

Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) Project

**THE RELATIONSHIP OF RANKING PUPILS
TO TEACHING AND LEARNING**

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Introduction

A casual conversation in Malawi readily reveals the influence of class rank on individuals' lives and how they perceive themselves in relation to others. Although Jamal had been out of school for 30 years he still could remember his class rank from primary school and how it had affected his life choices. While driving from the airport to the hotel he recalled,

I was number three in my class of 40 pupils. My parents desperately wanted me to be first in the class, because then I would be eligible for a scholarship to continue on to secondary school. I stayed up late studying and gave up opportunities to play football with my classmates. I was not asked to do the same chores as my siblings. The hope of the family was pinned on me. When I was advanced to position two but failed to reach the top position of the class, the entire family was sorely disappointed. I had to drop out of school. Eventually I joined the army where fortunately I learned how to drive, and that has provided my livelihood ever since.

The ranking process has been such an integral accepted part of Malawi's education system for so many years that most adults—from the taxi driver to the parliamentarian—can easily recall her or his rank or position in class throughout primary school and beyond.¹ Although the selective system of basic education that engendered this practice was altered radically in Malawi in 1994 when primary school doors were opened to all children, teachers still consider ranking a *sine qua non* of pupil assessment.

This awareness of the enduring importance of ranking in primary school assessment grew out of a study initiated by the USAID Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) project's feasibility study in Malawi on continuous assessment. Two researchers were assigned to explore teachers' understandings and practices of assessment and continuous assessment in primary school classrooms of 15 schools across the country (Schmidt & Santhe, 2002). Interviews with over 200 teachers, pupils, and other stakeholders revealed that ranking is fundamental to how teachers describe pupils' achievement in school and how they treat pupils as a consequence of their ranking. Hence, it became apparent that it would be necessary and useful to examine the process and the consequences of ranking in greater detail.

The importance of ranking stimulated a series of questions about the value and purposes of ranking in primary education. The following questions surfaced and moved to the front and center of the discussion:

¹ This practice is referred to as ranking or positioning. A teacher writes the number of a pupil's class rank or position on the child's progress report, and all pupils' positions are announced publicly at the end of the academic year.

- What is the relationship between instruction, pupil learning, and a pupil's position or class rank assigned by the teacher?
- In what ways do teachers believe that ranking helps children learn?
- Does knowing a pupil's rank enable the pupil to improve her or his performance or help the teacher teach more effectively?
- What, if anything, does ranking have to do with improving the quality of basic education in the country?

To explore these questions, the paper describes the background of ranking, explains how teachers assign rank order to pupils, and examines the data that describe the ways in which teachers use ranking. Implicit assumptions about ranking are made explicit and are discussed in the context of other research findings that challenge current ideas about ranking.

Background

In January 2002, the USAID-funded IEQ project and a group of education stakeholders² initiated a Continuous Assessment Feasibility Study in 21 primary schools in Malawi's Ntcheu district. The study seeks to explore ways in which Standard 3 teachers can assess pupil learning in three subjects on an individual basis. In this approach to continuous assessment, teachers use locally-made materials to assess pupil learning and use the assessment information to improve their own instruction. Teachers record pupil progress on a simple "rainbow" chart where the colors of the rainbow are assigned to literacy and numeracy skills of increasing complexity from the Standard 3 curriculum. As pupils master a particular category of skill development, they move a happy-face marker into the next color level on the chart. If pupils are not able to perform 18 out of 20 tasks correctly in a particular area, the teacher tells them to work with the related manipulative learning materials in the classroom in order to increase their understanding, and to return at another time to be assessed in the same level. The teacher then uses this information to assign remedial or enrichment activities to pupils in the context of her classroom instruction.

After several months favorable outcomes began to emerge from this feasibility study. Teachers were making assessment materials and using them for instruction. Pupils were saying how much more they were learning and how much better they liked school. Parents were expressing great interest in their

² Participating organizations included the Domasi College of Education, the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE), the Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB), the Ministry of Education, the Ntcheu District Education Office, St. Joseph Teacher Training College, and SAVE the Children-US.

child's assessment and were contributing to its success. Education officials, teacher trainers, and teachers began to ask whether this kind of continuous assessment could be expanded to other schools across the country. In order to understand the implications of that question and the range of needs that would have to be addressed to undertake this expansion, in July 2002 two teacher trainers, Sandra Schmidt and Enret Santhe,³ collected data from 15 schools around the country. They interviewed 112 teachers and scores of other stakeholders about the types of assessment practices currently in place in Malawi's schools, and about teachers' beliefs and understandings of these assessments.

All 15 schools visited for this study—indeed, all schools in Malawi and in many other countries of sub-Saharan Africa and beyond—rank pupils. The origins of ranking in Malawi's primary schools lie in its system of education that has a limited number of places available in secondary school and even fewer spaces available for university students. A pupil's score on her or his primary school leaving examination determines whether s/he can proceed to study in a government or private secondary school, and a student's scores on the Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC) and Malawi Secondary Certificate (MSC) examinations determine whether s/he is eligible to apply for entrance to the university. Students' marks from MSC exams are read out on the radio and broadcast around the nation.

It could easily be argued that a cut-off point for entrance into middle or secondary school would be sufficient, and that ranking pupils and publicly announcing their positions would not be necessary. However, the practice of ranking has come to serve important symbolic as well as instrumental purposes, and educationists and the general population have come to expect the ranking of pupils and assigning of class positions beginning in primary school. In most schools and communities this system has become an important part of the culture and continues unquestioned. How students who do not score well feel about this practice, and how this affects them and their life decisions seems not to be subject to critical discussion.

How Teachers Rank Pupils

Teachers rank pupils by assigning them a number 1, 2, 3, etc., based on the number of marks they score in comparison to their classmates on weekly tests or on exams in different subjects. The pupil who holds position one has received the highest number of marks on a test for a given subject. A pupil may hold different positions in different subjects; for example, s/he may rank 5th in mathematics and 16th in English, depending on her or his marks on the two tests. At the end of the term, students take a terminal test in all subjects. These scores are added together, and the pupil is then assigned a position in the class based on the total number of marks earned in all subjects. Hence, a pupil may

³ Schmidt was a volunteer teacher trainer in Malawi with the International Foundation for Education and Self-Help (IFESH); Santhe is a teacher trainer at St. Joseph's Teacher Training College, Dedza, Malawi.

receive the highest number of marks in mathematics and social studies, third highest in English, sixth highest in Chichewa, and 10th highest in science, but when all the marks are added together, the pupil may be at the top of the class in position one.

Figure 1. Standard 7 Progress Record Book – Terminal 2 Results.

	MATH	ENG	CHIC	SCIENCE	S/BRW	AGRIC	TOTAL
NAME OF PUPIL	100	100	100	100	100	100	600
1	56	71	92	80	85	90	474
2	70	70	76	85	75	90	466
3	66	60	60	85	85	92	448
4	56	63	72	85	80	80	436
5	36	70	84	80	75	80	435
11	52	69	84	95	70	65	435
6	40	72	76	82	75	80	425
7	46	72	75	80	68	75	416
8	24	51	80	88	80	85	408
9	20	64	84	71	65	100	404
10	50	51	72	75	60	90	399
11	50	64	80	70	72	60	396
12	70	40	72	62	75	70	389
13	70	95	56	75	60	50	386
14	50	69	64	65	66	70	380
15	52	66	92	60	80	51	381
16	50	30	60	66	65	50	361
17	40	68	60	85	45	71	369
18	50	68	76	80	42	52	368
19	0	68	60	85	76	70	359
20	58	30	69	75	62	65	359

To illustrate, Figure 1 above is taken from the first page of a teacher’s record book for terminal exams of a Standard 7 class at the end of Term 2 (Schmidt & Santhe, 2002). The sample includes marks and positions for the top 20 pupils. Pupils took exams in maths, English, Chichewa, social studies, science, and agriculture. Each test was worth 100 total possible marks. The pupil who was ranked at the top scored the highest in only two subjects: Chichewa and social studies. On other tests other pupils earned more marks, but the pupil in position one had earned the greatest number of marks

overall. The pupil who was ranked eighth had scored second from the bottom in mathematics out of the 20 pupils on the list, but the pupil scored high marks in the other subjects and so was ranked number eight.

There are various ways in which a pupil can end up in a low position with few total marks: a pupil may score poorly on each of the terminal tests; a pupil may score relatively well on two or three subjects and very poorly on the remaining subjects, generating a low total; or a pupil may score well on two or three tests but be absent (for any reason) on the remaining subject exams. In one case, a pupil in position 30 had done very well in two or three subjects, but was absent when examinations were administered in the other subjects and therefore s/he received no marks for that subject. If s/he had taken those exams, s/he might have been placed in the top 10 of the class. Without knowing why the pupil was absent – whether the pupil feared taking the remaining exams because of how poorly s/he might have performed, or whether s/he was sick, or sent to the market – it is not at all apparent that this pupil was weak. The pupil may actually be one of the stronger pupils in the class, but had the misfortune or the poor judgment of not attending school the day the exam was given, and so was ranked 30th. The consequences of these calculations, as suggested in the opening vignette of Jamal the driver, can be dramatic and life-determining.

Assigning class rank or position based on marks is arbitrary and relative. Schmidt and Santhe (2002) found pupils in position six at some schools who had scored high marks and pupils in position six at other schools who had failed. The same was true for position 30: some pupils in this position were “weak” according to the standards of the teacher, but others were considered “strong.” In some classes it was possible for 50 of the 70 pupils to have passed; in others fewer pupils passed, although they had similar scores.

As Mchazime (2003) and other educationists have noted, since no standardized tests are given in Malawi until Standard 8, there are as many different variations on what it means to be in the top positions of the class as there are primary school classrooms in the country. Position one in a Standard 3 classroom in Ntcheu can signify something very different from position one in a classroom in Balaka, and if a child transfers from one school to another her or his position may rise or fall dramatically. Being ranked at the top of the class in Classroom 3A and 3B of the same school can also signify something very different, since the number of marks awarded and the standards on which they are based differ for every teacher. If ranking pupils is this arbitrary and fraught with so many problems, and if the consequences suggested by the study are so pervasive, from the broader vision of education this is of grave concern. It is important to explore in greater detail exactly why teachers rank pupils.

Why Teachers Rank Pupils

Some teachers say they rank pupils so that they can identify the brightest and weakest pupils in order to assist those pupils who are weak. Teachers and pupils alike expect that the pupil at the top of the class is the brightest pupil and the fastest learner. Conversely, they expect that the child who ranks 30th out of 70 pupils has failed. A pupil in position six is considered a good student—if the test on which the marks are based has been fair (an assumption that will be discussed below), but the ability of a pupil in position 20 is uncertain.

Schmidt and Santhe (2002) were compelled to question these assumptions about the “brightest” students when they examined actual cases in teachers’ record books. For example, a Standard 7 student who was in position one through all of Standard 6 and for the first two terms of Standard 7, never received the highest scores in mathematics—in fact, he never even received a passing mark (above 50%) on a mathematics mid-term or terminal examination! But because he is at the top of the class he is perceived to be the strongest student. The teacher is likely to make him a group leader and ask him to assist his classmates as they work on English, Chichewa, and mathematics—even though it is obvious from his marks that he does not understand mathematics very well himself.

One teacher asserted that ranking encourages self-assessment among pupils. She posited that when a pupil’s position falls, a pupil is likely to pause and evaluate her or his performance in an effort to understand why s/he has not achieved the same position s/he did the previous term. Two other teachers said that they assigned pupils’ seating according to where pupils were ranked in the class. In this way, a teacher could then spend more time and energy with the weak pupils who were seated together in one area of the room.

Parents also generally assume that pupils in the top 10 are performing well. However, just as ranking offers little information to teachers about pupils, it also reveals very little to parents and pupils. Pupils are encouraged to compete with their peers, but they do not learn about their particular strengths and weaknesses in academic areas.

Implications of Change in Rank

What does a change in a pupil’s rank or position tell a teacher, a pupil, or a parent? The teachers said at first that if a pupil’s position fell his performance had worsened, and if her position rose, her performance had improved. However, Schmidt and Santhe found pupils whose position had risen or fallen from Term 1 to Term 2 but whose total marks did not move in the same direction (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Students' Results on Terminal and Mid-term Tests

	Eng.	Math	Chich.	G/S	Sci.	Agric.	Pts. Earn	Pts. Poss.	P/F	Position
JOLINE										
Terminal 1 2002	68	44	68	80	70	80	410	600	P	11
Terminal 2 2002	48	40	76	56	47	48	315	600	P	2
GULDA										
Terminal 3 2000	55	65	45	24	44		233	500	F	82
Terminal 1 2001	88	50	56	35	40	90	359	450	P	2
Midterm 3 2001	74	46	45	72	52	47	336	600	P	2

For example, Joline, a Standard 5 pupil, appears to improve from position 11 to position two, but her marks actually worsen. On the Term 1 exam in 2002, Joline received 410 out of 600 marks (68.3%) and was ranked 11th. After Term 2 exams, Joline's position rose to second in the class, but her total marks fell significantly—she earned only 315 out of 600 marks (52.5%). Her total percentage of correct answers dropped by 15.5 percentage points. Since Joline has risen to second highest in the class, it will be assumed that she has learned the material well and that she is in a position to mentor other pupils. However, Joline's marks strongly suggest that she has areas of weakness. Her terminal 2 exam scores indicate the Joline received less than 50% of the total marks in English, maths, science, and agriculture. She received 76/100 (76%) in Chichewa and 56/100 (56%) in social studies. In the first term, she received failing marks in mathematics.

Gulda, another Standard 5 pupil, was second in the class following the first terminal exam and the third mid-term exam in 2001.⁴ On the former exam, she received 259 out 450 marks (57.6%). On the latter she received 336 out of 600 marks (56%). She remained in the same position, but it cannot be concluded that because her percentages were similar—57.6% and 56%—that she was doing almost as well in Term 3 as in Term 1, especially when it is discovered that she had failed the Terminal 3 exam the previous year and was repeating Standard 5. Additional information from 2000 was not available to indicate whether her progress had steadily declined that year, but the point is clear: if teachers only pay attention to Gulda's position, they will assume that she is doing well, even though her marks are just above passing. The consequence for Gulda's learning is that she may not receive the additional assistance she needs to develop her skills in maths, languages, and other areas.

⁴ Results were not available for the midterm or terminal exam in term 2 or the terminal exam in the third term.

These Standard 5 pupils' positions changed, but most pupils tended to remain near the position they were originally assigned from the first midterm or terminal tests. A few pupils changed more than 10 positions in one direction or the other, but this was not the norm.

Evidence from the study convinced Schmidt and Santhe that although it is used widely, ranking and assigning positions has limited usefulness for teachers, parents, and pupils. The evidence from this small sample of students illustrates that the way teachers calculate pupils' marks is flawed. It is at high risk of communicating inaccurately to teachers and pupils how "strong" or "weak" a pupil is in relation to other pupils in the classroom. The substitution of a number for concrete information about what a pupil knows and can do with what s/he knows can lead teachers to incorrectly diagnose what a pupil needs to do to improve in a particular area.

In circumstances such as those described above, teachers said that there must be a flaw in the test. They also admitted, however, that they were not certain of the real strengths and weaknesses of the pupils. There is a limit to the amount of information that position alone can provide about a student and her or his ability and progress.

Improving Instruction Based on Position + Marks

As Schmidt and Santhe (2002) queried teachers about these examples, teachers explained that a pupil's rank could not be considered in isolation from the marks. "Position six" meant little to a teacher if s/he also was not aware of the number of marks that a pupil had scored. The total marks were much more useful in judging the overall strength of a pupil. Knowing total marks also had limitations, however. Even when teachers knew pupils marks they were unable to tell which pupils needed help in which areas of a particular subject.

Teachers indicated that they relied on more than just knowing a pupil's rank if they were trying to describe a pupil's strengths and weaknesses. Teachers also paid attention to a pupil's marks in each subject. Time constraints and large class sizes prevented them from doing this with frequency, but they knew that marks in the specific subjects, including marks on daily exercises for pupils who were absent during exams, were critical for understanding and dealing with pupils' individual strengths and weaknesses. However, even when teachers considered a pupil's marks in individual subjects along with her/his rank, this information could not tell them what a pupil had learned or which specific concepts a pupil had failed to understand. The common assumption was that pupils in the top three positions understood everything and those at the bottom had failed to learn anything or were lazy. Ranking did little to help teachers identify in which areas they needed to offer remediation and individual help to pupils.

Although teachers reported that they use rank or position combined with a pupil's marks to address the learning needs of pupils, there is as yet no evidence that Malawi's teachers who face large classes and who often have little or no teacher training are teaching to individual pupils' learning needs. How the teacher uses the information of rank and position, and how the information translates into classroom behavior or teaching practice is not at all clear.

Teachers generally agreed that ranking did not provide the information about learning that daily exercises and individual marks were able to provide. They noted that the primary benefit of ranking is that it enables a teacher to make general conclusions about whether a pupil is weak or strong so that s/he can give more attention to the generally weak pupil and less attention to the one who is generally strong. One teacher from Ng'onga created a strategy that can be used regardless of class size. This teacher assumes that the top ten pupils are achieving above average and do not need assistance while the remainder of the class ranked 11 and below are weak and need assistance. As was noted above, this conclusion may or may not be accurate. In addition, it misses the point that pupils in positions one through 10 and other pupils could benefit greatly from enrichment activities that challenge them and enhance their learning.

Perceived Benefits for Pupils: Encouragement, Competition, and Incentives

While teachers acknowledged that ranking had limitations for improving their instruction, they saw more benefits for pupils. Teachers believe that the primary benefit to pupils is the encouragement, competition, and incentives that this system provides.

Teachers assume that all pupils can be and strive to be at the top of the class, and that this desire will motivate all pupils to work harder when they learn of their positions. The pupil at the top of the class will work hard because s/he wants to stay in that position. Pupils just below position one will work hard in an effort to unseat the pupil currently in that position and claim it for themselves. Pupils in the middle of the class will believe they can achieve position one—or at least gain one of the top 10 positions—and consequently will work hard for this. Pupils at the bottom will try to improve their position out of desire or embarrassment. A majority of the teachers interviewed believed that ranking was the best way to encourage pupils: they believe that pupils always want to be best and will not become discouraged in their effort to get to the top.⁵

⁵ One could wonder how in a class of 100 or more children—the size of many primary classrooms in Malawi—a teacher would be able to accurately or fairly assign pupils position 80, 99, or 100. Yet being ranked at this level could have serious and devastating consequences on a child.

Another benefit of positioning, according to teachers, is the spirit of competition it fosters. The rationale is that since all pupils desire to earn position one, they quickly learn to compete with other pupils in an effort to do this. A competitive spirit appeared to be one of the general outcomes desired in Malawi's schools, undergirded by the assumption that girls and boys can improve themselves by competing with each other. This assumption is challenged by research on competition, cooperative learning, and gender dynamics in the classroom conducted over the last two decades. Research on cooperative learning has demonstrated that when group goals and individual accountability are taken into account and used together, the effects of cooperative learning—not competition—on achievement are consistently positive (OERI, 1992). Gender-based research suggests that girls may learn better through cooperation than through competition (AAUW, 1992). In studies of pupil gain scores conducted in three districts of Malawi over the past three years, boys have outperformed girls in most assessment categories.⁶ This system of competition could well be a contributing factor to this disparity.

In addition to the encouragement and incentive that competition provides, material rewards may be attached to the top positions. Some rewards come from the home, others from the school. Parents may slaughter a goat or provide monetary rewards to pupils who do well. One parent bought his daughter a bicycle after she was placed first in her class for three consecutive terms of middle school. Schools offer prizes such as notebooks and pens to pupils in the top three positions at the end of the term. One teacher seated her pupils according to their class rank in order to encourage them. She assigned the top pupils to the nice seats in the front of the room so that other pupils could see them and aspire to sit in those seats the next term. In contrast, punishment may be given to pupils who perform poorly on examinations. Two schools punished pupils who did not do well by giving them extra chores to do at school.

Motivating Pupils Through Scolding, Embarrassment, and Shame

Schmidt and Santhe asked the teachers to react to the following statement:

When pupils do poorly on tests they should be told to work harder and 'pull up their socks'. Other pupils should know of the weak performances of their fellow pupils because it will help the weak student to improve.

Teachers at the ten schools where this question was asked agreed with the statement and said that this is a good way to encourage pupils. One teacher said,

⁶ Note that this is not true in all cases, nor is the difference always statistically significant. However, the trend is clear.

It benefits pupils. If you scold they seem to respond with a pleasing manner. It has done something. They wake up. They work harder.

One teacher said the focus should be on praising those who have done well in front of those who have not done well because this would provide pupils with a model and make them feel bad so that they would work harder.

A few teachers disagreed that this statement offered the proper means of encouragement to pupils. Two teachers agreed with the first sentence, but felt that telling pupils about the weak performance of others would discourage pupils rather than encourage them. A third teacher said he felt “pity on weak pupils. [One] must give [them] individual help or they will get discouraged.” A small minority of teachers felt that positioning was not a system of encouragement for all pupils. That only a few teachers out of 112 would raise questions shows just how embedded ranking is in the system.

One head teacher suggested that public embarrassment was another motivational tool for pupils. The head teacher stated that it was important to announce the results of exams and pupils’ positions or rank in front of the entire school community in an effort to reach out to those pupils who were failing. Only those who passed were recognized. By embarrassing those who failed by not reading their names, they would be motivated to work harder in the future so that their names would also be read. Santhe and Schmidt had an opportunity to attend an end-of-term assembly at one school and observe this academic ritual. Although most head teachers had said that parents were invited to assemblies at the end of the year, at this end-of-term assembly only pupils were present. The teachers came to the front one at a time to announce the names of the pupils who had passed and to have these pupils stand for recognition. Less than one-half of the pupils who had passed were present to hear their positions read. The researchers did not have a way of knowing whether pupils who had failed also were in attendance, but if the positions are as important to pupils as the pupils, head teachers, and teachers had indicated, Santhe and Schmidt wondered why were so few pupils were present to learn the results. Perhaps attendance was better at similar assemblies occurring around the country. Nevertheless, educationists still must grapple with the question of how much encouragement is generated and how excited students truly are about hearing their position announced publicly—especially those who struggle to do well and who do not succeed. Research from classrooms in the USA has found that pupil achievement is enhanced when teachers call attention to pupil success, encourage discouraged pupils and try to build their self-esteem, and when they praise specific behaviors of pupils (Brophy, 1995; Brophy, 1983). This stands in sharp contrast to the attitude that scolding, embarrassing, or shaming pupils leads to improved academic achievement.

Emerging Concerns About Ranking

While most of the 112 teachers interviewed in the 15 schools defended the system of ranking, several teachers were eager to try new ideas or at least to learn about another system to which they could compare their own. The problem, they pointed out, was that they had not created this system and they were not sure of the merits upon which the system was based. They felt they needed to understand other systems and the foundations of this one in order to form an opinion. These three teachers were anxious to learn about other systems that could benefit and encourage *all* pupils.

A few teachers asserted that there were shortcomings in the system of ranking. First, ranking does not encourage all pupils. Those in the middle or at the bottom of the list tend to be discouraged rather than encouraged when the list of names is read and their names are not on it. These students do not work harder, but continue to do poorly. The motivational function that ranking is supposed to serve actually can *de*-motivate children when they consistently do poorly. This observation was congruent with what Schmidt and Santhe noted in the progress record books. One teacher noted, "Positioning does not help pupils to improve; they just look at the ones at the top and see who has done well." Other teachers found that those pupils who were not at the top tended to worry a lot and become even more fearful of tests. Attendance records were not available to indicate whether these pupils later began absenting themselves on examination days.

Another teacher was concerned about the information that teachers were (not) able to glean information from this system of ranking; the major concern raised by the authors of this paper. This teacher noted that while teachers claim to learn about strengths and weaknesses of all pupils, teachers really were able only to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of the average pupil. Teachers could say that "on average" the class could do one task or another and then they could make alterations to their schemes of work based upon this information. However, as with the Ng'onga teacher, teachers could teach to the middle or average group in the classroom, but they had little information from which to address the specific needs of individual pupils.

Ranking and Learning

A primary weakness of this system of "encouragement" is that pupils never learn exactly what they need to do in order to improve. They learn only that they need to work harder. Some pupils stated that they are working harder but their position is not improving. Because pupils do not learn their strengths and weaknesses and do not know which skills they have mastered and in which areas they need to improve, pupils are not prepared to revise or practice certain things that would help their learning.

Unfortunately, ranking *becomes* for teachers the remediation strategy—teachers expect that announcing a pupil’s rank or telling the pupil her/his total number of points will motivate and enable a child on to improve. A child may desperately want to improve, but is not sure what s/he needs to do to improve. Another weakness of the system suggested by anecdotal evidence outside the study is that ranking is likely to influence a teacher’s perception of the child; that is, a teacher comes to *expect* a child to be in position one in the class and consistently marks and ranks the child accordingly. Conversely it is probable that a pupil ranked at the bottom of the class will be expected to continue to perform poorly.

Tests as Assessments

In summary, ranking is reductive—a lot of complex information is reduced into a single number. Ranking is also arbitrary (e.g., one teacher may decide that “anyone with a 50 will pass”), and it is based on the assumption that the tests on which the marks are based are fair. Teachers obviously want to construct tests that accurately reflect pupil learning, but they are constrained by class size and their own training. Most teachers interviewed were either untrained or trained through the Malawi Integrated In-service Teacher Education Programme (MIITEP) programme. In MIITEP, four units in the Foundations Studies section of the textbook discuss tests, and one unit in the English section mentions that “testing is a means of assessing pupils” (MIITEP, p. 955). No other means of assessment besides tests are mentioned. Teachers are taught the purposes of tests, explanations of objective tests, test construction, and how to construct a good test. This is the extent of their training (MIITEP, pp. 814-831).

Assessment which is based in performance and assesses learning in a real setting appropriate to the content is not something teachers learn about in teacher training, so it is not surprising that the commonly used assessments are tests and are not authentic (that is, they do not match tasks from “real life”). Whether teachers were aware of it or not, some of the assessment methods they described were indeed authentic. These included debates, drawings and models, pupil demonstration of practical skills, exclusive use of English language in English class, conversations with pupils, composition, reading aloud, and storytelling. It is admirable that teachers use these methods, since assessing individual pupils in these ways requires a lot of time and is difficult to undertake with a large number of pupils. Malawian teachers lack the luxury of small classes and they have few other materials to help them authentically assess pupils in their classrooms. Although examples of more authentic assessments that reveal more about pupils’ learning can be found in the schools, these assessments have not yet been incorporated into ranking, the dominant method that teachers currently use to promote pupils and inform their instruction.⁷ The Continuous Assessment Feasibility Study described in the “Background” section of this paper provides an alternative method of continuous assessment

⁷ For additional information on continuous assessment as continuous testing, see Schmidt, S., Miske, S., and Santhe, E. *Continuous Assessment or Continuous Testing?* (forthcoming).

and improving instruction that can enable teachers to observe pupil progress and make systemic improvements in pupil learning in the classroom.

Conclusion

The evidence reveals that many variables affect the ways in which teachers calculate and assign a class rank to pupils, and that ranking is used for a range of purposes, from fostering competition to meting out punishment. The study raises a sufficient number of questions to compel educationists to ask whether the practice of ranking is educationally sound. Ranking pupils raises false hopes for success in a system that has a limited number of places available for individuals to enter secondary education. Assigning a position does not provide information that will help pupils to learn; it actually masks the learning needs of children. It is used to promote competition rather than cooperation between and among pupils. Some teachers use the system to embarrass or shame pupils who are weak in an attempt to apply pressure or “motivate” pupils to improve their position. This fosters an environment of fear and shame, the opposite of an environment of trust that encourages pupils to take risks, make mistakes, and learn without fear of retribution.

Ranking is powerful, but it is empirically weak. This small, exploratory research study surveyed only 15 schools and 112 of Malawi’s thousands of teachers and schools, yet the beliefs and practices it found suggest that the findings appear to be widespread. This information reveals only the “tip of the iceberg,” yet it is critical because it highlights a practice that is pervasive and is highly valued by the entire country, despite its questionable relationship to actual learning and achievement.

As with the taxi driver at the beginning of the paper, education stakeholders in Malawi end up focusing on ranking and on winning the top position rather than on learning, because of the potentially serious consequences of which position a child holds. Ranking prepares primary school pupils for the system of selection that characterizes the entire educational system. It could also be argued that ranking teaches children about “rankism,” that is, treating people according to their rank or status in society, rather than their dignity and worth as human beings (Fuller, 2003). Ranking as it currently exists does not teach children about the value of merit-based performance grounded in solid evidence and standardized measures. Nor does it reinforce egalitarian values about the importance of individuals’ different and equally important contributions to society.

The question remains: If the goal is to improve quality, is this the best way to improve teaching and learning in primary school? As Malawi continues to work to reform the education system, it is essential that educationists challenge the systems that do not promote quality learning in the 21st century, and begin to replace them with systems that will improve learning outcomes in education for all children.

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