Disseminating and Using Student Assessment Information in The Gambia

Ousmane Senghor
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About the Series

Building strong education systems that promote learning is fundamental to development and economic growth. Over the past few years, as developing countries have succeeded in building more classrooms, and getting millions more children into school, the education community has begun to actively embrace the vision of measurable learning for all children in school. However, learning depends not only on resources invested in the school system, but also on the quality of the policies and institutions that enable their use and on how well the policies are implemented.

In 2011, the World Bank Group launched Education Sector Strategy 2020: Learning for All, which outlines an agenda for achieving “Learning for All” in the developing world over the next decade. To support implementation of the strategy, the World Bank commenced a multi-year program to support countries in systematically examining and strengthening the performance of their education systems. This evidence-based initiative, called SABER (Systems Approach for Better Education Results), is building a toolkit of diagnostics for examining education systems and their component policy domains against global standards, best practices, and in comparison with the policies and practices of countries around the world. By leveraging this global knowledge, SABER fills a gap in the availability of data and evidence on what matters most to improve the quality of education and achievement of better results.

SABER-Student Assessment, one of the systems examined within the SABER program, has developed tools to analyze and benchmark student assessment policies and systems around the world, with the goal of promoting stronger assessment systems that contribute to improved education quality and learning for all. To help explore the state of knowledge in the area, the SABER-Student Assessment team invited leading academics, assessment experts, and practitioners from developing and industrialized countries to come together to discuss assessment issues relevant for improving education quality and learning outcomes. The papers and case studies on student assessment in this series are the result of those conversations and the underlying research. Prior to publication, all of the papers benefited from a rigorous review.
process, which included comments from World Bank staff, academics, development practitioners, and country assessment experts.

All SABER-Student Assessment papers in this series were made possible by support from the Russia Education Aid for Development Trust Fund (READ TF). READ TF is a collaboration between the Russian Federation and the World Bank that supports the improvement of student learning outcomes in low-income countries through the development of robust student assessment systems.

The SABER working paper series was produced under the general guidance of Elizabeth King, Education Director, and Harry Anthony Patrinos, Education Manager in the Human Development Network of the World Bank. The Student Assessment papers in the series were produced under the technical leadership of Marguerite Clarke, Senior Education Specialist and SABER-Student Assessment Team Coordinator in the Human Development Network of the World Bank. Papers in this series represent the independent views of the authors.
Abstract

The Gambia has shifted the focus of its education reforms from school attendance to student learning. This shift came with a stronger assessment system to measure learning. This paper highlights how assessment data are being used in The Gambia to contribute to education quality and learning. While assessment data were used mainly for selection purposes in the past, the emphasis now is on monitoring and supporting learning. Greater data availability has allowed for greater school accountability as well as for more systematic feedback on the curriculum and teacher training. Several factors converged to allow for more effective use of assessment data, including a favorable political environment, the development of strategic partnerships, and the building of local assessment capacity.
About the Author

Ousmane Senghor is Senior Programme Officer at The Gambia National Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). He has participated in the development of various subsectoral policies for the Gambian Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE), such as the In-Service Training Policy and the Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy. He also was instrumental in drafting the Basic Education Curriculum Framework. Since 2007, Ousmane has been a core team member of the national task force on assessment. His work on assessment data has enabled MoBSE to strengthen various policies aimed at addressing the quality of education in The Gambia. He coordinated the 2011 Early Grade Reading Assessment in the country.
Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank all those who supported him in the collection and compilation of assessment-related data in The Gambia. Special thanks to Fatou Kiney Sey (PEO, STED), Mohammed B. S. Jallow (Director, Planning), Sang Gomez (Director, SQAD), Momodou Jeng (Head, INSET Unit), Andrew Gomez (PEO, M&E Unit), Rachel Njie (M&E Officer), Anna Nancy Mendy (PEO, Basic Education), Jenny Hsieh (Consultant), and Lamin Jarju (NATCOM). In addition, the author is grateful to the Permanent Secretary of MoBSE, Baboucarr Bouy, for his continuous support and encouragement. Appreciation is also extended to all of the interview respondents who provided very useful information.
Abbreviations and Acronyms

CCM  Coordination Committee Meeting
CREDD  Curriculum Research Evaluation and Development Directorate
EGRA  Early Grade Reading Assessment
GABECE  The Gambia Basic Education Certificate Examination
INSET  Inservice Training Unit
M&E  Monitoring and Evaluation Unit
MoBSE  Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, The Gambia
NAT  National Assessment Test
NATCOM  National Commission for UNESCO
NGO  Nongovernmental organization
PEO  Principal Education Officer
PSLCE  Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination
SACMEQ  Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
STED  Science and Technology Education Directorate
SQAD  Standards and Quality Assurance Directorate
WAEC  West African Examinations Council
WASSCE  West Africa Senior School Certificate Examination
UNESCO  United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNICEF  United Nations Children’s Fund
Executive Summary

After expanding its school system, The Gambia now faces the challenge of ensuring that all students are learning. This shift in priorities has led to the development of a stronger student assessment system. It also has led to a change in the way assessment information is used: from selecting and filtering students out of the school system to monitoring and supporting learning by all students. That is, there has been a shift from “assessment for selection” to “assessment for learning.”

The purpose of this case study is twofold: (a) to describe how The Gambia makes effective use of its assessment information and (b) to draw lessons for other countries aiming to improve their uses of assessment data.

The Gambia uses assessment information for a variety of purposes. At the school level, assessment information is used to support teaching and learning and to hold schools accountable for student learning. At the community level, assessment information is disseminated to parents in order to raise awareness about student learning levels; and at the country level, assessment information informs national education policy dialog and decision making.

Several conditions need to be met for a country like The Gambia to make more effective use of assessment information. A favorable political environment that puts learning at the core of the education agenda is critical. Increased public awareness about the “learning crisis,” for example, creates a demand for assessment information. Curriculum reforms also create a push for assessment systems to determine if students are meeting curricular expectations. Local capacity to conduct assessments is essential to produce and disseminate data on learning levels. Stable funding and strategic partnerships with local and international institutions also are needed. This case study offers these and other key lessons for countries aiming to improve the utility of their assessment information.
Disseminating and Using Student Assessment Information in The Gambia

Ousmane Senghor

Introduction

The Gambia has been successful in introducing reforms to provide education for all. However, while thousands more Gambian children now attend school, far too many of them are not learning. According to The Gambia Country Status Report 2010, “Gambian learning outcomes are strikingly unsatisfactory, even in terms of the most basic reading and numeracy skills, and are well below subregional averages” (MoBSE and World Bank 2010, p. 26). In grade 2, for example, half of the students cannot read a single word (CREDD 2009). In grades 9 and 12, less than 15 percent of students pass either the English or mathematics exit examinations.

This “learning crisis” has led to a greater emphasis on monitoring and supporting student learning, including the development of a stronger student assessment system. The theory behind this reform was that assessments can generate key information to monitor learning and that this information can be fed back into the education system. Assessment information can be used to inform teaching, update the curriculum, train teachers, and address inequalities in the school system. The result should be increased learning.

This case study analyzes how data from the assessment system in The Gambia are used to contribute to improved education quality and learning, drawing lessons for other countries seeking to improve their use

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1 Documents published by the Gambian government are cited by the name of the respective ministry or ministerial subunit in this paper, but listed under “The Gambia, Government of” in the reference list.
of assessment information. The findings are based on a review of key documentation, such as policy documents, assessment reports, and curriculum frameworks, as well as interviews with key informants, including representatives of assessment institutions, teachers, parents, and students.

The findings and lessons learned should be appraised in the context of The Gambia, which is a very poor and small country in West Africa—the smallest country on mainland Africa. It has a multicultural population of 1.64 million, representing a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups. The country’s economy is relatively undiversified and limited by a small internal market. A low-income country, The Gambia has a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of US$1,948 (in purchasing power parity) and roughly one-third of the population live in severe poverty. In 2013, The Gambia ranked 165 out of 187 countries surveyed in the United Nation’s Human Development Index (UNDP 2013).

The education system in the Gambia serves a population of nearly 350,000 students in 574 schools. The schools operate in a 6-3-3 structure: six years of lower basic education, three years of upper basic education, and three years of senior secondary school. A national curriculum defines learning expectations and students take national examinations at the end of both basic and secondary education. Admission to secondary education is competitive. The Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) is the main governmental authority for the school system.

The education system underwent important reforms in the last decade or so related to expanded school coverage. Primary completion rates increased from 39 percent in 1992 to 66 percent in 2011, an expansion that mainly benefited girls. Simultaneously, primary education was expanded from six to nine years and barriers to the completion of primary education were phased out (including an exit examination taken at the end of grade 6). Once coverage was significantly expanded, improving learning levels became a priority. The Gambia accordingly introduced important reforms to monitor learning levels and support teaching and learning. As mentioned earlier, these reforms focused on the development of a strong student assessment system and the effective use of assessment data.

The next section of this paper presents an overview of the assessment system in The Gambia. It describes the policy context in
which assessment reforms have taken place and the institutional arrangements created to carry out assessment programs and activities. Three main types of assessments are discussed: classroom assessments, examinations, and national large-scale assessments. The following section addresses the uses of student assessment information at the school, community, and country levels. It includes a review of factors that condition the effective use of assessment information at each level. The final section offers key lessons and recommendations for other countries seeking to improve their use of assessment data.

Overview of the Assessment System

Policy context
The assessment system in The Gambia must be understood within the broader context of the country’s education system. Gambian schools have historically had poor coverage, that is, they have served a minority of the population. As students progressed from grade to grade, coverage became increasingly limited. Access to schools was based on the number of places available. National examinations at different grade levels were used to select some students into further education and to filter others out of further academic study.

These examinations had a detrimental pedagogical effect, generating a culture of “teaching to the test.” This approach narrowed the curriculum to what was required for the examination. The teaching emphasis was on how to beat the test in order to gain access to further education, rather than on deep holistic learning.

The goal of the Education for All initiative and the expansion of the Gambian school system in the late 1990s shifted educational priorities from access to quality and learning. This change resulted in a push for the development of new assessments that could better support learning. Examinations for filtering students out of the school system were no longer needed and a shift from “assessment for selection” to “assessment for learning” followed.

This new thinking translated into a new assessment landscape. The grade 6 examination (Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination, PSLCE) was gradually phased out between 2000 and 2002. In response to
the demands of parents and communities to reinstall the PSLCE, two new assessments that monitor learning at the country level were introduced to replace it: the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), in 2007, and the National Assessment Test (NAT), in 2008. These assessments marked a big step forward. For the first time, assessment data were used to monitor learning rather than to determine individual consequences. Regular background data on students, teachers, and schools also started to be collected, allowing for a better understanding of the variables that affect learning. These data permitted deeper analyses of assessment information, moving the focus from a simple count of passes and failures to policy analysis.

Institutional arrangements

Assessment-related issues in The Gambia are jointly managed by distinct institutions that play a key role in the design, implementation, dissemination, and use of assessment data. The most important are:

West African Examinations Council (WAEC). The primary function of the Council is to manage public examinations for primary and secondary education (The Gambia Basic Education Certificate Examination, or GABECE, and West Africa Senior School Certificate Examination, or WASSCE, respectively). The mandate of the Council has been enlarged; it is now entrusted with organizing and conducting the NAT in The Gambia for all students in grades 3, 5, and 8. WAEC also sets the guidelines for continuous classroom assessments at the senior secondary level; these classroom assessments constitute 30 percent of a student’s final examination score in grade 12.

WAEC National Examinations Committee. This body provides leadership and guidance to WAEC with regard to examination policies. For instance, it ensures that standardized procedures and mechanisms are put in place to control the quality of examinations. Examination results are also discussed by this committee. The WAEC Gambia office is comprised of officials of The Gambia’s Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education; teachers; curriculum developers; and staff of the MoBSE’s Standards and Quality Assurance Directorate, teacher training institutions, and the University of The Gambia.
Monitoring and Evaluation Unit of MoBSE. This unit collects all available assessment data, including data from examinations, national large-scale assessments, and classroom assessments. Assessment data are used to set targets (e.g., 80 percent competency on the NAT and GABECE) and monitor progress toward those targets. The MoBSE unit generates an annual report highlighting key policy issues and recommendations that is shared with stakeholders with the purpose of improving student performance.

Curriculum Research Evaluation and Development Directorate (CREDD). This directorate works closely with various stakeholders in the development of curricula, syllabi, teaching guides, and textbooks. The EGRA, which has a strong bearing on pedagogical issues, is entirely managed and coordinated by this directorate. This directorate uses assessment data from different programs to improve the quality of teaching and learning materials.

Planning and Budgeting Directorate. The primary functions of this directorate are to provide advice on policy issues, produce and disseminate education statistics, and monitor the efficient use of resources. All student assessment data are centralized in this directorate and used for education system planning purposes. The directorate analyzes the results of all terminal examinations and national assessments and engages stakeholders in policy discussions.

Standards and Quality Assurance Directorate (SQAD). This directorate is responsible for monitoring the compliance of all education institutions in the country with the government’s education policy and associated acts and regulations. Its primary function is to monitor and supervise the delivery of curricula at all levels of the school system, together with the implementation of participatory performance monitoring and school improvement initiatives. SQAD works closely with WAEC on the production and implementation of effective assessment, measurement, and evaluation tools to measure teaching and learning processes in the school system. The directorate is in charge of monitoring and quality
assurance of the administration of the NAT. SQAD also monitors classroom assessment through its network of cluster monitors.²

Assessment programs and activities

Favorable political and economic conditions in The Gambia have allowed for the institutionalization of stable assessments that complement one another. There are three main types of assessments (table 1):

- **Classroom assessments** (or school-based assessment) that support teaching and learning on a daily basis.
- **School-cycle certification examinations** that also select students into higher levels of education. The Gambia has two such examinations: the GABACE at the end of grade 9 and the WASSCE at the end of grade 12.
- **National large-scale assessments** that monitor learning at the national and subnational levels. The Gambia administers the EGRA in grades 1, 2, and 3 and the NAT in grades 3, 5, and 8.

Classroom assessments. This category refers to the processes used by teachers to gather evidence of student learning on a regular, ongoing basis. In The Gambia, teachers use classroom assessments when testing their students, grading their homework, or informally judging their learning levels or progress in a subject area. The learning evidence collected through classroom assessments is used for a range of purposes. For instance, teachers grade their students’ work, comply with administrative procedures, adjust their pedagogical approaches, and give students feedback about their strengths and weaknesses.

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² Cluster Monitors: Experienced and trained teachers attached to different schools. Their main function is to support teaching and learning, and provide pedagogical advice to Head Teachers.
Table 1. Key Features of Educational Assessment Programs in The Gambia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Classroom assessments</th>
<th>Examinations</th>
<th>Large-scale assessments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Name and/or description| School-based assessments used by teachers on a daily basis | • GABECE (The Gambia Basic Education Certificate Examination)  
• WASSCE (West Africa Senior Secondary Certificate Examination) | NAT (National Assessment Test)  
EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment) |
| Purpose                | Test comprehension of lessons taught, diagnose and monitor individual achievement | • Certifies basic and secondary education  
• Selects students into secondary and tertiary education  
• Informs teachers about curriculum coverage and student mastery  
• Monitors education quality at the country level | • Monitors learning at the national, regional, cluster, and school levels  
• Informs policy making  
• Supports teaching and learning  
• Ensures accountability | • Monitors early reading skills at the national level  
• Informs teaching and learning  
• Informs policy |
| Frequency              | Routine/daily         | Annually                                                                     | Annually                                                                                  | Every two years |
| Instrument             | Achievement tests, projects, informal observations | Achievement test                                                            | Achievement test and student questionnaire                                                  | Achievement test and student questionnaire |
| Population             | All students in all grades | All students in grades 9 (end of primary education) and 12 (end of secondary education) | All students in grades 3, 5, and 8 (census)                                                 | Nationally representative sample of students in grades 1, 2, and 3 |
| What is assessed       | All subjects in curriculum | All subjects in curriculum                                                   | Grade 3: English, mathematics, and integrated studies\(^a\)  
Grade 5: English, mathematics, science, and social and environmental studies\(^b\) | Letter recognition, letter-sound identification, word reading, reading fluency, reading comprehension |
| Implementing agent     | Teachers and Head Teachers  
Also monitored by SQAD through its network of cluster monitors | WAEC                                                                         | WAEC                                                                                     | CREDD |

*Notes: a. Integrated studies combine science, environmental studies, history, and geography into one subject for early grades.  
b. Social and Environmental Studies encompass history, geography, and environmental studies.*
The function of classroom assessments has dramatically shifted in the new policy context. In the context of poorer educational coverage, classroom assessments functioned as a filter mechanism, with results mainly used to determine which students were promoted to the next level or grade. Many students who were not promoted ended up dropping out of school. In the context of universal primary education, the function of these assessments shifted towards evaluating for learning. The focus is now on diagnosis and formative assessment in order to provide individualized support. Repeating a grade is highly discouraged.

The new policy context also calls for using continuous classroom assessment data to support stakeholder participation in school management. The “Revised Education Policy 2004–2015” (MoBSE 2013, p. 31) states:

In order for the education sector to perform its rightful role in the provision of quality education, the need for curricula that are relevant, elaborate, realistic, and deliverable cannot be overemphasized. The delivery of such curricula will require systems that will be able to verify impact through appropriate assessment and examination tools across all levels within basic and secondary education.... Assessments will include formal examinations, continuous assessment, routine and ad-hoc diagnostic tests, and other forms of assessments based on the curricula.... Benchmarks will be established to determine and monitor the standard of education across the basic and secondary levels in pursuit of excellence.... Classroom assessment practices will be improved and continuous assessment strengthened to monitor student performance and learning achievement....

The following instruments have been developed to make more effective use of classroom assessment data:

- **School scorecards** are a community-based monitoring tool that allows for immediate feedback on the quality and adequacy of services provided by individual schools. MoBSE recently introduced this tool with the aim of promoting transparency, accountability, and community participation. School scorecards report how a school is doing relative to its region and district. They are posted at schools and distributed to school committees, parent-teacher associations, cluster monitors, and regional education directorates (figure 1).
**Figure 1. Gambian School Scorecard**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Region1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>Banjul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Albion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of Students</th>
<th>663</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of classrooms</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of which are permanent</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of teachers</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of which are qualified</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Maths textbooks</td>
<td>582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of English textbooks</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Provided by MoBSE in 2013.
Student report cards are provided at the end of each school term. They contain information on student marks in different subjects, as well as student performance relative to other students in the class. Report cards note the number of students in a class plus the individual student’s attendance and punctuality; they also feature remarks from class teachers and head teachers on the general performance and conduct of each individual student. Information is presented in a format that allows easy interpretation of quality indicators by community members, including those who are illiterate.

Guidelines for remedial classes were introduced in 2011 and have greatly contributed to the rethinking of classroom assessment practices in schools. The guidelines promote the use of explicit assessment criteria that are used to benchmark student performance. They also promote giving more attention to children who are falling behind. The guidelines in particular emphasize the use of diagnostic testing and individual education plans to address students’ learning difficulties.

One component of the school management manual focuses on the use of assessment information to design remediation strategies. The text offers a comprehensive guide on how to collect and analyze classroom assessment information, as well as how to design and apply innovative teaching, learning, and assessment strategies to improve student performance.

Learning achievement targets now provide learning standards for each grade level and are benchmarked against WAEC standards. The idea is to shift toward teaching that supports students to achieve grade-level standards.

A set of minimum standards are used to evaluate school performance in various domains, including a school’s capacity to make effective use of classroom assessment information.

Standardized tools for measuring learning outcomes in lower basic schools explain the concepts of learning outcomes and provide guidelines for teachers to develop assessment instruments, as well as to implement, analyze, and report classroom assessment data.
Examinations
The Gambia’s assessment system encompasses two examinations: the basic education certificate examination and the secondary school leaving examination. These examinations are the predominant tools for measuring student learning in the school system.

The Gambia Basic Education Certificate Examination (GABECE). The GABECE was introduced in 2003. It is used to both certify primary education and select students into secondary education. Lack of seats for all students in secondary education has forced the school system to use the GABECE as a mechanism to filter students out of formal education. All students take the test in grade 9 (at the end of upper basic education). Students are required to be tested in four core subjects (mathematics, English, science, and social and environmental studies) and between three to five optional subjects.

According to “The Gambia Country Status Report 2010” (MoBSE and World Bank 2010, p. 112), the GABECE 2009 results showed very poor learning levels:

[Some] 76 percent of candidates failed to obtain a single credit in any of the 4 core GABECE subjects (the end of upper basic level exam), and only 4 percent achieved credits in all 4. Results are poorest in math, with 7 percent of candidates obtaining a credit. Boys perform better than girls (72 percent and 81 percent did not obtain a single credit, respectively)....

Unfortunately, GABACE results are characterized by a low level of analysis, with the emphasis on individual student achievement and ranking of test scores. The data generated is generally a simple count of the number of students who pass or fail the examination.

Secondary School Leaving Examination. WAEC introduced the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in 1998 as part of the education reform programs of its member countries. WASSCE has a dual purpose of certifying secondary education and selecting students into tertiary education. All students take the test in grade 12 (at the end of senior secondary education). Results are also used to compare Gambian students with other Anglophone-speaking countries in the region that administer the same tests (i.e., Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone).
The test is administered under strict conditions twice a year, in May–June and November–December. This practice allows candidates the opportunity to improve their results. The minimum entry requirement for university is usually 5 credits, including English and mathematics (core topics administered in the same manner in all countries). The final scores are computed using both results from the WAASCE (70 percent weight) and classroom assessment grades (30 percent weight).

As with the GABECE, WASSCE results are very low (table 2). As stated in the Country Status Report (MoBSE and World Bank 2010, p. 135):

Compared with other WAEC countries, data on English and mathematics results show that Gambian students’ performance is comparatively much worse. Although some significant improvements are apparent in English over the 2007–2009 period, results are still far below the regional average. These poor results reflect the generally poor quality of the Gambian education system.

Table 2. Results (percentage of passes) of the Secondary School Leaving Examination (WASSCE) in Gambia, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Gambia</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: WAEC 2009. Liberia is not included because it joined WASSCE in 2013.

National large-scale assessments. The Gambia has two national large-scale assessment programs: a census assessment of the core curriculum (the NAT) and the sample-based EGRA.

Census assessment of the core curriculum. The purpose of the National Assessment Test (NAT) is to provide a picture of student learning achievement in the core subject areas of the national curriculum in lower basic education. This census assessment is taken annually by all students in grades 3, 5, and 8 in government, private, grant-aided, and Islamic
(madrassa) schools.\textsuperscript{3} School results are made publicly available at the national, regional, cluster, and school levels.

The test was first piloted in 2001, following the phase-out of examinations in grade 6, and was deployed nationwide in 2008. In 2012, MoBSE introduced the NAT in grade 8 to better monitor learning achievements at the upper level of basic education.

NAT includes a battery of instruments. The test blueprint is aligned with the learning achievement targets of the national curriculum. In grade 3, NAT assesses students in three subject areas: mathematics, English, and integrated studies.\textsuperscript{4} In grade 5, it assesses students in four subject areas: mathematics, English, science, and social and environmental studies; these students also answer a student questionnaire. In grade 8, the assessment measures students’ level of achievement in mathematics, English language, science, and social and environmental studies.

NAT results have been published since 2011. Annual reports are made available to a variety of audiences, including schools, parents, communities, donors, partners, teacher training institutions, and line managers of the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education.

NAT data paint a picture of poor education quality, with few students achieving specified learning targets for their grades. In the 2010 NAT, for example, pass rates in grade 3 ranged from 46 percent in integrated studies to 20 percent in English. In grade 5, the average pass rate in mathematics and sciences was 20 percent (MoBSE and World Bank 2010). These results contrast significantly with learning targets of 80 percent, which the country aims to reach by 2015.

Some criticisms of the NAT have been voiced. Parents and teachers have complained that the tests are too difficult and insufficiently sensitive to the range of students’ actual achievements. Critics also point out that the tests do not cover the entire curricula taught in schools, and that cross-year comparisons are not possible due to changes in the testing protocol from one year to the next.

\textsuperscript{3} Islamic schools, which represent 16 percent of the student population, joined the NAT in 2013.

\textsuperscript{4} See table 1.
In response to these criticisms, NAT 2011 introduced important innovations. The number of items in the English and mathematics tests was increased, thus covering a broader span of knowledge in each subject. Test questions were distributed across a wider range of difficulty levels and a variety of item types (e.g., multiple choice and open-ended questions) were introduced.

Sample-based Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). The purpose of the EGRA is to inform schools about student acquisition of the most basic foundational reading skills in the early grades of primary school. This information is then used to inform policy and pedagogy, and to raise awareness about the urgency of improving student achievement (Gove and Cvelich 2010).

The EGRA measures nationally representative samples of students in grades 1, 2, and 3. The assessment, which is individually administered, covers the main skills required for a child to learn to read, including recognizing letters, syllables, and words; understanding basic sentences and paragraphs; and listening comprehension. EGRA also collects information on opportunities for learning reading skills in both school and home environments.

The EGRA has been gradually institutionalized in The Gambia. The first assessment was conducted in 2007, and involved a nationally representative sample of 40 schools (10 percent of the lower basic education schools nationwide), which were selected through stratified random sampling. In each school, 30 students were selected from across grades 1, 2, and 3 (10 from each grade) for an overall total of 1,200 students. A second EGRA was carried out in 2009 using the same sample of schools (although not the same students). The results were used to measure changes in student learning achievement over time and evaluate the impact of actions between 2007 and 2009. The EGRA is now conducted every two years (2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, and so on).

The EGRA 2009 results showed a low level of basic literacy skills in the early grades. Many children were not able to read to learn, but were still learning to read. Grade 3 students could read 16 words per minute on average, but understood barely half of what they read. An alarming finding was that 54 percent of grade 2 pupils and 27 percent of grade 3 pupils were still not able to read a single word. There were important
differences in performance by region, gender, and socioeconomic background.

However, the EGRA has shown improvements in most indicators over time. As shown in table 3, improvements were higher and more significant in grade 3, with an average increase of 0.4 percent of a standard deviation. The introduction of new pedagogical methods seems to have had a positive impact on student learning achievements (MoBSE and the World Bank 2010).

Table 3. EGRA Results: Mean Score and Percentage Increase, 2007 and 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoneme Counting (% of phonemes correctly identified)</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoneme Identification (% of phonemes correctly pronounced)</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter Identification (Number of correct letters/minute)</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudoword Recognition (Number of correct non-words/minute)</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Recognition (Number of correct words/minute)</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words in Context (Number of correct words/minute)</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Comprehension (% of correct answers)</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening Comprehension (% of correct answers)</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling (% of correct answers)</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MoBSE and World Bank 2010, p. 120.

Note: The percentage increase is computed using the standard deviation in the denominator to allow for normalized comparisons.

* Statistically significant at the 10 percent level.

** Statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

*** Statistically significant at the 1 percent level.
Uses of Student Assessment Information

The Gambia uses the information collected by its student assessment system (classroom assessments, examinations, and national large-scale assessments) at the school, community, and country levels.

Uses of assessment information at the school level

Until recently, examination results and student pass rates were the main education quality indicators. Gradually, with the introduction of finer analysis, examination results have been used to both identify strengths and weaknesses in student learning and introduce curriculum changes. More and more, data from large-scale assessments are used to monitor education quality and learning. They also are used to measure the impact of variables that affect student learning, such as teaching and learning, curriculum coverage, time on task, and student socioeconomic background. By collecting this information, assessment programs provide insight into the measures needed to improve learning in classrooms.

Policy documents support schools to make more effective use of assessment data. Minimum standards and the school management manual in particular help schools use data from different assessments. Schools are mandated to develop their own classroom assessment policy based on these documents, which must specify the frequency and type of feedback students should receive from classroom assessments.

A School Management Committee in each school is mandated to analyze student assessment data from different sources, including the three types of assessments listed above. These analyses look at average student performance and pass rates, as well as changes in average performance and pass rates, subject area, grade, and gender, among other indicators. The information is then used to diagnose a school’s current situation, provide feedback to the school community (i.e., teachers, parents, students), and take action to improve educational achievement.

Schools also use student assessment information to improve pedagogical approaches. Given the pressure to improve student learning levels as measured by assessments, teachers explore how to boost learning by using different pedagogical approaches. For instance, EGRA
results have promoted the teaching of phonics, the use of a learner-centered approach, and an emphasis on continuous assessment. Various monitoring reports (e.g., Standard Quality Assurance Directorate quarterly reports for 2010–2012, Coordination Committee Meeting reports) indicate greater awareness by teachers of the importance of using assessment data to improve student learning.

Schools in The Gambia use classroom assessment information for a variety of functions. These include determining whether students are learning according to curriculum expectations, whether teaching is effectively promoting student learning and supporting poorly performing students (e.g., remedial classes), engaging students and parents in improving education, justifying the allocation of teachers and school resources, and complying with policy directives. National education policy advocates nine uninterrupted years of basic education and discourages the use of assessment results to make students repeat a grade.

Despite the above mentioned positive uses of student assessment information in schools, some negative uses have also been observed:

- **Ability grouping.** Students are grouped in different classes (e.g., “A classes” for high achievers, “F classes” for low achievers) according to their assessment results. This has had negative effects on both teacher and student motivation.

- **Preventing poorly performing students from taking the NAT, GABECE, and WASSCE.** To boost overall school performance, some schools prevent poorly performing students from taking assessments. Because this practice distorts the results and the purpose of assessments, measures have been taken to correct this situation. For instance, school averages have been corrected by taking into account the total number of students in a tested class, not only those who sat for the test. Efforts also have been made to lower absentee rates. The absentee rate during the NAT ranges

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5 A Coordination Committee Meeting (CCM) is organized in each of the six educational regions of The Gambia every year. CCM members include teachers, head teachers, regional directors, cluster monitors, local NGOs and other civil society organizations, and representatives of United Nations bodies. School visits and classroom observation are part of the activities conducted by a CCM.
from 20 percent to 40 percent in some schools; it remains a serious problem in at least a third of all Gambian schools.

- **Narrowing the curriculum.** Teachers may cover only the subject areas included in the NAT and other assessments, either excluding or not giving sufficient attention to other subject areas. This problem has been detected through observation of student workbooks and classwork.

- **Misuse of assessment results.** Some schools have used NAT results to make decisions about student promotion or retention. Results also have been used to evaluate teacher performance and even promote competition among teachers. These kinds of applications of assessment data may end up distorting both the results and purpose of the NAT.

### Uses of assessment information at the community level

Targeting communities with student assessment information is a relatively new strategy in The Gambia. Traditionally, assessment information has been disseminated to teachers and education specialists, not to parents and communities. Examination results first published in the media were too generic and therefore not effective in engaging parents and communities in improving education quality.

The EGRA 2007 was the first assessment that was widely disseminated beyond education specialists. The findings of this assessment were presented and discussed in public during workshops, training sessions, and technical meetings with donors and development partners. They also were published on the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education’s website and reported to Coordination Committee Meeting members and schools.

The Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education has also taken concrete steps to engage parents and communities in education, including the creation of a participatory system for monitoring school performance (MoBSE, 2012, p. 38):

> In order to address the concerns of parents in the delivery of quality education and to encourage their active participation in education, a Participatory Performance Monitoring (PPM), which will involve active participation of parents and communities in monitoring, participating, supporting, and collaborating with schools in all aspects
of school life, will be introduced. School Performance Appraisal Monitoring (SPAM), which is a component of the PPM, will be conducted annually in all schools.

A key indicator of School Performance Appraisal Monitoring is student performance, as measured by classroom assessments, examinations, and large-scale assessments.

Another mechanism put in place to engage parents and communities is the Parent-Teacher Association. This is a forum for discussing student performance (and assessment results) and pedagogical measures (e.g., provision of remedial classes). Yet it is likely that the most important mechanism for engaging parents has been student report cards, which contain detailed information about individual student performance.

Communicating assessment data to parents and the local community has built awareness of poor learning levels. Most importantly, it has opened a door for these stakeholders to help improve the quality of education. For instance, parents are now more willing to support student learning at home, the education of girls, the allocation of sufficient resources to schools, and the monitoring of teaching and learning. There also is some evidence of parents using assessment information to make decisions about which school to enroll their child in.

The dissemination of assessment information also has been instrumental for engaging nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other development agencies to support the MoBSE. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and several NGOs are, for instance, supporting the government by training teachers and developing pedagogical materials—interventions informed by student assessment results.

Uses of assessment information at the country level
Student assessment information has been widely used at the country level in The Gambia to inform education policy. The principal uses of classroom assessment, examinations, and national large-scale assessments include:

- **Raising awareness about the importance of learning.** Student assessment results have been critical to raising awareness of poor
school quality in the country. The NAT and other assessments have shown that student learning levels are far below expectations. Moreover, the WASSCE and the EGRA have shown that learning levels are weaker than those of other West African countries. This has placed pressure on MoBSE to ensure that Gambian students develop the necessary skills to compete with their counterparts in West Africa. A task force consisting of senior officials was specifically created to work on interventions to address education quality and learning.

- **Engaging in policy dialogue.** Data from different assessments have been used as the basis for policy dialogue with development partners. For instance, the MoBSE has used assessment information to engage strategic donor funding. The EGRA has been widely used to monitor the goals of Education for All and the Fast Track Initiative (now the Global Partnership for Education). Analysis of the context in which students learn has played a critical role in informing decision making (box 1).

**Box 1. Using NAT Data**

The Gambia’s National Assessment Test (NAT) provides unique information on students’ learning contexts and helps identify policy strategies that can improve student performance. Multivariate analytical models have been used to highlight factors that influence NAT scores, revealing that school facilities, textbooks, electrification, means of travelling to school, and time spent travelling to school are significantly related to student performance on the NAT. For instance, schools with one textbook per pupil have a success rate in English that is 9 percentage points higher than schools with no textbooks. The success rate of schools with electricity is 5.4 percentage points higher than schools without electricity. Cost-effectiveness analyses also have been conducted to inform plans for education spending. Electrification of schools seems to be one of the most cost-effective investments to support learning.

*Source: MoBSE and World Bank (2010).*

- **Revising the curriculum.** Student assessment information has been used to review learning standards and the curriculum. Reading literacy standards, for example, were adopted and used by teachers to guide instruction. Use of the EGRA helped update the reading curriculum in the early grades and served as the basis for introducing initiatives on learning to read. Assessment
Disseminating information also was used to set up remedial classes for students who most needed support.

- **Ensuring the provision of adequate textbooks and other pedagogical resources.** Poor assessment results have enabled MoBSE to ensure that each student has a textbook in each subject area. Additional pedagogical resources also have been developed and distributed to teachers, such as printed pedagogical cards, scripted lessons, posters, and flash cards for phonics activities (box 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 2. Using the EGRA to Improve the Education System: An Example</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The results of the EGRA 2007 highlighted poor reading performance among children in grades 1 through 3. It also provided evidence of a weak curriculum, inappropriate teaching practices, poor pedagogical resources, and lack of support for struggling students. The Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education took action by redesigning teacher training programs. This included:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instituting pre-service and in-service training programs</strong> that emphasize the correspondence between phonemes and graphemes. Since 2007, about 4,000 classroom teachers, senior teachers, head teachers, and cluster monitors have been trained in using new teaching and assessment methods. The training has focused on foundational reading skills, including pre-reading skills, oral reading, written comprehension, oral comprehension, and spelling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Developing reading materials.</strong> A review was conducted to identify gaps in the instructional reading materials used in schools and The Gambia College (the teacher training college). This activity brought together curriculum developers, teachers from grant-aided and other private schools, and university professors. They identified gaps in the instructional materials and best practices for teaching reading in early grades. Consequently, supplementary materials such as teaching guides and reading materials were developed and sent to schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Source:</em> MoBSE.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Training teachers.** The reform of pre- and in-service teacher training programs has been a direct result of poor assessment results. Low student learning levels led educators to wonder about teachers’ skills. In fact, a teacher survey conducted in 2010 showed that many teachers did not have the required knowledge and skills to boost student learning. As a consequence, nationwide training of all primary school teachers was launched. The curriculum of the country’s teacher training college (The
Gambia College) was revised to ensure that teachers learn relevant teaching skills. Teachers are now trained to use literacy benchmarks and learning achievement targets. The MoBSE even offered sabbaticals to experienced veteran teachers of The Gambia Association of Teachers of English, together with subsidies for practicing teachers, to participate in nationwide trainings (box 2).

- **Addressing equity issues.** The reporting of student assessment data by gender, region, and poverty level has highlighted serious equity problems in the school system. Assessment data have subsequently been used to target the lowest-performing groups of students. Incentives to close the gap in achievement levels have also been put in place; for instance, teachers now receive incentives\(^6\) when serving in remote and low-performing areas, as well as when they initiate remedial classes.

- **Improving the assessment system.** Greater awareness of the importance of learning assessments has led to a push to strengthen the assessment system. The NAT and the EGRA have built local capacity to administer learning assessments and improve the technical characteristics of assessment tools and procedures. Discussions also have taken place regarding the design of existing assessment programs and how to make more effective use of the resulting data to inform policy. In addition, debate on whether The Gambia should join one of the African regional assessments (e.g., the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality, or SACMEQ) is ongoing.

- **Building an education management information system (EMIS).** The MoBSE has been gradually putting in place an integrated system to monitor the education sector. This EMIS tracks such indicators as the number of students, teachers, and schools, facilities, and allocated resources. Since 2011, the EMIS has gathered data on student learning levels from the NAT, GABECE, and WASSCE assessments.

\(^6\) Special allowances ("Hardship allowance") are paid to teachers.
Factors affecting the uses of assessment information

Producing student assessment information is a necessary first step toward making decisions based on evidence. However, the information has to be effectively used in order to contribute to improving educational quality and learning achievement. In The Gambia, several factors have contributed to a more effective use of assessment information:

- **Favorable political environment.** The Gambia’s political leadership committed to addressing the “learning crisis,” which led to more effective use of assessment information. Assessment tools were perceived as the key to monitoring and supporting learning. This focus on learning also validated the uses of assessment results to advocate for reforms and funds.

- **Increased public awareness and accountability.** The dissemination of assessment information created public awareness of the importance of learning levels. Greater awareness created a greater demand for assessment information and increased pressure by the general public and other stakeholders on schools to improve and monitor education quality.

- **Curriculum reform.** The basic education curriculum was revised in 2010, with greater emphasis placed on school-based classroom assessment activities. All schools had to develop their own assessment policies using ministerial guidelines. This process contributed to further use of assessments for learning, while building an assessment culture in the schools.

- **Greater local capacity.** Staff in those education institutions with a mandate to conduct assessment activities, together with head teachers, benefited from training on how to design, conduct, analyze, disseminate, and use assessment data. This increased capacity allowed for more effective use of the data generated by assessments. The MoBSE plans to further enhance the capacity of head teachers to interpret and use NAT and EGRA results.

- **Improved technical quality.** Having more valid, reliable, and user-friendly student assessment instruments allowed the school system to build greater consensus and trust with respect to
assessment results. The more the assessment results are trusted, the more likely they are to be used.

- **Stable budget allocation.** Increased and predictable education budgets allowed the school system to conduct assessments on a more regular basis. Consistent funding has made assessments a stable part of the education landscape.

- **Multisectoral approach.** The Gambia adopted a multisectoral, collaborative approach that involved the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, the Ministry of Finance, donors, NGOs, local communities, and the media. All stakeholders were called to work together and were actively involved in the design, implementation, analyses, and dissemination of assessment data. Most importantly, they were called to work together to find solutions to the problems identified by these data.

- **Strategic partnerships.** The Gambia greatly benefited from building partnerships with institutions that supported the country in developing an assessment system. For instance, RTI International provided valuable assistance in introducing the EGRA, adapting assessment instruments, and stimulating effective use of assessment information.

**Conclusion**

The Gambia has taken big steps over the past decade in improving the effectiveness of its student assessment system, including the uses of assessment data. These efforts, combined with other education reforms and initiatives, seem to be yielding positive results. There is growing evidence of improved learning outcomes in The Gambia, as measured by the different assessments, although education quality remains a challenge.

The following lessons and recommendations can be extracted from The Gambia experience:

- A favorable political context is required for an education system to focus on learning, create the necessary policies to support assessment activities, and institutionalize stable assessment
programs. Strong leadership and communication campaigns can be instrumental in helping create a conducive political context.

- The Gambia envisioned an assessment system that combined different types of assessments (i.e., classroom assessments, examinations, national large-scale assessments) for different purposes (i.e., supporting pedagogy, selecting and certifying students, monitoring learning). These complementary functions inform different types of decisions. Countries should clarify what kind of assessment system they want to put in place and how much emphasis they want to give each type of assessment.

- For assessment data to be used effectively, the messages must be relevant. If assessment results are to inform decision making, it is important that a country identify key decisions and information gaps ahead of time. For instance, assessments should report on factors that have both a negative (e.g., repetition rate, absentee rate, class size) and positive (e.g., textbooks, electricity) impact on learning. Both sets of factors are relevant for evidence-based decision making.

- Effective dissemination of assessment information is critical. Communication should be free of technical jargon. The language and the media (e.g., written documents, videos, cartoons) used should be adapted to each specific audience. Various types of media should be used, including reports, flyers, videos, and workshops. Journalists also should be trained in how to interpret assessment results.

- Countries aiming to make effective use of assessment information should disseminate assessment information beyond the education sector and forge partnerships with various sectors beyond education.

- Countries need to make assessment information easily available to stakeholders. The principal limitation preventing teachers from making good use of assessment data is the poor recording systems of individual schools. Improving data access at the school level should be a priority.

- If assessment information is not trusted, it will not be used. In The Gambia, trust was built by improving the technical quality of
assessments and involving stakeholders at different stages of developing and implementing assessments.

- Building local capacity must be a priority to ensure that assessment data are effectively and sustainably used. Teachers, parents, government officials, and journalists need to understand assessment data in order to use them. The Gambia addressed this challenge by introducing assessment topics into the curriculum of teacher training institutions. In-service teachers, cluster monitors, and supervisors also were trained on the analysis of assessment data. Parents were targeted with easy-to-understand information. Capacity building should be decentralized to the local and school level.

- Building the capacity of assessment staff should be prioritized. Training in the design, administration, analysis, and reporting of assessments is needed; this training should include instruction in how to use statistical software (e.g., STATA, SPSS).

- Using assessment information for accountability purposes is a priority in many countries. In The Gambia, several groups representing different stakeholders were mandated to monitor student performance and put pressure on the school system. This proved to be an effective formula for promoting greater accountability and ensuring more effective use of assessment results.

- The cost of disseminating assessment information was found to be low compared to the benefits. Countries should accordingly prioritize a budget for the dissemination of assessment results.

- The successful introduction of new assessments and the shift toward using assessment results to improve learning poses a new challenge: how to ensure the sustainability of the national assessment system. More efforts, resources, and commitments will be needed to ensure that the system is preserved.

It is hoped that these lessons can help other countries in their journey to improve education quality and learning.
Bibliography


List of papers published in the current Working Paper series


Forthcoming papers

The Gambia has shifted the focus of its education reforms from school attendance to student learning. This shift came with a stronger assessment system to measure learning. This paper highlights how assessment data are being used in The Gambia to contribute to education quality and learning. While assessment data were used mainly for selection purposes in the past, the emphasis now is on monitoring and supporting learning. Greater data availability has allowed for greater school accountability as well as for more systematic feedback on the curriculum and teacher training. Several factors converged to allow for more effective use of assessment data, including a favorable political environment, the development of strategic partnerships, and the building of local assessment capacity.