

ABSTRACT

An Investigation of Nation-wide Testing in Barbadian Primary Schools

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This dissertation examines the impact of a National Assessment (NA) on teaching and learning in primary schools of Barbados. According to the Ministry of Education, the innovation is an attempt to stem the trend of growing failure rates among students who write the Barbados Secondary School Entrance Examination, otherwise known as the Common Entrance Examination (CEE). The NA, introduced by the Government of Barbados in 1996, is intended to serve a diagnostic purpose. The subjects, Mathematics and English are assessed by means of Criterion-Referenced Tests (CRTs). It is hoped that changes in the approach to assessment will have a positive impact on teaching and learning.

A survey questionnaire was designed to investigate (1) teachers' perceptions of the assessment and (2) to determine the extent to which teachers are using the assessment results to address weaknesses in students' learning. Additionally, interviews were conducted with teachers, principals and Ministry of Education officials as a means of cross-referencing the data collected from the Teachers'

Questionnaire. This procedure, referred to as ‘triangulation’ is often used in studies to help validate the findings.

While Ministry officials believe that the innovation is widely accepted and that teachers are using the test results to make changes in teaching methods that encourage re-learning, the findings indicated otherwise. For instance, teachers felt that the National Assessment results would be used for accountability purposes rather than to inform Government’s policies concerning poor academic performance.

The study concluded that the National Assessment as a diagnostic tool is not having the positive impact on the teaching-learning processes as the Ministry intends. Teachers indicated that the results of the external National Assessment do not provide prescriptive information necessary for remedial work. The findings, however, suggested that teachers’ informal or continuous assessment strategies are more closely aligned to classroom instruction than the external assessment. Not surprisingly, teachers believe that the use of ‘teacher-proof’ methods of assessment stifles their creative use of informal assessment methods.

Keywords: National Assessment; Accountability; Criterion-Referenced Tests; Continuous Assessment.