

# Assessment and National Cohesion

A case study of how assessment is being used to bring about national unity and reconciliation in Rwanda after the 1994 Tutsi genocide

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The paper aims at analysing the role assessment can play in social reconstruction and national reconciliation in post genocide Rwanda or in any other society emerging out of civil war as a result of ethnic, religious or regional interests. It begins with an appraisal of the historical developments in the country especially in the educational context.*

*It recognizes the role played by colonialists and post colonial governments in bringing about the country's problems especially in promoting division by using education in offering new opportunities for promotion to some while shutting out others and also recognizes the role of the Rwandans in believing these historical versions and using them to destroy their society.*

*It further shows the role of education in nation building in different parts of the world and goes on to show how external assessment is being used to rebuild the nation by making education open to all through merit.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Educational assessment has played a major role throughout the history of modern education in most countries around the world. It has served a number of functions but the most important of these in most developing countries has been the selection of students to successive levels in the education system.

In countries where selection to successive levels has been based on criteria other than the results of assessment, a lot of injustice has been seen to be done and this has created resentment among the nationals. A case in question is Rwanda where in the education systems from the time of the introduction of modern education in around 1900 until 1994, selection to the next cycle was based on discriminative practices where ethnic, religious and regional considerations took precedence and results of assessment came last.

The paper shows that from the time the colonialists set foot in the country, the nation ceased to be one cohesive entity mainly because of their divide and rule policies where education and other areas of society were distributed on ethnic grounds.

This paper, shows that although the results of assessment were not given priority during the selection of students to the next cycle, which led to resentment, currently assessment is being used for the selection of students to successive levels which has contributed a lot to national unity and reconciliation

Today, Governments are seeking to render their national education systems more effective by raising standards in the face of international economic and cultural competition. They have done so by establishing examination boards for the conduct of all examination related matters. In the case of developing countries such as Rwanda, it established the Rwanda National Examinations Council to take charge of Primary and Secondary school examinations.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE HISTORY OF ASSESSMENT**

The essence of education is change, the acquisition of mental processes, the skills and attitudes that were not present before, or the development and improvement of existing ones. It follows that the assessment or measurement of this change is important in education both to chart the development and to match teaching strategies to the individual needs.

However, the original aims of modern assessment in form of examinations which continue to play a significant role in the lives of those assessed can be traced to Imperial China when various tests of practical and academic skills were introduced to combat nepotism in relation to state employment. Individuals would be selected on the basis of merit rather than birth. This remains one of the permanent appeals of testing. It is worth noting that whatever the limitations of the system, it is estimated that up to 60 % of the successful candidates came from families that were not of administrative elite.

Similar reasoning underpinned the introduction of examinations into Europe, particularly in Britain, in the nineteenth century; as economic development led to social mobility, assessment was increasingly seen as a fairer and more effective way of selecting students for entry to higher education and to the civil service (Mathews, 1985, p1).

This is still going on in other countries especially developing countries such as Rwanda where the pyramidal education system narrows as one moves to higher levels, and this requires a fair merit based selective mechanism to distribute the few available places that exist as one moves to higher levels, this function is best performed by assessment. Since education is the key to promotion , denying one this basic right divides the people between the distributors and those at the receiving end

## **MEANING OF ASSESSMENT**

The term assessment according to Longman dictionary of contemporary English means "a process in which you make judgement about a person or situation".

However, different authors attach different meanings to it.

According to Lambert and Lines (2000, p 4),

*Assessment is the process of gathering, interpreting, recording and using information about pupils' response to educational tasks.*

## **MEANING OF COHESION.**

Cohesion mean unity, solidarity or pulling together.

National cohesion would in this case mean the unity of the nation.

The Rwandan nation was for a long time during and after colonial rule until 1994 divided along ethnic lines which later culminated into the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi. The question that arises is therefore to relate assessment to national cohesion

## **PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT**

While the underlying purpose of assessment in instruction is simply to assist the instructional process, other purposes for providing different information exist;

Since the learner occupies a centre stage in the process of learning, providing feedback to learners so that they can learn from mistakes and build on achievements, and act on them for further improvement, is a fundamental purposes of assessment.

Another key area which has preoccupied both teachers and learners is the purpose of classifying or grading student achievement, and certifying those who are competent for employment positions in both public and private sectors.

Assessment is also supposed to lead to the identification of students' learning needs and to develop remedial strategies if necessary.

For students to learn with a purpose they must be motivated. Learners respond to stimulus of new learning when offered rewards, and assessment offers rewards in form of marks, praise, grades, promotion to the next class or cycle and certificates, and these motivate students to work hard.

Assessment also helps in estimating students' potential for future performance, and in determining who progresses to other courses or the next educational cycle, a selective function that is common in developing countries such as Rwanda where the places in institutions of learning are fewer than the number of applicants. But it is worth noting that even in institutions of higher learning in industrialized countries, there is still competition for places in the famous institutions and universities where higher grades are a requirement for admission. It is the unfair distribution of the scarce places that has created problems for Rwanda.

Assessment also gives teachers feedback on how effective they are promoting learning by knowing how students respond to particular teaching approaches. This helps them to know how effective the instruction has been and whether the methodology used was correct, which will help in designing more suitable teaching, learning, and assessment activities.

Assessment normally provides statistics for internal and external agencies. Internally, the statistics are used by schools and institutions of higher learning in monitoring the standards. While externally, they are used by educational policy makers for accountability purposes by monitoring standards across schools through the use of league tables and across the educational system as a whole, and on evaluating the programmes of study or the performance of teachers.

Rowntree (1989, p 28) advances another purpose of preparing students for life. He says that the competitive element in the examination structure is a reflection of the competitive situation in the world outside school.

## ***HOW EDUCATION WAS USED BY THE COLONIAL AND IMMEDIATE POST-COLONIAL GOVERNMENTS UP TO 1994***

Education was introduced by Missionaries in order to facilitate the spread of the gospel. To them it did not matter who received this education Hutu, Tutsi or Twa ( the three ethnic groups in the country), but this was in contradiction of the wishes of the administrators who wanted to educate only sons of Tutsi chiefs who would succeed their fathers as chief. However, in the early stages, the response of the Hutu to Gospel teachings and subsequently to education was greater than that of the Tutsi, because they saw in it a tool for their emancipation from oppression. This was to change until after the Second World War, when the Tutsi were the sole recipients of secular and missionary education (Lemarchand, 1970, p. 74).

The few Hutu who received secondary education were trained in the seminaries which were free from discrimination, but were denied the opportunity to participate in their country's political institutions. This alienation created intense feelings of frustration to the extent that they became the leaders of an all Hutu political party that overthrew the old Tutsi monarchy and substituted it with an oppressive Hutu republican regime .

The new republican governments embarked on a discriminatory quota system in education based on ethnic and regional criteria, but the quota system was extended to the other areas of the country's social and political life. Having scored highly in the terminal examinations would not guarantee one a place in the next cycle. There was neither transparency in the publication of results nor in the publication of selection lists. All the Ministry of Education did was to publish a list of students awarded places in secondary school with no indication of marks obtained.

The introduction of national examinations on the present scale therefore was born out of the desire to redress the past injustices in the distribution of scarce

places in secondary schools and in higher institutions of learning. Although the opportunity to provide equal access to education showed up, the problem of few available places in Secondary schools and in higher institutions persisted, and this necessitated the creation of national examinations. It was believed that national examinations would also lead to openness and transparency which had eluded the previous regimes.

Introduction of national exams would bring about the raising of standards which had not been possible under the previous regimes because, under them it would not have been easy to ascertain that the curriculum was being implemented equally across all the schools. It was therefore not easy to hold the schools and teachers accountable.

## **THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN NATION BUILDING IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT**

Education has been described as transmission of culture from one generation to the next, that is, the patterns of behaviour, the values, the beliefs, the ideals and the knowledge which that society has accumulated and uses (Agyeman, 1986, p. 20). The historical role of education in the process of state formation or nation building is now widely accepted.

The greatest contribution education has made towards nation building is the provision of the necessary manpower for administrative and industrial development which count greatly towards economic and political development. The nineteenth century thinkers had the cultivation of social solidarity, democratic citizenship and national identity as other functions that education could perform (Green, 1997, p. 30)

After independence of most African and Asian countries for example, most of which had been carved out of many tribes and ethnic groups with a multitude of languages, there was need to forge these tribes into nations and the first unifying

factor they needed was a common language and most picked the language of the former colonial masters to in order nor not to alienate any section of the population by picking one of the local languages. These countries introduced boarding secondary schools in which pupils from different regional, ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds became acquainted and this tended to minimize fears and ignorance which underlie much discrimination (Bray, Clarke & Stevens, 1996, p. 260). Others expanded education with the hope that this would provide equal opportunities to all and reduce the inequalities which have served as a source of discontent and tension in the past. This is what South Africa did after the demise of apartheid.

### ***THE ROLE OF ASSESSMENT( NATIONAL EXAMINATIONS) IN NATIONAL COHESION***

National examinations which are sometimes called external assessment or public examinations have come to dominate the lives of many young people across the world during the twentieth century. In those countries where national examinations are taken, they represent the stamp of official approval set on the completion of the pupils' school career, and in addition to marking the end of a career they also motivate adolescents to a serious and sustained effort (Luijten, 1991, p. 9). The above statements underscore the important, though sometimes resented, place examinations have come to occupy in education in many countries.

During the education of an individual it becomes necessary to undertake some form of monitoring to ascertain whether the intended outcomes have been achieved. One way of doing this is through assessment which is the gathering of information about student performance, to inform the students about their current position and how to advance towards a better position. It also informs the teacher about the effectiveness of teaching, and gives direction to what should be done to improve instruction for better results(Black and Wiliam, 1998, p. 2)

National examinations are a form of assessment which summarises the achievement of a student at the end of a programme, normally at the end of an academic year or at the end of a cycle and are conducted at national level

The practices of patronage and family connections were common in many countries (Lambert and Lines, 2000, p. 23). There was therefore need for fairness and equality of treatment and the elimination of patronage in the selection of applicants for job and places in schools, hence the establishment of external assessment, where their major function was selection. Today, examinations in many developing countries are also increasingly being used for accountability, curriculum control, prediction for future performance and the raising of standards..

The examinations are run by Rwanda National Examinations Council, a statutory autonomous body under the auspices of the Ministry of Education that came into being in 1997. Among other things, it was charged with were the preparation, administration, marking, publication of results and putting in place selection procedures to the next cycles in collaboration with Ministry of Education officials, secondary schools heads and higher institutions of learning (Prime Minister's Office, 2001).

The Council tries to observe the main principle of assessment 'that all must be equal in the process of the examination and in its outcomes'. In other words examinations are supposed to be egalitarian, being the same for everyone no matter who the candidates are, their ethnic, regional or religious affiliation, and this makes them just and fair. The questions are the same, the examinations are taken under similar conditions, the marking is the same and is done under standardized conditions and during the marking the examiners do not know the identities of the owners of the scripts they are marking. The results are announced publicly and the certificates are the same. The selection process is centrally carried out and lists of results are used for this purpose. The candidates are picked in rank order of merit during the selection process. It is the transparent

manner in which the examinations are conducted and processed and the selection process which have proved that all Rwandans are equal for the first time and this has endeared the Rwanda National Examinations Council to the population.

To ensure that rightful candidates are admitted, admission letters as well as admission lists indicating the candidates' marks and the schools they have been selected to are sent through the respective administrative headquarters, where admission letters are picked by the parent of the candidate on production of identification papers. School inspectors undertake controls to monitor the authenticity of the student admission lists after the students have reported to their respective schools. All these measures are taken to ensure that there is no danger of favouritism and corruption to individuals or to institutions, and that only the results of national examinations are used for this provision of equal opportunities.

These reforms are hailed by the majority of the population from all walks of life and all ethnic groups as a significant move from the past and they represent a bridge between the ugly past and the promising future with an all inclusive education system. This has contributed to national cohesion where all candidates are given equal treatment on the strength of merit.

However, examinations are not free from problems and their validity and reliability are questionable due to several causes including high stakes nature of the examinations which lead to teachers and students using various approaches and sometimes malpractices to ensure that high results are obtained.

Therefore there is need for the improvement of the quality, relevance and technical adequacy of this selection examination to ensure that those who are selected are either fairly identified, or are the best suited for the jobs or further courses to which they have been chosen.

Secondly, the Council should, as Lewin (1993, pp. 41-42) says, undertake research on examination performance in different schools and for students with different social backgrounds to help in making decisions designed to lead to further improvements in access, equity and outcomes of schooling. But this calls for training of researchers in research procedures in order to increase their capacity to efficiently evaluate and interpret examination results. Studies of predictive validity could also be undertaken because the results are used as selection devices.

Certain subjects like history, civics, political education and religious education, that need to be emphasized because of their perceived importance in bringing about reconciliation, should be given examinable status. This is because teachers as well as students are known to give a low status to subjects that are not examined at national level and which do not count towards the final result, as Broadfoot (1990a) in *Bray and Steward, 1998, p. 21* says,

*'Governments around the world are increasingly turning to assessment as a means of bringing about desirable changes in the system. A change in emphasis in the content or skills examined in a particular public examination paper, for example can be a highly effective means of curriculum development'*

In setting examination questions, emphasis should be placed on inclusion of elements of the Rwandan social, historical and political realities in the examinations across most subjects. It should however be emphasized that examining a subject can not alone lead to social cohesion, because most students read in order to pass examinations and then forget all about it at the end of the examination.

The Examination Council employees should be given optimum conditions they require to do their job effectively, free from political and partisan pressures and patronage where politicians who are used to the old order would wish to bypass the established procedures to seek for favours in having their children admitted

to this or that school. The desire by the present government to address problems of inequality through national examinations at the end of each cycle should therefore be supported because the examinations with their selective purpose serve as a strong tool of national cohesion.

## **ROLE OF OTHER FACTORS**

While assessment has played a key role in national cohesion, a lot more is required for the realisation of national cohesion. Factors such as patriotic leadership and curriculum can also play a role in bringing about national cohesion.

## **A PATRIOTIC AND COMMITTED LEADERSHIP**

In Rwanda, the first opportunity of using education and assessment for national cohesion came immediately after the Tutsi genocide of 1994 where the government of national unity reopened schools which had been closed during the genocide. This reopening was characterized by prioritization of equity of provision and access, and encouraging a culture of inclusion of all the categories of students including those who had stayed in the country, the internally displaced, the 1959 refugees who had returned, and those whose language of instruction was English as opposed to French which had been the official language and the language of instruction in the country. The basis of education changed radically as any form of discrimination became illegal. The classification of students and the general public through the use of ethnic identity papers was abolished.

Provision of educational opportunities is now based on scholastic performance, and this has been strengthened by the introduction of national examinations. This inclusive education has created an atmosphere of trust and hope for a better future among all sections of the population

In order to implement some of the policies, a number of institutions were put in place, and included the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC), The Rwanda National Examinations Council (RNEC), and the General Inspectorate, Their work is supplemented by the Human Rights Commission and the National Reconciliation Commission and the Gacaca (traditional) courts which operate in a wider context embracing schools and the general public. The latter two use both formal and informal situations such as solidarity political education camps to students who have secured admission to public higher Institutions, the media, and village meetings to educate the wider public about the history of the country, current issues facing the country, how they came about, and how they can be resolved whereas the Gacaca courts are used to judge genocide cases with a view to reconciling the wronged and the wrongdoers.

## **THE ROLE OF CURRICULUM IN NATIONAL COHESION**

Curriculum means 'a selection from culture' meaning that since no person can know everything, a workable curriculum must be selective, including some elements of the culture and leaving others out (Jeffreys, 1971, p. 67). Curriculum can also be viewed as those learning experiences and activities that are provided by the school and the wider society for the education of the child. This would embrace such unplanned activities as the hidden curriculum, which though not planned by the school, exercise influence on the individual. The young generations should be exposed to those values and practices of societies to which they belong, to socialise them, and enable them to fit usefully and harmoniously into those societies(Thompson, 1981, p. 24).

The question that arises is how people can be encouraged to move towards common and shared identities that transcend ethnic affiliations one way of doing this though by no means the only one, is through developing a curriculum that suits the present social, economic and political conditions in which the country finds itself. This has been done by adding new subjects and new topics to the pre-1994 curriculum. It is hoped that the new additions such as political

education, peace education and human rights, will inculcate new values leading towards unity. Plans to rewrite the history and civics books that are free of stereotypes and divisive information have started.

Emphasis should also be given to subjects like history, civics; political education and religious education which many believe have a greater role to play towards the reconciliation process.

The importance of history in the promotion of national identity is highly disputed but still the policy makers in most countries see no better alternative of doing this job. Many countries include it in the curriculum because they believe that more than any other subject it can lead to national identity.

Examples of where reconciliation has taken place should be provided to emphasize that however insurmountable the problems might appear to be, it is possible to get around them. For example the reconciliation that took place between peoples who were adversaries such as Germany and Poland, Germany and France after the Second World War, FRELIMO and RENAMO in Mozambique, and the South African Whites and Black communities. There is a practical lesson to be drawn from this, one which could act as a corrective to all to the widespread feeling that the complexity of the situation leaves humanity relatively powerless (Remond, 1998, p. 346).

Students should be given the opportunity to explore the many faces of evil, how it can disguise itself as national interest, ethnic survival, 'it's none of my businesses', or "what can I do"? (Ibid) Most of these reasons are given by perpetrators of genocide especially in Rwanda claiming that they were pushed by fear that the Tutsi were out to exterminate them, so they killed in self defence. Others became bystanders because they had nothing to lose if the Tutsi were killed, while others felt their single voices could have achieved nothing especially because they felt they would be killed if they acted contrary to the wishes of the killers.

Moral examples need to be used to encourage pupils to grapple with issues of human rights and social responsibility; teach them about people who tried to make a difference, who did not give up to save the lives of people threatened by genocide. By doing so the kind of people who would be prepared to stand up rather than stand back are nurtured (Totten, 2004, p.5). In Rwanda such people exist like a Hutu Catholic nun who refused to abandon Tutsi refugees and was killed with them. She is currently regarded as a national hero.

While teaching about genocide, teachers should try to make use of actual case studies such as eyewitness accounts, films or memorial sites because when students hear people who experienced genocide or those who witnessed genocide talking about it, they get a clear glimpse of what suffering a person went through. This is the only time they can think of preventing it from happening again. Students should also be helped to think about the use and abuse of power and the roles and responsibilities of individuals, organizations and nations when confronted with civil rights violations.

When talking about reconciliation, students must be made aware of what needs to be done to eliminate impunity. But great care must be taken because most classrooms have pupils whose parents might have been killed by parents of pupils in the same class, and pupils who were very young or not yet born during 1994 genocide whose fathers are in prison accused of genocide, but who believe that their parents are innocent. Therefore the talks about reconciliation in such cases require careful planning

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the issues analysed, it is clear that the road towards social reconstruction and political reconciliation is a long one. The nature of the current social problems and the various causes that contributed to these problems, hinge on the wrong historical interpretation by the European colonialists and the wholesale acceptance by the Rwandese of the version of history put across by the Europeans. The behaviour of the Europeans in siding with one section of the population and later siding with different group and supervising the overthrow of

the ruling clique by their new found allies also paved the way for the problems that were to follow.

The fact that education was one of the tools used in fuelling resentment and the conflict that followed especially by the elite who were able to manipulate the masses, it can be used to redress the situation by making it open to all and using it in a way to build bridges across the protagonists. This can be done by borrowing a leaf from similar conditions where education was used for nation building in countries emerging from civil wars or revolutions.

Appreciation should be made for attempts made to employ curriculum and national examinations through introduction of new subjects and new topics in the curriculum and the introduction of national examinations for distributing the scarce educational resources at the primary, lower secondary and upper secondary cycles. It is also important that the cooperation of all the stakeholders including the leadership, the religious institutions, the civil society and the general public, is necessary to make it possible to inculcate the desirable values into the youth in order to achieve social reconstruction and national cohesion.

Since people lived almost through 100 years under one form of discrimination or the other during colonial and post -colonial regimes up to 1994, a period in which ethnicity was a major consideration for the distribution of social and political benefits, it is not easy to wish away the ethnic groups from the scene. They can be scraped from the identity cards, but not so from people's minds. What is important is to talk about the past and show that differences are a fact of life, but should not be used as a divisive factor.

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