

Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) Project

**FEASIBILITY OF A LARGE SCALE IMPLEMENTATION  
OF CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT AS A STIMULUS  
FOR TEACHER DEVELOPMENT IN MALAWI**

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## Introduction

Continuous Assessment was introduced in Ntcheu as an intervention and an innovation in Malawi's primary education system after research in Mangochi and Balaka districts had shown that even standards 2, 3 and 4 pupils were unable to read and write in English and Chichewa. Their numeracy skills were much to be desired. This scenario demands a need for an intervention and an innovation at a classroom level to stabilize the FPE in Malawi. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in conjunction with USAID suggested that the alternative solution could take the line of assessment instead of pedagogy itself. The primary objective of this CA is to improve pupil performance through teacher development process. But, how possible can this innovation be implemented at a large scale in order to transform the education system in Malawi?

After describing and analysing CA in Ntcheu district, this paper examines the feasibility of a large-scale implementation of CA as a stimulus to further teacher education development in Malawi. Successes and implications emanating from Ntcheu experience will be the major parameters to be examined.

## Background

The primary education system in Malawi has undergone a radical transformation in the recent years. In 1994, Malawi adopted a Free Primary Education (FPE), to make basic education more accessible. The enrolment increased from 1.9 million in 1993/94 to more than 3.2 million in 1994/95 academic year after the declaration of FPE. This increase exerted a heavy constraint on physical, financial and human resources in primary education. For instance, the number of pupils per qualified teacher increased from 35 to 123. In Mangochi; there are 192 pupils for every teacher. Furthermore, there are approximately 24 pupils for each Chichewa, English and mathematics textbooks (Kamangira, 2001).

Teacher education programme has also significantly changed over the years. The current programme is known as Malawi Integrated In-service Teacher Education Programme (MIITEP). It is a programme whereby trainees attend an intensive three-months of methodology classroom work. Then these teachers go to teach for 5 terms before returning to finish course work and to take examinations for full certification. During the 5 terms in the schools, the trainees are strictly under the supervision of PEA's, qualified headteachers and class teachers. The biggest hurdle in this programme is that the trainees do not automatically go to the college after the 5 terms of teaching. The main reason has been lack of funding the training by the government.

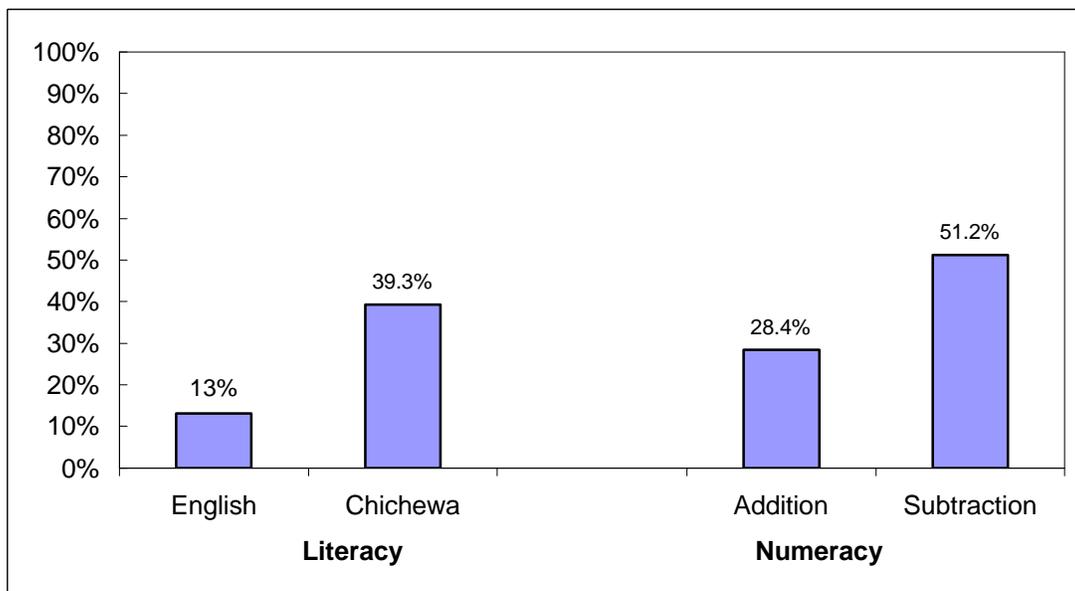
This programme allows for an accelerated path to teaching and increasing the number of teachers in a short period of time. However, the government recruited about 22,000 women and men for this programme. Almost half of them are trained and certified.

These two major changes in the educational system of Malawi have adversely affected pupil performance in the classrooms. The following paragraphs explain.

With financial support from USAID, Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) 11 project conducted a longitudinal study from 1999 to 2002 in Mangochi and Balaka districts. Basically, the focus of the study was on the quality of education the primary school pupils receive at classroom level. The study examined several parameters of primary education in Malawi. These included pupil performance (literacy and numeracy), lesson preparation and delivery, repetition and dropout rates, teacher mobility and absenteeism on both teachers and pupils.

The results show a negative trend in the basic education system. Figure 1 demonstrates that most pupils are lacking subject mastery.

**Figure 1: Percent of Standard 3 Students with Mastery in Literacy and Numeracy (1999).**



The teachers are unable to plan and deliver a lesson. Absenteeism by both the teachers and pupils is very high. Pupils' dropout rate is very high, 25% in the studied classes of 2, 3 and 4.

## Continuous Assessment in Ntcheu

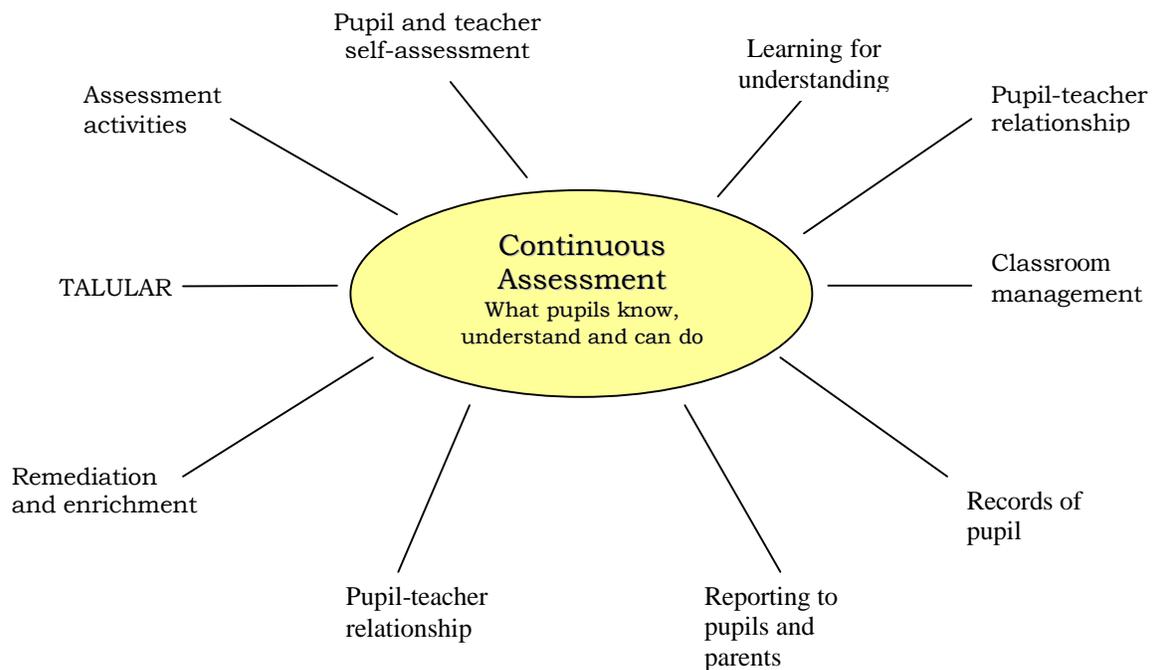
The CA feasibility study in Ntcheu plays double roles i.e., as an intervention, which would correct the problems such as those in Mangochi and Balaka. Secondly, it would also take the role of an innovation to address or improve the national issue of education in order to achieve the FPE objectives of increasing access without losing quality of basic education.

In this section, CA objectives will be outlined and its description will be presented. The reasons for introduction and an analysis of how it has been implemented in Ntcheu will be discussed.

There are three main objectives for the introduction of CA in this country. Firstly, it is to find out whether CA can stimulate the improvement of teacher development and pupil performance in the classroom. Secondly, to make teachers aware that CA is a system of providing feedback to teachers themselves, learners, parents, community and the Ministry officials. Thirdly, to train the teachers in CA procedures in order to improve their own pedagogy skills which can eventually be implemented at a large scale. It is believed that the training would benefit both the teachers and the learners in the classroom. The initial teacher training for this feasibility study took place a week before the primary schools opened in January 2002 and was held at MIE.

In order to describe the CA in Ntcheu, an attempt is made here to present its operational structure, figure 2, and a comparison with another form of assessment, which is the examination system table 1, are hereby outlined.

**Figure 2: Framework of Continuous Assessment**



This intervention and innovation in Ntcheu was organized as a feasibility study with a focus on a teacher as the main player. The following are some of its basic principles:

- It is based on primary curriculum and textbooks, especially for standard 3.

- Increase learning by providing feedback to the teachers, learners, parents and other stakeholders in order to promote pupil progress. The study has completely avoided the use of ranking and marks, instead it has focused on levels of learning as reflected by the Rainbow Progress Chart and Recording pupils' progress from one level to another.
- Keeping the assessment simple and workable in the Malawi context
- It is holistic, connecting assessment to teaching- learning, pupil-teacher interaction, production and use of local materials and community involvement
- Partnership of all stakeholders such as teachers, headteachers, Primary Education Advisors (PEA's), Malawi Institute of Education (MIE), District and Division Offices, Malawi National Examination Board (MANEB) and others are all partners in the development of Continuous Assessment (CA) strategies for Malawi primary schools. All are expected to make contribution in helping to find the best strategies for using Continuous Assessment in Malawi.

**Table 1: Comparing Continuous Assessment and Examination**

| Continuous Assessment   | Examinations   |
|---|--|
| Ongoing in the classroom throughout the year  | Usually at the end of a unit, semester, term or a cycle of learning                        |
| Many different tasks are given to the learner as teaching and learning proceed            | One examination or few tests are given per subject   |
| Carried out by the teacher  | Can be administered by someone other than the classroom teacher                            |
| The assessment items can be developed by the classroom teacher                            | Often developed by persons other than the classroom teacher                                |
| Marked by the classroom teacher   | Often marked by persons other than the classroom teacher                                   |
| Teachers use the assessment results to improve their teaching strategies                  | Teachers do not always know the learner's weaknesses or strengths the examinations         |
| The assessment items are directly connected to the taught curriculum and syllabus content | The test items may not be directly connected to the taught curriculum and syllabus content |
| Teachers use the assessment results to improve their teaching strategies                  | Teachers do not always know the learner's weaknesses or strengths the examinations         |
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Source: Adapted from American Institute for Research, (2000): **Continuous Assessment, A Practical Guide for Teachers.**

Primarily, CA is a typical classroom based strategy. Teachers make observations periodically in order to find out what the pupils know, understand and are able to do. Teachers give specific tasks to learners on what they have been taught. There is no waiting up to the end of the term, semester or a cycle. As the teacher is assessing the pupils she/ he observes them doing the tasks and then makes judgements about how well the pupils are performing the tasks. The information obtained from the assessment helps the teachers to assist her/his pupils better. The pupils who are behind their friends are given

extra attention and work which is called remediation. Those who are performing better than their friends are also given extra and more challenging tasks known as enrichment.

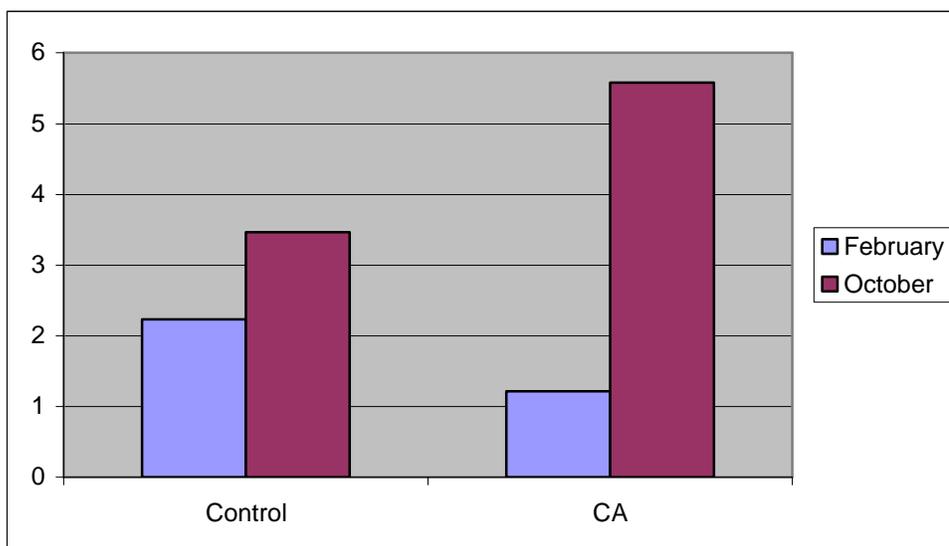
In CA, both the teachers and the learners are mirrors, reflecting upon each other's performance. Hence, appropriate responses are taken to guide teaching and learning processes in the classroom.

Malawi adopted an examination system of assessment from the British colonial master, where not all learners are ensured equal chance or opportunity to succeed in school. But in CA there is frequent contact between the teacher and the learners. The teacher is able to monitor the progress in quality and quantity of their performance. Through this monitoring teachers are able to adjust and improve on their teaching strategies to the needs and abilities of the learners. Finally in CA, the teachers make a deliberate effort to also provide feedback in the form of a report to an appropriate clientele. On special days, the entire community is invited to the school where various CA activities including pupil progress are practically presented and performed, just to report to the community. These were some of the reasons, which justify the choice of CA in Ntcheu as an intervention and an innovation that can initiate change in the education system of Malawi.

Continuous Assessment feasibility study collected baseline and follow-up data in the 2002 academic year. The analyses were compared with the Balaka schools, which acted as a control, see figures 3 and 4. Balaka and Ntcheu are neighbouring districts and their dominant language is Chichewa.

In both subjects, the control schools seem to start off better in February than their ending in October. These two sets of data show a statistical significant difference. Since there is no CA in Balaka, therefore one can attribute the difference to CA activities in Ntcheu schools.

**Figure 3: Average Number of English Words Achieved by Standard 3 Pupils.**



A powerful task force, called Training and Support Team (TST), whose members are all stakeholders of education system in Malawi has managed this Continuous Assessment feasibility study. It comprised the 11 PEA's of the selected zones, the District Education Manager, the representative of Division office, the representative of Ministry Headquarters, MANEB, St Joseph's Teacher Training College, Domasi College of Education, Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) and Save the Children US (Mangochi office). Its main function has been to plan, train and support the teachers and the heads of the 21 schools. Four training sessions were conducted (January, April, August, 2002 and January, 2003). These training sessions were to achieve two cardinal objectives. The first object was to provide an incremental teacher and Headteacher education development. The training syllabus included:

- Continuous Assessment procedures (theory and practice at MIE and Domasi Government Primary School)
- Preparing pupils' records
- Recording pupils' results
- Keeping pupils' progress records
- Conducting remediation and enrichment (in numeracy and literacy)
- Classroom management
- Production and use of Teaching And Learning Using Locally Available Materials (TALULAR)

The second objective was to develop TALULAR materials for use at their respective schools. The following materials were developed at each training session:

- Materials for teaching standard 3 maths, Chichewa and English
- Record sheets
- Report cards

After each training session, the Training and Support Team (TST) members visit the schools to support the teachers and provide them with professional guidance. These field visits have been instrumental as a follow-up to the training. They have also provided an effective mechanism of monitoring of the CA activities in the schools.

## Preliminary Results

As an intervention and an innovation, the CA feasibility study has produced positive results and encountered challenges. The study reflected a great improvement in pupil performance; see figures 3 and 4 above; teacher professional development and community's perception of the school.

Although it may not be scientific to jump to a conclusion that the significance in learning gains are due to CA activities, however, there are all indications that CA has played a significant role. Here are some

of concrete examples. At Chilobwe School, 4 pupils failed standard 2 examinations in 2001 academic year. They were recommended to proceed to standard 3 where CA was being conducted. They are now able to read and write Chichewa and English and numerate maths at their grade level. They have now moved to a higher class i.e. standard 4. At Nsiyaludzu school a standard 3 pupil challenged the IEQ researcher saying “if someone transferred my teacher I will stop schooling”. The reasons she gave were that the teacher is now good because he teaches well, he doesn’t beat the pupils, he answers pupils’ questions and when he asks questions the pupils also answer his questions. The teachers are testifying that by going through CA training and the field support visits they are now more confident to teach and able to manage classes, despite being very large. They can assess the pupils, judge their performance and adjust their teaching methods accordingly to suit their pupils’ needs and abilities. At Bawi School, the community provided durable and lockable doors for standard 3 classrooms where apart from teaching; they are also used for safe keeping of their TALULAR materials.

This shows that in these 21 schools the pupil’s and the community’s perception of the teacher and the school as the whole has completely changed for the better.

Despite these positive results, there are other limiting factors or challenges, which impinge upon its complete, success and restrict its large-scale implementation. For example the classes are too large to manage (more than 100 pupils), in some cases they are even being handled by unqualified teachers. It has been observed that other subjects such as General Studies are suffering; just little attention is paid to them. Educationally, it is not the subject, which is suffering, but the pupil and the entire curriculum they are following. Coupled with large classes, teachers are operating under inadequate resources such as lack of textbooks and are saying that CA is time –consuming to prepare for a lesson and its delivery. Some teachers also felt that the usual 35 minute-period is not adequate for CA lessons, however, many teachers try their best to teach and assess all the pupils. Some teachers have faced challenges in this task.

Furthermore, teachers have to record, report pupils’ progress and prepare for teaching, which are also equally demanding CA activities. It is interesting to note that amid this situation, there are significant learning gains made in these classes within the 8 months period. How much more learning would have been there if the pupil/teacher ratio was reduced from 60/1 to about 40/1?

Record keeping among many teachers has posed a great challenge. The information about pupil progress in various level groups has not been consistent and reliable in some cases. The inconsistency mainly occurs in dates as to when the children were assessed and the numbers of pupils in each group were unreliable. Some teachers showed full pages of assessment, when in fact the teacher did not assess the pupils in all the levels. Despite the spot-checks by the TST, to determine whether a pupil was in the recorded level, this has not cautioned the teacher to be faithful in their recording activities.

Use of Self-Assessment chart (popularly known as How Did I Do Today?) posed a problem to both teachers and the pupils. At each residential training session and school visit, the questions concerning this chart frequently and consistently came out from the teachers. However, the correct use of this chart would effectively stimulate both the teachers and the pupils to think about their own teaching and learning respectively.

During the months of January, February and March 2002, food was terribly scarce and there were a lot of absenteeism by the pupils and the teachers as well. These challenges can pose a big stumbling block for a large-scale implementation of CA in Malawi. Although the challenges are big but they can easily be sorted out as long as the school and their communities are in strong partnership for the improvement of quality education in Malawi.

## **Large Scale Implementation of Continuous Assessment**

Judging from the results of CA in the 21 schools, one cannot hesitate to try and introduce CA in the primary schools. But due to other implications it cannot take the same pattern as in Ntcheu. The implications affect MOEST (at policy level), teacher training and MANEB.

Although MOEST has supported CA in Ntcheu from the beginning to the end, it also knows its weaknesses and strengths; it is required to institute some policies to effect CA at a large scale. For instance, the question of which classes and subjects to introduce CA is of great importance to the success of CA at a large scale. I believe that CA can be a great success if it is introduced in phases. Phase 1 should involve standards 1-3 and in the three basic subjects, namely Chichewa, English and mathematics. In these classes the pupils need to acquire the most needed and the foundational skills to necessitate them to proceed with their education.

The 54 teachers and the 21 head teachers in Ntcheu have shown tremendous motivation and willingness to be trained in CA procedures. But the training of teachers at a large scale would take a different mode altogether since they would be far too many of them. One method to speed up the training of teachers in CA procedures is to introduce CA in the TTC curriculum. Fortunately, two TTC's (Domasi and St Joseph's) have fully been involved in Ntcheu activities. This caters for the pre-service teachers. For in-service teachers, a Cascade model of multiplying effect can be used. These courses can take place in Teacher Development Centres, which can act as satellite centres. There are already 315 of them existing throughout the country. This provides a great opportunity for MIE to fulfil one of its noble mandates of providing effective in-service for teachers.

The TST has already formed a specialist cadre of educators, which can function as a resource personnel in the TDC's for a powerful thrust of CA at a large scale. Malawi Institute of Education should take a full charge of the training the trainer of trainers (TOT) in the centres.

For the stability of CA at a large scale, MOEST should not just deploy or post teachers without proper reasons (causing heavy teacher mobility). Stability of teachers at a school is a very important element in the training of teachers for CA. Coupled with that, MOEST should recognize the CA training that the teachers undergo for salary increase and an added advantage for promotion.

At the moment, there are not enough trained teachers in Malawi, hence making pupil/teacher ratio to be very high i.e. 60/1. Therefore, MOEST should train more teachers to reduce it to about 40/1. This ratio is conducive to remediation and enrichment activities of CA. In addition the provision of more classroom space is of equal importance for large scale implementation of CA in Malawi. These classrooms serve as safe places for keeping TALULAR materials.

Delegates to the two important conferences have already recommended the introduction of CA at a large scale in Malawi. Firstly, the conference on assessment in Malawi held at MIE in 1998 (Nitko, 1998), deemed to recommend that continuous assessment should be introduced in the education system. Unfortunately, they didn't elaborate as to how it can be implemented. However, if this could be planned together with the community, it is possible to implement CA into the education system at a large scale. Similarly, at the Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR) conceptualisation held at MIE in 2003, the delegates also recommended that continuous assessment should be the type or system of evaluation in the revised curriculum. Conclusively, this is an unofficial adoption of CA at a large scale to match with the incoming curriculum.

There is also an attitudinal factor in the teachers and some community members. They feel that grading and ranking the learners through examinations measure the quality of education. Probably, the best answer could be the product of CA itself whereby the pupils successfully complete their tasks in numeracy and literacy. Also Civic education through the media about the advantages and the importance of CA in the system can help to change society's attitude away from examination.

The major implication that can emanate from the introduction of CA into the system is to redefine the role of MANEB in the CA. Over 30 years it has administered norm-referenced examinations and to suddenly drop this well-established organisation, it may produce far-reaching consequences on the entire nation. Probably the best approach is to introduce CA in phases, with a mixture of examination s at the senior primary level.

## **Conclusion**

Continuous Assessment as a feasibility study in Ntcheu, has achieved its objectives as an intervention and an innovation in the education system. Through the incremental teacher development training sessions teachers have improved to teach confidently and assess accordingly. They are now able to produce and use TALULAR materials when teaching to promote learning in the classroom, as the

results have indicated. But its large scale implementation requires careful planning, although the personnel and the infrastructure are available throughout Malawi.

The challenges and implications, which emerge from the implementation of CA at a large scale, have been examined and it has been argued for its introduction into the education system in Malawi.

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