



## Test Fairness of the National Common Entrance Examination in Nigeria: Implications for School Counselling

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### Abstract

Test fairness is one of the qualities of a good test. It ensures relative comparability and reduces biases that tend to portray education as a factor of inequality i.e. widening the gap between the rich and the poor even within the public school context. The paper focused on the National Common Entrance Examination in a context of remarkable differences in the quality of schools, being subjected to the same examination with similar evaluation parameters. Area of test fairness concerns includes: fairly well-funded schools and the impoverished ones treated as common and test and measurement; aptitude subjects are taught through the levels/classes of private and model schools while this is not the case with most public schools (i.e. L.E.A. Schools). Undesirable effects of the examination were examined. Such effects include coaching and cramming which may not promote learning but are designed primarily to pass the test. This may also affect the predictive validity of the aptitude test. Implications for counselling include advocacy to operationalize the concept of school as an agent of education to guarantee learning for all, and not as a mere selection mechanism for those who passed the test. Accreditation of schools should apply to all levels including primary schools to reduce the gap in the infrastructure of fairly well-funded schools and the ones that have experienced ritualized deprivation.

**Keywords:** National Examination, Test Fairness, Education Policy, Secondary Schools

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### Introduction

The National Common Entrance Examination is a standardized aptitude test which implies that it is a test designed to predict or ascertain the readiness of primary school finishers to adjust to the academic challenges of post-primary school education specifically the unity schools i.e. Federal Government Colleges in Nigeria. The prospective candidates consist of all primary six pupils all over Nigeria. The National Examination Council (NECO) is responsible for the conduct of the examination. The selection is usually done within the scope of available vacancies in the first year junior secondary school classes of Federal unity schools under specific national policies guidelines such as Merit category, and then quota system that is designed to favour catchment areas - a mechanism meant to reduce or rule out preponderant biases of the selection process in favour of presumed educationally advantaged states. In other words, a quota system which is more or less a form of positive discrimination creates constituencies or clusters of the identical platform of scores for the selection of candidates.



It is important to document that the curriculum that prepares Nigerian children for the National Common Entrance Examination forms part of the Universal Basic Education curriculum in Nigeria, the six-year primary school education constitutes the lower basic and the middle basic. It is debatable if the selection process (which is characterized by the payment of fees which prevents the children from a poor socioeconomic background from taking the examination) is in tandem with the spirit and letter of the UBE act especially as it relates to the desire of the government to give free, universal and compulsory education. Educational assessment always takes off from some kind of presupposition about what education is for. Education assessment which is geared to giving access to all citizens will proceed slightly different from that which is to produce maximum access to an elite core of citizens. As implied in the name, the National Common Entrance examination provides a common basis (in terms of test content/items, administration, measurement and evaluation under specific policy conditions for all Nigeria primary six pupils to get admission into unity schools, that is, Federal Government Colleges which are funded by the Federal Government of Nigeria and are perceived to be part of the best of the public school system in Nigeria. Within the context of public schools, Federal Government Colleges enjoy greater prestige, better public expectations of academic achievement and higher prospects of entrance into universities and other prestigious post-secondary training institutions for professional development. Consequently, the school year in which children register for the examination is often one of strain for all concerned particularly parents, pupils, teachers and school administrators.

The objective of this paper is to examine the extent to which the examination fulfils one of the key qualities of the test, that is, test fairness as well as to ascertain the credibility of the name - National Common Entrance Examination- given the widening gap in funding, staffing and public expectation of fairly better-funded schools via-a-vis poorly funded ones. There is also the question of whether or not the Nigeria philosophy of education which is founded on the principle of, equality of educational opportunities and justice (FRN, 2014) will allow for the sort of selection that the common entrance examination engenders

### **Concept of Test Fairness**

A fair assessment provides all test takers with an equal opportunity to demonstrate achievement or aptitude and yields scores that are comparably valid from one person or group to another (Herbert and Hausert 1999). The rationale is to allow learners or prospective test takers to show what they have learned from instruction in the form of an application of some sort. If some students have an advantage over others because of factors unrelated to what is taught, then the assessment is not fair (Macmillan 2007). Fairness requires that the test be unbiased and non-discriminatory, uninfluenced by irrelevant or subjective factors that are neither the test content/items nor the scoring is differentially affected by gender, ethnicity, background, handicapping condition or other factors unrelated to what is been assessed.

Fairness, an essential quality of a test has been broadly defined as the equitable treatment of all test-takers during the testing process, absence of measurement bias, equitable access to the constructs being measured and justifiable validity of test score interpretation for the intended purpose (AERA, APA & NCME, 2014).



### **Test Fairness of the National Common Entrance Examination**

Part of the features of the school system in Nigeria is ownership of different categories of schools. Some of the categories of school include:

1. Schools owned by individual and corporate bodies
2. Model schools owned by federal and state governments
3. Demonstration and/or staff schools attached to institutions or parastatals with a sizable number of cities
4. Public schools I.e. primary schools managed by the state Universal Basic Education school board (SUBEC)

A cursory appraisal of the school as listed above will reveal the remarkable difference in the quality of learning facilities or resource allocation and personnel or staffing. A survey of primary schools that traditionally serve as dominant sources of admission to federal government colleges will show that the LEA schools are the least to likely obtain admission. This was not the case from 1970s till the early 1980s because the public primary school or L.E.A. Schools were remarkably comparable to the private and model primary schools. Indeed, many public primary schools especially the rural ones are no longer attempting the National common entrance examination. In addition, the UBE act (FRN, 2000) provides that assessment at the basic education level shall be largely based on continuous assessment only to be confronted with an end of primary school programme evaluation that is significantly formalized. The National Common Entrance Examination exemplifies the view of Gopaul-Monicol and Brice Baker (1998) that school assessment has veered too far in the direction of formal testing. The Examination compromises most of the advantages envisaged for the continuous assessment programme as documented in the national policy on education (FRN, 2014).

One of the weaknesses of the National Common Entrance Examination relates to a developmental psychology imperative that nascent cognitive potentials emerge, develop and are displayed within the socio-cultural milieu (Brice- Baker 1998). Tests are usually skewed toward a certain type of cognitive style. For example, the availability of textbooks for the aptitude test (quantitative and verbal) together with past questions and answers confound the aptitudinal claim of the examination. Also, most of the source schools for admission to target schools i.e. unity schools have on their timetable these aptitude subjects from primary one to primary six. The concept of aptitude test does not require teaching and intensive coaching that characterizes examination year. Invariably the test and the assumption that it predicts the readiness of the prospective successful candidates is substantially compromised.

Most public schools in states like Niger do not have the aptitude subject on the timetable and it is important to reiterate that it is not a conventional school practice to have it. Also undermined is the bio-ecological treatise on intellectual development by Cecil in Gopaul-Mcnical and Brice-Baker which states that context and cognition are inseparable. Simply put the National Common Entrance Examination suffers from item bias. Item bias is said to have occurred when individuals with the same amount of underlying aptitude traits from different sub-population have different probabilities of responding to an item (i.e. a test question) correctly in ability measurements or positively in attitude measurements. The cause of item bias could be the use of highly idiosyncratic terms drawing on sub-cultural knowledge not widely shared in the



population, an item that refers to a concept not relevant to some sub-population of an item that has been badly translated into a foreign language (Hulin Drasgrow & Persons, 1983). For example in 1992 during the marking of the NECO junior secondary school certificate Examinations, the writer witnessed a situation where children from urban centres included E-mail in their answer to the question - List five modern forms of communication - some markers who were predominantly teachers in and around Minna (Niger State capital) marked E-mail as the wrong answer because those teachers at that time did not know E-mail as a means of communication but some children listed it as a correct answer. Invariably children taught by these markers could not have known E-mail as a means of communication. This is one reason why seminars and workshops should be a feature of our school practice because of the dynamism of knowledge.

There are primary schools in Nigeria that are experiencing ritualized deprivation. The experience of the writer in teaching primary school teachers who were returning to school for NCE (Nigeria Certificate in Education) by correspondence overwhelmingly suggests that many of the teachers did not know enough to pass the National common entrance examination, let alone teach the pupils. Fafunwa (1983) reported that the famous Dr Samuel Johnson said that those born to poverty and drudgery should not be deprived by an improper education of the “opiate of ignorance.” He added that in any democratic society schools must be committed to mass rather than elite education. The school should aim to develop the full potential of all pupils, be they gifted or slow and there would be no need for National Common Entrance Examination as the basis for admission to the fairly well funded Secondary Schools. Fafunwa warned that educationally disinherited children are worse off than maternally disinherited ones.

One of the assumptions of sustaining the practice and conduct of the National Common Entrance Examination is that selection is by merit. Heinecke (1988) in an attempt from a sociological perspective to fault the meritocratic claim of our school system said that peasants, labourers and truck-pushers all belong to the same underprivileged group whose children suffer serious educational handicaps in comparison to their rich peers. Working class children are most likely to take up similar occupations to their parents, not because they have a natural and/or innate aptitude for pushing trucks and labouring but because they lack contacts, academically conducive home environment, money, godfathers and other Favourable avenues that make for upward social mobility in Nigeria. Education has become an expensive commodity that most people simply cannot afford. Educational policies of Government on free, compulsory and universal basic education lack financial backing particularly when primary education is largely the responsibility of Local Governments.

Bowles and Gintis in Hurn (1995) disagreed with the meritocratic hypothesis with its assumption that schools are efficient ways of selecting talented people. Instead, National Examination is one of the ways that shows albeit seemingly and not in reality that selection is meritocratic. This is essential for the legitimacy of the capitalist order that the population be convinced that people in high-status positions do deserve these positions that they are more talented and harder workers than others. Schools are an essential prop of legitimacy. Selection for particular tracks within a school must appear to be made based on ability and intelligence, and such purportedly objective criteria as Intelligence Quotient (I.Q) and grades serve this function. But these criteria mask the fact that success in schooling and of course success in later life is closely related to



social class becoming less closely related over time. We need to interrogate more critically what constitutes normalcy and what harmful assumptions are inherent in our educational practice.

One aspect of the National Common Entrance Examination that abbreviates test fairness is the concept of clustering for a cut-off point which defines a collectivity for the same cut-off point to include indigenes of a state irrespective of residence. For example, an indigene of Niger state schooling in Lagos state will be considered on the same measuring scale as those at home. But it is a well-known fact the school context of Lagos is generally better than that of Niger state. Similarly, even with pupils resident in the state of origin, selection across socioeconomic classes within the state with the same cut-off point smacks of insensitivity to the research imperative of socio-economic factors in academic achievement. Poverty is more obvious in villages and urban slums. It is the poor that patronize UBE schools more and the schools are generally impoverished. Therefore using the same cut-off point for schools that have a remarkable difference in the quality of teachers, infrastructure, student support services and public expectation simply illustrates test unfairness

#### **Undesirable Effects of the National Common Entrance Examinations**

As children approach the end of the primary school curriculum, many teachers and parents in Nigeria exert pressure on learners by devoting all their effort in the last year or two to cramming pupils into passing the Examination and usually pay less attention to school subjects or activities which do not directly contribute to this end. Teaching for examination or test is liable to have a stultifying effect on progressive educational practice, to discourage experimentation with activity methods, group work and self-expression or creative subjects. This is injurious to the mental health and the proper social and emotional growth of children.

Coaching is another harmful effect. As an accountability tool, the National Common Entrance examinations often lead to widespread coaching of prospective candidates. Coaching often degenerates into drilling for the least important skills and perpetuates damaging models of instruction and educational excellence. Learning how to learn and use knowledge is relegated to the background.

A national standardized, multiple-choice examinations would likely perpetuate sorting students according to class. Under the guise of tracking for “ability” students are often segregated according to socioeconomic class based on test scores. This is partly because the tests make cultural assumptions through the language used and the experience the test treats as normative, assumptions that work to the detriment of low-income children and children from rural areas. For example, most students in Federal Government colleges attended pre-primary schools as well as a model or private primary schools. While there are real differences in the educational opportunities of poor and rich pupils, standardized tests exaggerate these differences by their biases and confuse lack of ability with lack of exposure.

#### **Implications for Counselling**

Schools are supposed to be designed to guarantee success for every child, particularly for a government that has committed itself to equal educational opportunities and free education for citizens. Also, school from a counselling point of view should give expression to what is in the



child through systematic management of individual differences. Consequently, a National common learning environment/context should precede a national common entrance examination. The national common entrance examination put the cart of testing before the horse of a relatively comparable educational context/facilities and the harmful effects of this trend will fall most heavily on the children of the poor. If two children attend two different schools of different qualities they do not have to write the same examination if the purpose is aptitudinal or when they write the same examination, they do not need to be subjected to the same cut-off point if the purpose is aptitude. Differences in the test performance are likely going to reflect more of the differences in the learning environment rather than in their aptitude to learn. There is nothing common about the national common entrance examination except the examination paper and the dates or else not even the venues of the examination are of equal or comparable comfort for testing Nigerian schools need to be repositioned in such a way that teachers and school management can be held accountable for the education of learners. Most public primary schools lack basic infrastructure and qualified and motivated teachers. In these circumstances, school personnel cannot be held accountable. The hypocritical approach to attaining a conducive learning environment through accreditation at the tertiary educational level should be stepped down to primary and secondary schools. One's the condition for functional education is available every child can learn (Schmidt, 1999)

Continuous assessment at the primary school level should be of the right difficulty level and the essential attribute of guidance oriented practice should be implemented, this will significantly improve learning. School conditions that allow for immediate feedback and remedial services such as appropriate learner/teacher ratio as recommended in the National Policy on Education should be adhered to If aptitude which embodies readiness for secondary school education is our goal, then we need to robustly reconceptualize the readiness test in a way that gives fairly equal opportunity to all that desire secondary school education. In the 1970s up to the early 1980s, products of public primary schools including the ones located in villages were getting admission to Federal Government Colleges. Such students will show initial learning deficits, especially in communication skills but within the time-space of two to three years of learning in the Unity Schools, they adjusted and often graduated with good WAEC results. If we value both fairness and merit in determining access, we might consider alternative readiness test designs that move away from an emphasis on a single cut-off point and tilt towards that which incorporate the identification of the skills the students should develop to improve their readiness for success.

### **Conclusion**

The absence of test fairness amounts to test abuse of a kind. The National Common Entrance Examinations need to be closely examined to reflect legitimate variables of national interest so that education rather than being a factor of social mobility turns out to be a factor in widening the gap between the rich and the poor thereby setting the stage for social implosion as implied in the Marxist materialist construction of history which talks about the contradictions of the system that is bound to experience upheavals by working out its logic. Our school system can be made better, more responsive or sensitive to the need and aspirations of the various sub-cultures as it relates to the comparability of results of national examinations.



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