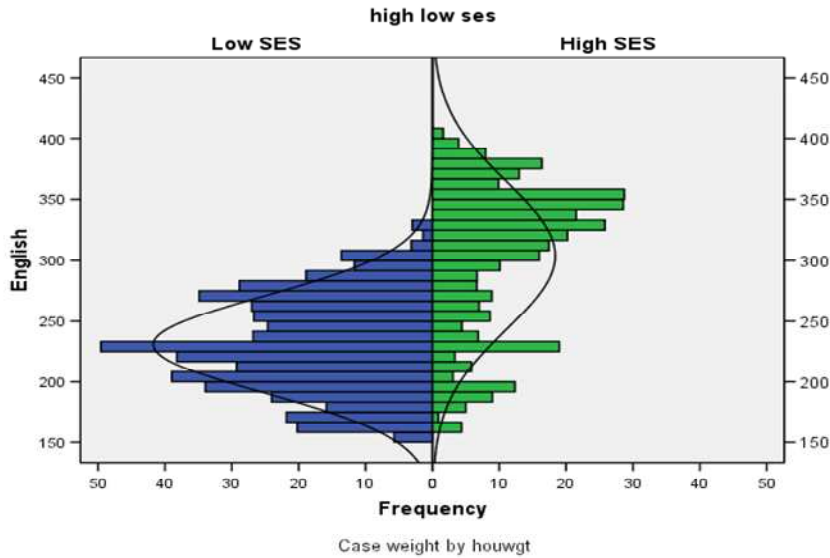
There does not seem to be many education systems which use classroom assessments as part of promotional marks at the exit and certificated points of the education system. Even though there is evidence that many education systems have endorsed the use of school-based assessments in the make up of the final mark for even high stakes examinations. School-based assessment is already included in policies of many education systems, but has yet to be implemented. In Zambia for example, the 1977 Educational reforms provided for the use of Continuous assessment, but only in 2006 were the initial pilots for grade 7 established (Mutanekelwa & Mweemba, 2006). In Swaziland, the Examinations Council is also just piloting the inclusion of a 5% Continuous assessment mark in its Junior Secondary Certificate. Part of the problem for the poor up-take of school-based assessments is because this violates the sacred traditions of the ethos of external examinations, which put a prime on reliability and validity in assessments (Poliah, 2006). Part is due to the real lack of capacity of teachers to undertake valid assessments which would be valid to be included in the certification of results. This second factor is further compounded by the confusion that reigns in the area, conflating diagnostic or formative and summative assessments done by teachers into one basket of assessments by policy makers, examinations councils and schools.

South Africa has been brave in including up to 25% of Continuous Assessments marks in the final mark of the Senior Certificate, and proposing a 75% for the Grade 9 assessments. However, this bold move has not been without its fair share of problems. Poliah (2006) enumerates these as being: teacher preparation, variations in the scoring of assessment tasks among teachers, increase in the workload of both teachers and learners, cheating by learners / teachers/ schools, and lack of uniformity between schools. More than anything else, it is clear that the legacy of apartheid has created a wide gap between schools, based on their previous racial profile and their location and those previously advantaged are able to take up school-based assessments convincingly and recent analysis of the accuracy of continuous assessment as compared to the external examinations at South African schools revealed considerable inaccuracies. Shepherd & van der Berg (2007) note that schools in the wealthiest percentile are assessing better than schools in the poorest percentile and that certain subjects tend to have better assessment accuracy. This tells us a lot about the capacity of schools to handle school-based assessments, even when the school-based policy has been implemented. This further illustrates inequalities which can be found in an education system.

#### **Box 4: Grade 9 Reading and Writing results in South Africa**

<sup>2</sup> This topic tends to dominate the annual conferences of the Association of Educational Assessment in Africa (AEAA).

## Grade 9 R&W results by SES



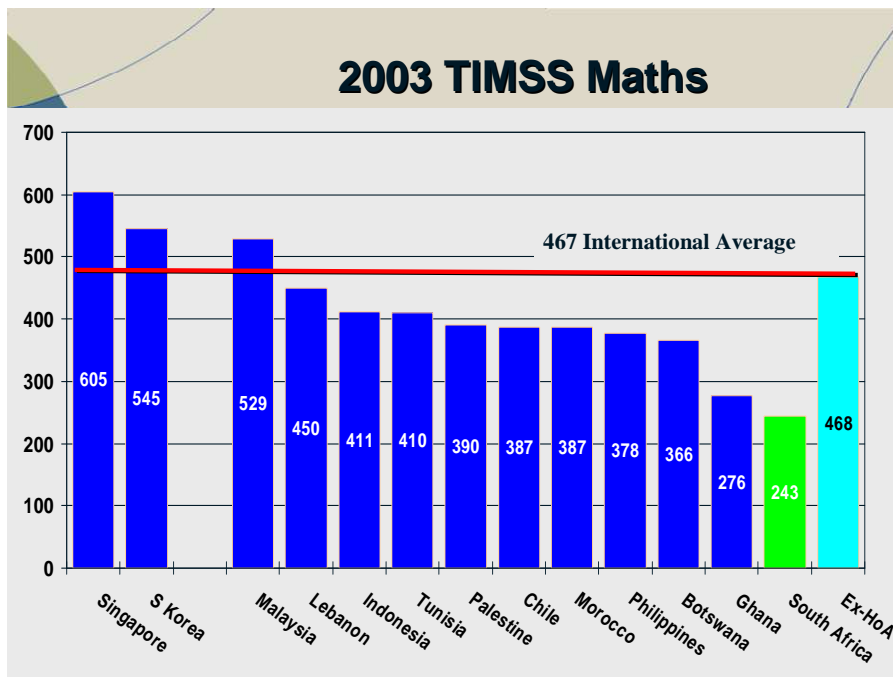
Source: Kanjee (2007)

### 5.2.3. National and International assessments

National and international assessments are relatively new in the education systems, and even newer in SSA (Kelleghan, 2004). Already there are different kinds of both national and international assessments in which SSA has participated and in varying degrees. The first category is the kind of assessments that involve similar activities in several countries. Examples of these are the Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) project which is a joint UNESCO / UNICEF initiative and part of the Education For All (EFA) assessment (UNESCO, 2003). Forty seven African countries have participated in these studies since 1992, and the performance of many African countries has been found to be wanting. (Kelleghan, 2004). The Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) is a test taken by a collaborative group of fifteen ministries in southern and Eastern Africa. Again, these assessments show that the performance of students under these countries is not meeting the standards of the ministries concerned, when they do, as in the case of Zimbabwe, the performance levels do not improve over time (Kelleghan, 2004). In the case of South African learners, their performance has been collated with the socio-economic status of their schools (Van der berg, 2005). In other words, children in historically disadvantaged schools seem to be doubly disadvantaged by the status of the school, as these are the children who perform at the bottom of the pile.

Few SSA countries have participated in the Trends for Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and these are: South Africa, Botswana and Ghana. Again, the performance of these countries has been poor (Reddy, 2006). The following graph shows the performance of eleven countries in the SACMEQ 2000 Mathematics test for example.

Figure2: TIMSS 2003



Source; Kanjee (2007)

Again, the analysis in the graph above shows that students from ex House of assembly (HOA)<sup>3</sup> out-perform their counterparts from less advantaged schools in South Africa. The performance of the former schools is close to the international average and almost double of other schools in South Africa. This together, with the Grade 9 results show us the nature of inequalities that are beginning to emerge in this system. Although there is no data available about the school systems in other SSA countries, the disparities between urban and rural schools have already been mentioned in various studies and should also indicate the source of inequalities in education. The fact that many children in many SSA countries cannot be provided for by their governments and have to rely on community schools and privately funded schools should be a source for concern about the standards in these varied sites (Verspoor, 2007; Bregman, 2004; van der Berg, 2005)

The Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes Educatifs des Pays de la CONFEMEN (PASEC) is an assessment system used in francophone countries. Assessments have also been carried out by individual countries, such as the Namibian and the National Learner Baseline Assessment tested the achievement of grades 4 and 7 in mathematics; the South African Systemic evaluation of Grades 3 and 6. So, SSA though a late starter, is beginning to get in the game of national and international assessments. However, the capacity to carry out these assessments is still low. But what is more troubling is the fact that the results of these studies almost always give an indication that children in SSA schools are not learning enough content, not learning up to the required standards and achievement results are varied amongst schools in one country (Kelleghan, 2004; Soudien, 2006; Bregman, 2004; Reddy, 2006; Verspoor, 2007; van der berg., 2005).

### 5.3. Certification

The African long history of certificating primary education has been traced to the post-colonial era by some writers (Cooksey, 1997; Dore, 1997). At this point there were expectations that primary education could realistically be linked to some forms of productivity, especially agricultural productivity. When this myth was finally exploded for what it was, many donor countries began to promote self employment and consequently vocational education as a connecting link between primary education and further opportunities.

<sup>3</sup> Ex-HOA are schools which were for former whites in the apartheid education, all characterized by privilege and superior resources.



These attempts are described in various countries' reports under the guise of poverty eradication (Psacharopoulos, 1987; King, 2007).

There seems to be two general systems used to certify learner achievements in the different countries. One approach is that of indicating the marks or percentage grade that has been achieved and leaving the judgment about the worth of the qualification to the receiving institution. The other method is that which makes judgments on who has passed and who has failed. In a context of limited spaces in subsequent levels of provision, both forms of certification still have the same impact of selecting the best. Both systems still focus the assessment on the retention of content in the syllabus.

International acceptability of qualifications in SSA is of major concern as places higher up in the education system are scarce in low income countries. Many learners still travel outside of their countries in order to get their education, especially higher education. This is of particular concern for small countries. As a result, many countries still using UCLES are doing this at a great cost to their budgets which they can hardly recover from their income just to have a Cambridge linked qualification. But in general the SSA education certification system is probably providing the least mobility for its citizens within the continent as the qualifications differ from country to country.

## **6. WHAT ARE THE LESSONS FOR SSA?**

Curriculum, assessment and certification are handled somewhat differently in the SSA education systems. What is striking about these systems is how much little has changed since many of these countries first experienced independence. In particular, they continue to serve a very small clientele at the top end, destined for universities. As only a few and usually the wealthier sections of society continue to access higher levels of education in SSA, education seems to be one key institution that is recreating a new social order in these societies. Education is doing this in two ways: as a result of inaccessibility to levels beyond primary education for many children, and the differentiated quality which seem to characterize the range of schools available in any given country.

Universal education, which lasts for anywhere between 8 and 10 years, would be a good start in the right direction. This in turn would stimulate demand for senior secondary education, which is where SSA should be in the twenty first century. Many countries already have aspirations for universal basic education, as gleamed from the countries' policies. It is true that the availability of resources that will make it possible for all children to have a place in school up to 8 – 10 years might prove to be a big stumbling block, hindering many countries to take this bold and necessary step. However, finances aside, there are critical issues that need to be addressed in the curriculum, assessment and certification processes of many countries in order to ensure that the extension of primary education to the lower secondary level is possible.

### **6.1. Access to quality education**

SSA has to make up time and catch up with many developed countries if the continent ever hopes to be an economic global player and ever hopes to establish stable political and social systems. It is therefore important that the issue of providing universal access to education beyond primary education is embarked upon soon and with urgency; the issue of phasing out early selection is addressed; the issue of quality curriculum in education is tackled; the issue of monitoring and controlling quality is equally important and urgent; and the issue of getting assessments and certification functions which will assist instead of impeding the process of access to quality education must begin soon.

#### **6.1.1. Universal access to education beyond primary education**

It has already been noted that many SSA systems have intensions of extending primary education so that what would be considered as basic education should include the lower levels of the present junior secondary education. One source of barriers to the extension of primary education to basic education can be found in factors that militate against successful completion of primary schooling in the first place. One of these is the continuance of external examinations at the end of primary education, because this practice contradicts the

policy intentions. Examinations at the end of primary education serve one purpose only, to select and restrict the numbers of those who will proceed further. The other reason for non-completion is due to poor quality in primary education. Controlling for quality could be dealt with in a different way, and this will be addressed later. The critical issue here is to work on providing places for all those students who will be coming through from the primary education system, and allow sponsored mobility. This has been done in high and middle income countries, and is done in some selected SSA countries, which now boast of high participation rates all the way to senior secondary schooling. Cutting down external examinations at the end of primary schooling will also free up resources which could be utilized somewhere else.

### **6.1.2. Phasing out early selection**

Extending primary education to universal basic education is not the same as phasing out early selection. The latter will be supported by putting in place deliberate interventions targeted at ensuring that selection of students does not happen early on the system. Sponsored progression means that all students must be afforded a chance to participate in a quality educational experience where basic resources like text books, qualified teachers, and school and government instructional supervision are available to all schools. The intervention also assumes a wider range of learning abilities for any cohort of children in a classroom, and failing students is not only counter productive to widening access, but is extremely inefficient. Firstly, repetitions in SSA education systems are not helpful to the students, the schools and the education systems. Targets must be set to reduce repetitions to zero levels and schools to be held accountable for not meeting these targets.

Secondly, a more diversified curriculum that meets a wider range of ability range of students must be in place, especially at the current junior secondary education, so that most students can acquire a basic education level. The diversification of curriculum means providing differentiated curriculum that will provide challenges for the more able learners, whilst ensuring that what is considered to be basic knowledge and skills is mastered by all students.

Thirdly, phasing out early selection means that SSA countries must be courageous in addressing the difficulties caused by introducing students too early in learning through a foreign language like English or French before cognitive skills in mother tongue have been developed. This may go against the parents' aspiration of an early acquisition of a European language, but Ministries of education should know better of what is pedagogically sound and what is not.

Lastly, the freed up capacity from examining, and processing primary school results and placements at junior schools, should be diverted to assisting teachers in their classrooms in order to develop better formative and summative assessments. It is imperative that the teachers' capacities to conduct formative assessments are improved as they are the only adults who can intervene early when children are not learning and achieving at required levels. Also, the judgments they make for promoting students from one grade to another are very important in making quality education.

### **6.1.3. Quality curriculum**

Quality curriculum speaks to both the breadth and depth of curriculum in education. Even though there may be an implicit aim of many education Ministries to provide flexibility and options for school choices, many schools are not well equipped to exercise these options without disadvantaging many learners. It is important therefore that ministries regard the process of curriculum development, implementation and monitoring as central in their efforts to develop the education systems. This requires dedicated expertise in curriculum development and intermittent reviews. This will consequently stimulate the establishment of new text books used in schools and also prevent curriculum stagnation. The curriculum function in many SSA countries seems to be ineffective and must be reviewed. So should the insistence to rigid separation between curriculum and assessments and inspections or offices of standards. Focus of country curriculum functions should be about modernizing, providing relevance and access, and being vigilant about quality.

Whilst today there are infinite choices that can be made by education systems in what they could theoretically offer as teaching and learning material, the question of what schools are there for, always has to be given serious consideration by all countries. Education ministries wield an enormous power in defining what counts as knowledge in their countries. Bregman (2005) has noted agreements across stakeholder groups and countries of what has now become known as general education and these are: (i) Sciences and Mathematics; (ii) Social, Life Skills and Geo-World; (iii) ICT and Technology; and (iv) Languages and Communication. SSA education systems have to ensure that the curriculum which they offer at basic education level, not only covers these domains considered important to form the foundations for further learning, but they are also vigilant about the state of modernity of such curriculum.

In SSA there is always a question about the extent to which vocational subjects have to be included in the curriculum as a means of diversifying curriculum offerings. There is also a question about adequate preparation for the economic participation of school graduates, which may be defined as ‘popular economy’, or ‘informal economy’. This question tends to steer the minds of policy makers to introducing direct training in the school curriculum. Yet the limited nature of resource and capacities of these countries militate against a meaningful vocational curriculum in school sites. A case is made instead of (i) improving the scientific content of practical training in schools which would link easier with employment – based training later on; and (ii) increase instruction in subjects that may facilitate entrepreneurship (e.g. mathematics and languages) (Eisemon, & Schwille, 1991; Psacharopoulos, 1987).

Modern curriculum tends to take on different terms to define subject areas; e.g. Social Sciences; Natural Sciences, etc. This broad categorization of domains of knowledge is often not helpful in systems which have a weak teaching profession. For example the South African experience has shown us that leaving curriculum open-ended and defined by broad domains that integrate subjects from different disciplinary sources is not very helpful to schools and teachers with less resources and capacity. This is also indicated by the changes introduced with the “No Child left Behind” in USA middle school curriculum has been changed to traditional subjects in the USA (Georgia Professional Standards Commission). The presentation of these knowledge domains as curriculum or syllabuses is important for ensuring coherence, framing and sequencing in teaching and learning. Weaker forms of discipline knowledge are central in reproducing inequalities in education (Young, 2007). What this means is that when students are made to access different knowledge forms, this subsequently creates inequalities and the basis for self-selection in later life chances. The selection of topics in a discipline could vary in order to cater for different abilities and offer more challenging topics for the more gifted. Content coverage of what is being learned must be the basis of comparability and providing equality in all education systems. The idea of establishing new forms of knowledge by naming subjects differently is not pedagogically helpful.

The depth of curriculum has to do with the cognitive and other transversal skills being developed through the curriculum and the whole school experience. The importance of cognitive skills education has been highlighted in the UNESCO (2005) report on quality in education.

Education systems that are more effective in establishing cognitive skills to advanced level and distributing them broadly through the population will bring stronger social and economic benefits than less effective systems. This implies that the subject structure of the curriculum is important, in that school systems that do not impart literacy and numeracy would not be associated with these benefits – and those that do so more effectively (i.e. those that are of higher quality) are associated with larger benefits (p.43).

Good curriculum should provide clarity about conceptual procedures within each content area that are being promoted. This gives guidance to teachers with regard to the differentiation between difficulty levels within the discipline, as well as the levels of difficulty associated with suggested assessment activities. There should be a range of cognitive operations demanded of students. The organizing principles of a good curriculum should also allow for logical progression and appropriate sequencing between skills and content areas, over the course of the year, and across grades / years of study. It must be recognized that cognitive skills are learned through the content area, and not in abstract, e.g. problem-solving should be taught in the context of a subject like mathematics; analyzing and evaluating information should be taught in the context of subjects like history, etc. Therefore, using both the principle of breadth and depth of curriculum, it is necessary that ministries establish and develop this capacity in order to be vigilant about what is taught in their school classroom if the dream of providing universal basic education in their countries is to be realized.

Already, it is apparent that SSA children are not learning and achieving to the same breadth and depth as high and middle income countries (Reddy, 2006; Verspoor, 2007).

Whilst an argument for borrowing from the definitions of curriculum boundaries in basic education of other countries has been suggested here, the uniqueness of SSA is also made. Almost all SSA countries can be characterized as fledgling democracies and a school system should be a place where to socialize the young into this new order. Different countries must find their ways of reinforcing this element in their curriculum systems, but this cannot be left out purely to chance as we have seen earlier on that in high income countries this was considered to be an important role of education. The second important element of a SSA education system curriculum has to be about values and culture in all its manifestations. SSA's uniqueness in the world also stems from the values espoused about life; its culture that has been passed from generation to generation, and its languages. These are the elements that need to be protected as they are very fragile in the face of western invasions.

#### **6.1.4. Certification**

Assessments and certification are an important and integral strategy of extending primary education to lower secondary education in the SSA education. To this end then we need to reflect on how and when to use both external and school-based assessments in order to achieve this goal. It has been suggested above that primary school external assessments are counter-productive and should be done away with. This is how most high and middle income countries massified their education systems by removing hurdles. If examinations are maintained, they will continue to squeeze the pipeline of students' mobility in the system. Instead, school-based assessments should be utilized for the promotion of students throughout the grades, up to the end of basic education.

When school-based assessments are used to sponsor the mobility of students in the system, other means of intervention to guard against unequal outcomes must be set in motion instead. It is a known fact that teacher assessments are generally of lower quality than that usually set out by Examination bodies, whose remit is only assessments and have over the years refined this expertise. It is prudent therefore that the remit of Examination Councils over primary education matters change and become that of guiding and developing this process in schools. There are a variety of ways in which this could be done, including a systematized approach to training teachers in assessments; working with teacher training institutions to establish assessment curriculum; setting exemplars for teachers; and even setting the end-of the year examinations for key grades but allowing teachers to mark these and make decisions on promotions. The idea behind this approach would be to help teachers in developing their expertise in both formative and summative assessments in education. Assessment policies for schools should require that promotion be based on continuous and summative assessments, so that teachers can use assessments more in supporting learning in the classrooms.

If external examinations are desired, the first examinations to be experienced by learners in the system should be at the end of basic education. As basic education is not meant to be an end by itself, but means to the end, external examinations even at this end must have a light touch and not meant to be highly selective. What will make this examination to be light and not selective, is first to limit the subject areas in which this examination is to be provided to mainly the core curriculum or what is considered to be key competencies in the basic education system, e.g. language, numeracy. Secondly, the results for certification must include a large school-based assessments portion, minimally 50%. Thirdly, the certification should not be about passing judgments on who has failed and who has passed, rather what areas of knowledge the learner has been able to achieve and at what levels of cognitive skills. It is very important to provide an assessment system that will give indication of the skills achieved at the end of basic education than merely a record of the amount of fact retained. These skills become the bridge for further learning and entry into the labor market. The skills also enforce a different kind of classroom pedagogy.

The present assessment expertise within the examination bodies and schools needs improvement and external intervention is needed for most SSA countries. One suggestion is for UNESCO to build this capacity through the Association for Educational Assessment in Africa (AEAA) for anglophone countries, and to

encourage an establishment of such an association in francophone countries. UNESCO already has a close working relationship with the International Association for Educational Assessment (IAEA) but not AEEA. The advantage of getting this intervention right is that the AEEA is already structured, meets on a regular basis annually and there are also regional formation of this organization such as the SADC association and the West African Education Council (WAEC) which would form the basis for regional cooperation and interventions. The development of expertise in assessment and certification has by and large been left to the sole expertise of a commercial entity such as UCLES for most Anglophone countries, and this tends to perpetuate the narrow trajectory that most countries have been traveling unfortunately.

#### **6.1.6. Quality teachers**

A strategy for the preparation and development of teachers is central in any attempts to extend primary education to junior secondary education. Many countries tend to be concerned with the numbers of teachers available in the system. The quality of the teacher is something often left to the ambit of institutions responsible for initial training in the first place, namely universities. Further professional teacher development initiatives can be haphazard and not really connected to what is required in the classrooms.

Christie (2007) makes a poignant point that policies that work in education are those that are mapped back from a classroom situation. In this regard then, the starting point being the curriculum to be taught and learned, teacher development has to focus on teachers possessing sufficient knowledge for the subjects they will teach, possessing enough pedagogy skills to cope with their classrooms and the students who inhabit them; and more importantly to have enough pedagogy to teach their particular subjects. Verspoor (2007) for example cannot emphasize enough the need for assessments to be curriculum referenced. The last part is often amiss in teacher preparation programs and teachers enter classrooms not sufficiently equipped with skills for reaching a range of student abilities and not able to know enough if students are getting it and if not where they are getting lost. This is the most critical part of making education work.

Further, we have already seen that in countries that have achieved mass education at all levels there has been a shift in the middle level of the school system in terms of how knowledge is organized, changing from generic to deeper content engagement around year 4 to 8 (Georgia Professional Standards Commission). If this is the phase which we anticipate to change in the SSA education systems in order to accommodate for an extended basic education, then the teachers who will handle this phase must be better equipped with specialized knowledge and its pedagogy. This calls for a rethink of how classroom teaching is organized at the top end of primary education as subject instead of classroom teachers might be more appropriate in order to ensure that students come out of basic education with adequate subject knowledge for a smoother transition to secondary education.

#### **6.1.6. Monitoring and evaluating quality of achievements**

International experience shows us that most countries do not rely solely on individual learner achievements to evaluate and monitor the quality of achievements in school education. On the contrary, other countries which have moved away from primary education examinations tend to have other means to evaluate the performance of learners in the system in the form of national and international assessments as well as inspection of schools. In basic education there seems to be two key points for monitoring, namely the end of the first phase of primary education (year 3 / 4) and the transition point to lower secondary (year 6 / 7). These points are important in the sense that at the end of year 3 / 4 it is important to find out if students have acquired adequate basic literacy and numeracy skills to equip them with skills for further learning. The year 6 / 7 assessment is important as this is the phase where the emphasis has changed to the acquisition of more subject knowledge and skills. It is important to evaluate whether students have been able to learn adequately.

Some countries like South Africa and Namibia and some Francophone countries have begun their own systemic or national assessments at the first phase, and this should be encouraged for most countries. The SACMEQ which is now implemented at year 6 in 15 countries should be strengthened and if possible extended to other countries. It is important to have a sense of how SSA countries fare on their own and

against each other and also learn from each other because the circumstances in SSA are much more similar than to the West. Also, the capacity to develop such assessment instruments and capability in each and every country is not yet there.

The other monitoring device which is useful in education is that of inspection. Unfortunately inspection can easily become unhelpful when it is used only as a means to hold schools accountable to bureaucracy and not to help schools as they struggle with a whole host of educational problems they confront in their schools and classrooms (Grubb, 2000). It looks like the key to a good inspection service is to have an appropriate balance of management and curriculum oversight activities in schools. Therefore, individuals who are knowledgeable about subject matter and assessment issues are important in setting up inspection services, if they are to work in improving the effectiveness of education. School leadership training ought to include instructional oversight instead of being limited to management issues. Also, the definition of the inspection services has to overlap significantly with curriculum and assessment matters instead of being a parallel function. More than anything else, if countries are conscious of the inequality divides that exist in their countries, such as rural/urban divides; low and high income areas, inspection services should focus on the support on bridging gaps.

## **6.2. To internationalize or not to internationalize**

There are two ways in which the issue of internationalization of education can be looked at in SSA. One is to examine the appropriateness of common systems across SSA countries instead of disparate systems with no points of comparability or to adopt some of the wisdoms of developed education systems and thus not invent the wheel in the process. This matter has to be considered for curriculum, assessment and certification matters by all SSA countries.

Regarding curriculum, the issues here are those of form and substance. Countries have to decide on the form of curriculum they have capacity for. The choice of form is generally a syllabus-based form; a standards-based form and an outcomes-based form. Many SSA countries are more familiar with the syllabus-based curriculum and only South Africa is known to have made a significant break with this past to an outcomes-based form. Judging by the experience of South Africa, it may not be wise to embark on a radical change without first reflecting on the capacity of all schools to handle the change at the classroom level. The form alone is not the determining factor in ensuring quality, substance is a determining factor. Substance is a determining factor in as far as deciding on what will be considered to be adequate competences in basic education. Young (2007) for example directs us to the question of thinking about what should be considered as appropriate knowledge for schools. He concludes that schools are first and foremost about propagating disciplinary forms of knowledge as compared to any other form of socializing institutions by the in society. This conclusion seems to be vindicated by the nature of curriculum considered to be appropriate for basic education in most countries with developed education systems.

The other issue that has come to vex SSA education has to do with the arrangements made regarding qualification frameworks that accommodate all certificated programs within the country and across countries. Many countries have been considering qualifications frameworks in order to legitimize all certificated programs in the education and training systems within and across countries. However Young (2004) argues that this broadening support for National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF) across the world is based on relatively little evidence on what NQFs can achieve in relation to the goals claimed for them. There are also many countries which are significant and economically successful in Europe, Asia and North America where there are no moves to introduce NQFs. In general, NQFs have been introduced to deal with the parity of esteem between general and vocational education. They have been introduced by countries with weak vocational systems as well as countries with strong vocational systems. Countries with strong vocational education systems like Scotland have had a better success in the implementation of NQFs, as compared to countries like South Africa and England starting with weaker vocational education systems.

National and Regional Qualifications Frameworks have become institutions and concepts that have come to dominate the African discourse especially the Southern and Eastern regions. Chisholm (2006) attributes the Qualifications' Frameworks' emergence in these regions to what she calls 'a policy diffusion through a

network of agencies'. Her point is that in Africa, a National Qualifications Framework was exported by policy entrepreneurs who borrowed from nascent policies of some countries in the North. South Africa at the time of its transformation from a politically abhorrent system was a vulnerable system to be made a laboratory for modernity. Whilst South Africa has been pulling back<sup>4</sup> from the original versions of the National Qualifications Framework, the country continues to propagate the original ideas to the region. Yet we know that NQFs are expensive and the attention of countries with little resources get diverted to the creation of new institutions who muddle issues around standards setting, assessments, qualifications and quality assurance and general provision is compromised. Whilst it is clear that NQFs are here as a permanent feature of educational systems, caution should be exercised in not compromising provision and also bearing in mind what schools are for and expectations moderated. It seems logical to consider building the sub-systems first, e.g. basic education; a diversified senior secondary education system and higher education, before bringing them together into a frame.

SSA education systems are also notorious for lack of co-operation unless engendered by external donors, yet these countries are facing similar problems than the rest of the world. They continue to look only up to high income countries for their development and not amongst themselves. Monitoring systems within and across countries need to be encouraged. A systematic approach to the development of assessment capacity in the region has to be found. It seems logical that as much as the African Union already has projects on higher education in Africa, this organization must also tackle basic and secondary education with urgency, or else the higher education will also not grow. This proposal is made in the spirit of assisting in realizing the New Economic Partnership for Economic Development (NEPAD).

## 7. WHEN STUDENTS FALL OUT

It is difficult to think about solving the problem of any part of the formal education without dealing with the young out of the school system. Colonization not only left Africa with massive backlogs in literacy, but the continent has been lagging behind even after independence (Gebremariam (2001; Maruatona, 2006). The low literacy levels in SSA are not only perpetuated by the lack of secondary school places in secondary schools, but an absence of opportunities for young adults to continue with their education is hampering the education systems in SSA. The young adults soon become adults and parents who have little capacity to assist their children in their own education. As Gebremariam (2001) notes:

Primary education is a means to adult education and is hardly ever an end in itself. (p.98).

Further, the wastage of many young adults, who could still contribute actively in the economy of SSA countries, because of their lack of adequate education, is a serious indictment to these countries. In an era when many individuals work beyond the age of 65, to condemn so many young people for life because they did not succeed in their first attempts to acquire formal education is a cause for serious concern indeed.

It is therefore not enough to develop a vibrant and thriving basic education system for full time learners without a corresponding system for adults outside of the formal system. Many adult education programs tend to be limited to basic literacy or primary school levels, and these militate against the raising the standards of education for the whole population. Those that do, tend to be school-like as adult education as a field is still very young in many countries (Lolwana, 2007). Basic education curriculum, assessment and certification are an important reinforcement for an effective basic education system in any country. Best programs are those whose standards are based on the school standards but take on the different context of adult learning ((Woodward, 1999). This is a clear call for the creation of articulated pathways to educational and economic advancements for those young individuals who have fallen out of the formal school system.

## 8. CONCLUSION

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<sup>4</sup> The South African NQF has been under review for the past 7 years and recently the Ministers of Education and Labor have come up with a joint statement that dramatically alters the ideas espoused in in the original NQF.

This paper spoke to the inequalities and inefficiencies that have been created by the schooling system in SSA. The highly selective system at the end of the primary school system has created a very steep pyramid in the education system, which in many countries with a public mass education system is the thing of the past. Drawing from the experiences of education systems with mass education, this paper pointed to the lessons for SSA education systems.

Suggestions have been made in the paper on how to improve the efficacy of curriculum, assessment and certification in the SSA school system in order to ensure a seamless progression of students till they attain a minimum of 8- 9 years of basic education. Matters of quality in the education have been raised and suggestions made.

However, it is also acknowledged that some of the decisions needed to correct this anomaly in the SSA education system will be political, but most of it will require insightful educational interventions to change the system around. Above all, commitment to these interventions is needed if this very undesirable situation of low levels of education provision and participation are to be reversed.

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