



Impact of external assessment on teachers' instructional practices in Social Studies in Ghana



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Abstract

External assessment has often times been perceived to have much influence on the teaching of social studies in the senior high schools in Ghana. A study was conducted in eight senior high schools in the Eastern Region of Ghana. According to [Alderson and Wall \(1993, pp. 120-121\)](#), examination influences the classroom teaching; how teachers teach the subject; the rate and sequence of teaching; the degree and depth of teaching; and the attitudes to the content, method, etc. of teaching. This assertion was confirmed by [Cheng's \(1997\)](#) where he concluded that a revised public examination has to a large extent changed the content of teaching in the classroom. A structured questionnaire was designed and used to gather data from the teachers on how external assessment affects the teaching of social studies in the SHS. The study revealed that most teachers use lecture technique to teach and students are to take notes. Social Studies is noted for out-of-door activities which are practical in nature and to promote the use of non-testing procedure in assessing learners, but the emphasis on external assessment and standardized assessment has intensified the domination of what get assessed as what gets taught.

Keywords: examination, external assessment, social studies, teachers, teaching

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1.0 Introduction

External assessment results have very important implications for instructions in the classroom and therefore affect teaching and learning in Social Studies as a discipline in basic, secondary and tertiary levels of our education. External assessment has great influence on the teaching and learning process in the school and whatever goes on in the classroom. It sometimes places undue stress on students in producing results that they want as most of the learning is measured by testing. It usually uses specific questions which are definite, predetermined version of reality, which are administered within specific limited time and seek to measure only limited number of cognitive knowledge. Through curricular and co-curricular activities, the educational curriculum strives to develop an informed citizenry, which is a graduate who is critically reflective and monitor their thinking about the world and their place in it. In a more practical way, the schools are expected to prepare graduates to participate effectively in workplace and in their communities. Not only would future graduates be expected to be content experts, they would also be effective problem-solvers and critical thinkers in their locality. Learning to think critically, to analyse and synthesize information to solve problems in a variety of contexts and to work effectively in teams are crucial skills for modern employees and industry. However, there is little evidence that our education systems are developing these skills in our children (Bransford, Goldman and Vye, 1991). There is the need to provide learners with better opportunities to achieve their own learning goals in accordance with the conventional learning goals of Social Studies rather than only accepting external assessment whose measurement mostly dwells on the cognitive domain of learners to the neglect of affective and the psychomotor domains. The attempt to solve problems posed by the external examination on the teaching and learning in schools led to the introduction of continuous assessment to account for the shortfalls in external examinations. In Ghana for instance, the continuous assessment set up by [CRDD \(2007\)](#), in its syllabus, is aimed at assessing the learner at all areas of learner's endeavour which include cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains. It had set up a principle of assessing the learner by using testing and non-testing modes of assessment by the class teacher which formed 30% of the examination score of the student's final grade. Despite the introduction of continuous assessment in the secondary schools for some years now, teachers still use tests as a major tool in evaluating their students' learning. This mode of assessment mostly evaluates the cognitive aspect of learner's knowledge and neglects the affective and psychomotor domain aspects.

Literature Review

[Tamakloe, Amedahe and Atta \(1996\)](#), stated that assessment can be terminal or continuous, where the person doing the assessment waits until the end of an action, instruction, course, term or year before gathering information of the learner, then it is terminal. In this form of assessment the main tool is tests and examinations where the results are used in grading students or promoting them

to the next level. [Line & Lambert \(2000\)](#) stated that since majority of the external assessment is done at the end of a course and for this matter they are often called terminal examination. This had been the practice and therefore teachers normally assess their students at the end of the term or the year to promote them to the next level of their education ladder and those who could not pass are repeated or terminate the programme. This form of assessment is preferred on the premise of finding a mechanism of selection of students to the next level, which appears to be objective and reliable. In view of [Stiggins \(2005\)](#), external assessment or high stake examinations interest has over a decade far outstripped that accorded to the continuous assessment, but [Glasbergen, \(2002\)](#) felt that the tools typically assess low-level, literal questions and specific skills. Wilson (1992) cited by [Bekoe \(2006\)](#) felt the tools used in the external examination may neglect higher-level intellectual skills, personal and social competences and attitudes. [McNergney and McNergney \(2004\)](#) also confirmed some shortcomings of external assessment by stating that it is not a complete measure of students' knowledge or talents but rather just a sample which is restricted in size and its scores are not coming from the performance of real life situation.

[Tolley \(1998\)](#) further reiterated that to be of value, assessment must satisfy the requirement of validity, reliability and convenience, which he said external examination upon which selection is based into higher education and occupation dominates the curriculum have some reliability (the degree to which the test yields the same results on repeated trials – consistency), convenience (simple and relatively inexpensive to administer) but do not meet the central essential requirement that is validity (measuring what it is intended to measure). It should be noted that, in the construction of test items and the nature of the test do not put much emphasis on validity but rather on the consistency of the results of the students, in this way examination or tests is playing a dominate role in assessing learners. However, external assessment is inherent with a lot of problems hence the introduction of continuous assessment which has gained much root in most educational set up even though external examination is prominent in the system. For instance, 'how would one short examination adequately assess what a learner has learnt over a long period of schooling? How would one grade a learner who happens to fall ill and could not write the final examination? [Tamakloe, Amedahe and Atta \(1996\)](#) stated that continuous assessment was introduced in Ghana partly because of the weakness of terminal assessment which is unfair and unnecessarily stressful. This therefore called for the use of continuous assessment which was to promote the use of non-testing procedures in addition to testing procedures, so that the marks obtained could be accumulated to reflect the knowledge, attitudes, values and skills of the learner.

[Yolote \(1984\)](#) defined continuous assessment as a method of evaluating the progress and achievement of students in educational institutions, which aimed at getting the best picture of each student's ability to the fullest. [Alonge \(1985\)](#) contented continuous assessment to be a process which deliberately allows for periodic assessment throughout the course and take into accounts progress towards desired goal as well as success in practicing it. On his part, [Falayalo](#)

(1986) sees continuous assessment as “a mechanism whereby the final grading of learners in the cognitive, affective and the psychomotor domains of learning systematically takes account of all their performances during a given period of schooling’. Tamakloe, Amedahe and Atta (1996) finds it as the type of assessment which takes place in more or less in a systematic form throughout period of schooling which involves learners’ performance over the period of study in a variety of ways and situations to determine the final grade of the learner. Another definition by Airasian (1991) describes continuous assessment as an assessment approach which should depict the full range of sources and methods teachers use to gather, interpret and synthesize information about learners; information that is used to help teachers understand their learners, plan and monitor instruction and establish a viable classroom culture. On his part, Baker (1991) opined that continuous assessment should involve a formal assessment of learners’ affective characteristics and motivation, in which they will need to demonstrate their commitment to tasks over time, their work-force readiness and their competence in team or group performance.

From these definitions, one could infer that continuous assessment is an assessment approach which involves the use of a variety of assessment instruments, assessing various components of learning, not only the thinking processes but including behaviours, personality traits and manual dexterity. Continuous assessment will also take place over a period of time. Such an approach would be more holistic, representing the learner in his/her entirety. It will begin with the decisions that the teachers perform on the first day of school and end with the decisions that the teachers and administrators make on the learners regarding end-of-year grading, promotion and the final grading. Although many educators, administrators, parents and students believed the introduction of continuous assessment into the educational system have helped in reducing the fear created by the terminal examinations, a number of researches have revealed a lot of problems associated with the use of continuous assessment. The major problems that continuous assessment poses could be associated with the teachers which include: their skills in test construction and administration, and their attitudes toward the continuous assessment approach and record keeping. A study by Akyeampong (1997) revealed numerous problems with the practice of Continuous Assessment in Training Colleges. Among the most significant findings of his study were:

- Tutors’ continuous assessment practices gravitated towards external examination requirements and continuous assessment was perceived and implemented as supplementary rather than complementary to examinations. The study revealed that a major constraint to change is the political focus on summative assessment conditioned by the examination culture.
- Many tutors and teacher trainees recognised the importance of continuous assessment for promoting professional learning and instruction. This was not, however, put into practice.

Instead, it reflected commonly accepted theoretical knowledge about the function of continuous assessment.

- Generally tutors made very little use of continuous assessment results for formative and professional development purposes. The main reason for this was the lack of will on the part of tutors to use continuous assessment in this way because of the increased workload this generated. Also, for some there was a lack of understanding of how the continuous assessment process and results could be used to promote teaching and learning outcomes.
- Time available for assessing students on a more regular and systematic basis was limited. This problem had arisen because of the short college year resulting from extracurricular and examination activities that took up a considerable amount of term time. Tutors preferred to use the scarce time available to teach in order to complete the syllabus before external examinations.
- Institutional support for continuous assessment in terms of professional guidance for tutors was non-existent. Again, this seems to reflect a lack of proper orientation and inadequate training in the management of continuous assessment at the institutional level.
- The system for monitoring and moderating continuous assessment was lacking, leading to no uniformity of practice across colleges.

According to [Tamakloe, Amedahe and Atta \(1996\)](#), the problems of continuous assessment may include:

- i. The increase in the work load of the classroom teacher
- ii. The comparability of standards from school to school and from district to district.
- iii. Record keeping too will be another problem that the teacher will face, which may call for storage facilities which are lacking in most of our schools.
- iv. Computerisation skills in terms of combining and or converting scores using scales at times become a challenge to the teacher.
- v. Teachers' biases in terms of favouritism can affect the validity of the assessment.

The above problems made [Akyeampong \(1997\)](#) to state that the fundamental problems of CA in the training system stemmed from poor conceptualisation of its functions in the teacher training context, but one of the important aspects of continuous assessment is the availability of valid and reliable tests which could be used in all schools. There is a need to construct these tests following established procedures and practices, and to make the results comparable across all the schools, teachers need to be equipped with skills of test construction and administration. Owing to this, teachers have put much emphasis on tests and examinations in the continuous assessment practice than other areas because of the influence that external examination have on the final grade of the learners. Harlen and [Deakin Crick, 2002](#) cited by Bekoe (2006) stated that external assessment has influence on teacher's classroom assessments. For instance a research conducted

by O'shea and Wideen (1993) on the impact of external examination on science teaching, came out that due to preparation of students towards the external examination, it takes too much of their time and therefore make them to prepare their students in such a way that they would be able to be familiar with examination questions. Passé (2006) also stated that external examination in the secondary schools made Social Studies to shift their emphasis on the use of summarised results of observations, interviews, portfolio etc. and other forms of teaching techniques such as local study, fieldtrips etc to the setting of questions which calls for recalling of facts. Bekoe (2006) made it known in his work that due to the pressure to prepare students to pass external examinations, teachers resort to coaching which makes the formative role of the classroom assessment become underemphasised and neglected. This therefore, makes classroom assessment look like that of the external assessment with all its negative impacts on teaching and learning.

Research Design and Methodology

A descriptive research design was used for this study which involved collection of data concerning the subject under study. Descriptive research design, according to Glatthorn and Joyner (2005), describes the characteristics of a population by directly examining samples of that population and making primary use of survey, interview and documents in the collection of its data and reporting frequencies, average and percentages. This work used the primary source as described by Glatthorn and Joyner, where the data collected enabled the researcher to analyse the responses from the sampled population to arrive at the findings. As stated by Osuala (2001), this design is highly regarded by policy makers in educational research, and data gathered by the way of descriptive survey represents field conditions. With the descriptive research design, both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms were adopted. The quantitative research is the numerical representation and analysis of data for the purpose of describing and explaining the phenomenon. The reason for using quantitative approach in this research was to promote comparison of data collected from teachers and students in their different settings and at times using a quantitative questionnaire, and the findings were compared to see how authentic they are. The qualitative method on the other hand was used to enable the teachers and students to come out with data on their experiences, feelings and emotions on the impact of external assessment on the teaching and learning of Social Studies in the SHS. The quantitative approach was used in the study to illuminate and clarify the meaning of actions and situations of teachers and students in the course of teaching and learning of Social Studies. Qualitative questionnaires were used for the data collection from both students and teachers. Since teaching and learning of Social Studies involves behavioural change of the people involved, it may sometimes become difficult to know peoples' real reaction as some may pretend. So it has become prudent to involve

the use of qualitative methods in addition to the quantitative in order to apiece for any shortfall in each of the methods for the study.

Population

The population for the study consisted of teachers and students of fifteen (15) selected Senior High Schools in four districts in the Eastern Region of Ghana. According to the Regional Directorate, [GES \(2008\)](#), the fifteen selected schools have a total student population of sixteen thousand, six hundred and twenty (16,620) and staff strength of one thousand and forty-eight (1,048). Thus, the population for the study was seventeen thousand, six hundred and sixty-eight (17,668) respondents. The researcher selected the fifteen (15) school based on their accessibility and proximity. This is because some of the schools in the district are located in rural communities that are not easily accessible by the researcher. Therefore, the researcher concentrated on schools that are either in the district capitals or near the district capitals to ensure that he frequently visits the selected schools to gather the needed data for the study to draw useful conclusions.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The sample for the study consisted of two hundred and forty (240) Senior High School students and forty five (45) Social Studies teachers from the schools selected. Thus, the study had a sample of two hundred and eighty five (285) respondents. The researcher employed purposive sampling for selecting the forty five (45) SHS Social Studies teachers for the study. The reason for this purposive sampling was that, the researcher believes that teachers who teach the subject can give the necessary information that was needed for the study. With assistance from the various Heads of Departments of Social Studies in the respective schools the researcher sampled the students for the study. A simple random sampling technique was used to select two hundred and forty (240) students for the study. This was done by selecting sixteen (16) students from each of the fifteen (15) schools. The sixteen (16) students sampled from each school were from the General Arts, Visual Arts, Business/Technical and Science classes for second and third year students because at the time of the study the first year students had not reported to school. The lottery system was used to sample two (2) students from each class. This was done by writing "Yes" or "No" on pieces of paper and students were asked to pick a piece of paper each. In each class the student who picks the piece of paper with "Yes" written on it was selected and given a questionnaire to complete and return. This was done in all the selected schools to sample the students for the study. In addition, fifteen (15) Social Studies teachers from all the selected schools were purposively sampled by the researcher for an interview using a semi structured interview guide. The purpose of the interview was to solicit the views of teachers on the topic after initial analysis from the data collected could not give an in-depth response needed by the researcher for the study.

Findings, Analysis and Discussion

The descriptive statistics was used in analysing the data collected. The descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage) was used to analyse the research questions. The frequency and the percentage from the statistical data of the respondents were analysed to answer the research questions for the study. The data of the questionnaire from students and teachers were edited, coded, and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The data were presented using frequencies and percentages of the items. Bar graph and pie chart were also used, where the frequency and percent values of responses were analysed descriptively. In the frequency table which indicated the responses of respondents as in Table 1, "Dis" and S. Dis", were used to mean "Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree". Finally, data collected qualitatively was analysed thematically using the open code method. The data was organised and common statements by subjects were written down and emerging themes noted.

Discussion

This research tried to seek the view of respondents on the form of assessment usually used in the schools to assess the teaching and learning of Social Studies and whether external assessment is having any influence on the use of internal assessment. It was also to find out if the teachers in the schools are aware of the procedures to use in assessing learners in Social Studies to ensure that it promotes the attainment of positive attitude, values and skills needed by Social Studies students. It came out that both internal and external forms of assessments are used in the schools, since it is a requirement that the external examination formed 70% of the total score for grading students and the internal assessment forms 30% of the total marks. With internal assessment the respondents were quizzed on the mode of assessments which are often used in the schools that form part of the grading system of the students, and whether they use the scores from other mode of assessment in the final grading of their students in Social Studies. The following was the results as indicated in the following Tables

Table 1 Teacher’s Assessment Procedure used in the Schools

Assessment procedure	Frequently f (%)	Sometimes f (%)	Seldom f (%)	Not at all f (%)	Total f (%)
Examination / test	37 (93)	3 (7)	0 (0)	0 (0)	40 (100)
Assignments / Homework	22 (55)	10 (25)	5 (12.5)	3 (7.5)	40 (100)
The use of Interviews	9 (22.5)	11 (27.5)	10 (25)	10 (25)	40 (100)
Portfolio/Anecdotal records	4 (10)	16 (40)	16 (40)	4 (10)	40 (100)

From Table 1, thirty-seven (93%) of the teachers indicated that they frequently used examinations and tests in assessing their student which formed part of the total score for grading their students, and the remaining three (3) teachers representing 7% of them sometimes used it. Twenty-two (55%) of the teachers indicated they use assignments and homework to assess their students. Ten (25%) of the teachers indicated they sometimes used it. Five (12.5%) of the teachers indicated they seldom used it, while the remaining 3 (7.5%) of the teachers do not use it at all. Nine (22.5%) of the teachers indicated they frequently used interviews to assess their students. Eleven (27.5%) of the teachers indicated they sometimes used it, ten (25%) of the teachers seldom used it and the remaining 10 (25%) of the respondents stated that they never used it to score their students. On the use of portfolio and anecdotal records four (10%) of the teachers indicated they frequently use portfolio and anecdotal record in assessing their students, 16 (40%) of the teachers indicated they sometimes use it. Again, sixteen (40%) of the teachers seldom use it and the remaining 4 (10%) of the teachers never used it.

The findings from Table 1 shows that examinations and test form greater part of the mode by which learners are assessed in the sampled schools by their teachers. This finding confirms the views of [Tamakloe, Amedahe and Atta \(1996\)](#), and [Stiggins \(2005\)](#) that examinations and tests are the major tools use by teachers in assessing their students. Another finding from the Table is that greater numbers of teachers used assignments and homework most often, and on whether they used the scores in grading the students, almost all the teachers indicated the marks formed part of the scores for grading students.

Table 2: Form of Assessment Procedure often used by Your Teachers in the School

Assessment procedure	Frequently f (%)	Sometimes f (%)	Seldom f (%)	Not at all f (%)	Total f (%)
Examination/ test	182 (75.8)	52 (21.7)	6 (2.5)	0 (0)	240 (100)
Assignments / Homework	78 (32.5)	152 (63.3)	6 (2.5)	4 (1.7)	240 (100)
The use of Interviews	4 (1.7)	18 (7.5)	86 (35.8)	132 (55)	240 (100)
Portfolio etc.	6 (2.5)	12 (5)	50 (20.8)	172 (71.7)	240 (100)

From Table 2, one hundred and eighty two (75.8%) of the students indicated that their teachers frequently use examination and test as a procedure for assessing students. Fifty-two (21.7%) of the students indicated their teachers sometimes use examination and test, and the remaining 6

(2.5%) of the students indicated their teachers seldom used examination and test. Seventy eight (78) representing 32.5% of the students indicated that their teachers frequently use assignment to assess them, one hundred and fifty-two (63.3%) of the students indicated that their teachers sometimes use assignment to assess them. Six (2.5%) of the students indicated seldom, and the remaining 4 (1.7%) of the students indicated their teachers never use assignment to assess them. Four (1.7%) of the students indicated their teachers frequently use interview to assess them, 18 (7.5%) of the students indicated that their teachers sometimes use interview to assess them. Eighty six (86) representing 35.8% of the students indicated their teachers seldom use interview to assess them and the remaining 132 (55%) of the students indicated their teachers never used interview to assess them. Six (2.5%) of the students indicated their teachers frequently use portfolio to assess them, twelve (5%) of the students indicated their teachers sometimes used portfolio to assess them. In addition, 50 (20.8%) of the students indicated that their teachers seldom used portfolio to assess them and the remaining 172 (71.7%) of the students indicated that their teachers never used portfolio to assess them.

Comparing the responses from teachers and students, 25% of the teachers indicated they do not use interview while 55% of the students indicated that their teachers did not use it. And with portfolio and anecdotal, 10% of teacher respondents said they did not use it at all but 71.7% of the students indicated that the teachers did not use it at all. Despite percentage disparity in the response of teachers and students, majority of them confirmed that interview, portfolio and anecdotal form of assessment tools are not used at all in the schools. It is much worrying that a greater number of teachers are not using these tools internally. These forms of assessment according to [Burke \(1992, p. 5\)](#) engage students and teach them how to “produce” rather than simply “reproducing” knowledge. He further stated that this practice helps students to analyse and synthesize information, apply what they have learned and demonstrate their understanding of material according to specific criteria. This therefore implies that teachers are aware of the use of interviews, portfolios, etc for assessing their students but the majority of them do not use it. The finding confirm what [Stiggins \(2005\)](#) stated earlier on that test and examination is the common tools used by teachers in assessing their students. The teachers were further questioned to find out whether teachers in the SHS would like assessment results to include non-testing materials and also whether they used non-testing procedures in assessing their students. The following data revealed the outcome of the respondents as presented in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3 Assessment Results Should Include Non-testing Materials

Response	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	12	30
Agree	22	55
Undecided	6	15
Disagree	0	0
Total	40	100

From Table 3, twelve (30%) of the teachers strongly agreed that assessment results should include non-testing materials. Twenty two (55%) of the teachers agreed that assessment results should include non-testing materials, and the remaining six (15%) of the teachers were undecided on the statement. This therefore implies that a greater number of teachers think non-testing procedures should form part of the results of learners' internal assessment. This will enable learners to display the knowledge, skills and values acquired in the course of teaching and learning. It would also help the teachers to teach learners to attain the objectives of the subject, since other results from the non-testing will also be used to grade the students. Many of the teachers held the view that the use of assessment results to teach is very important to the teacher and the learner, because it would help the teacher to evaluate his/her method of teaching and at the same time help the learner to correct any mistakes that he/she will encounter. This was confirmed by the data collected from the field, based on the questionnaire issued to the respondents, on how frequent do they used assessment results in teaching their students.

Table 4 Teachers find it Difficult in Using Non-testing Procedure for Assessment

Response	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	5	12.5
Agree	23	57.5
Undecided	6	15
Disagree	4	10
Strongly Disagree	2	5
Total	40	100

From Table 4, five (12.5%) of the teachers strongly agreed and twenty-three (57.5%) of the teachers agreed that it was difficult using non-testing procedure in assessing their students internally, citing the difficulty in using such procedure especially in scoring to grade students. Four (10%) of the teachers disagreed and two (5%) of the teachers strongly disagreed that teachers found it difficult to use non-testing procedure for assessment. The remaining six (15%) of them

could not decide on the statement. Learners were asked if they may prefer other forms of assessment to score them in addition to the examinations, test, homework and exercises. The responses they gave have been summarised on Table 5.

Other forms of assessment should be used in addition to the use of class test, exercises and homework.

Response	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	175	72.9
Agree	50	20.8
Undecided	4	1.67
Disagree	4	1.67
Strongly Disagree	7	2.9
Total	240	100

Table 5 show that 175 (72.9%) of the students strongly agreed and 50 (20.8%) of the students agreed that other forms of assessment should be used in addition to the exercise, homework, class test and examinations. Four (1.67%) of the students disagreed and seven (2.9%) strongly disagreed that other forms of assessment should be used in addition to the exercise, homework, class test and examinations. The remaining four (1.67%) of the students were not certain of the response to give. This therefore, implies that most teachers of the sampled schools do not use other non-testing procedures in assessing their students. Based on this result, it may be assumed that most of these students may prefer that their teachers use other non-testing instruments in addition to the tests and examinations being used regularly in the schools, because of the perceived assumption for the fear of examinations.

Conclusion

Most of the teachers were not given any orientation on their first posting to the school and majority never attended any workshops or seminars over the past five years for their professional development to improve their knowledge on content, methods of teaching and assessment. This gives cause for concerned. The current situation implies that such teachers would not be abreast with modern methods, skills, theories, strategies in teaching and mode of assessment. It was also possible that some heads were reluctant to sponsor teachers for professional development programmes or such programmes were not frequently organised for teachers in the Senior High Schools. The teachers also believed that state examination plays an important role in determining what they teach. This implies that they may teach to the test, by selecting and focusing on few topics they feel examiners would set questions on. It also implies such teachers may want their

students to do well in the examination and so may coach them on how to answer examination questions. There is the possibility of being grade-minded to lead to a high tendency of encouraging teachers and students to adopt bad habits of teaching and learning and could even lead to cheating in external examinations. Although most teachers may like their students to pass their subjects but they may not like them to cheat during examinations.

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