

EXAMINATION DEVELOPMENT FOR
EDUCATIONAL REFORM
BAHAMAS NEW SECONDARY
EXAMINATION - (BGCSE)

Leroy Sumner

ABSTRACT

The Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) is the most recent initiative on the part of Bahamian educational policymakers to ensure the utilization of a means of assessment which is comprehensive and fair and generally does not discriminate against sections of the student population. Introduced in 1993, in nature and structure, the BGCSE is designed to recognize positive achievement, taking into account varying and different abilities, rather than relative levels of failure. This paper outlines the evolution of The BGCSE and draws attention to its characteristics which set it apart from all previous instruments and facilitate the equalization of educational opportunity.

EDUCATION ASSESSMENT AND EXAMINATIONS

In May 1993, students completing secondary school in The Commonwealth of The Bahamas, for the first time commenced the writing of an examination whose development had the direct input of local persons. The introduction of this examination, The Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) could be seen as a pivotal step in the development of Education in The Bahamas. For quite apart from the fact that its introduction was a very necessary step in the continued growth and development of nationhood, this new examination, which is designed to acknowledge positive achievement and to meet the varying needs and abilities of the majority of students completing five or six years of secondary education, marked a significant advancement in testing and evaluation strategies in The Bahamas. A major argument in support of these advanced strategies is that they facilitate the equalization of opportunity in education by enabling a wider cross section of the graduating class the opportunity to obtain some record of achievement after twelve years of schooling.

In outlining the evolution of the BGCSE, this paper describes the advanced testing and evaluation strategies embodied in the BGCSE and examines the extent to which they enable the equalization of educational opportunity in The Bahamas.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE BAHAMAS GENERAL CERTIFICATE OF SECONDARY EXAMINATION (BGCSE)

Prior to the implementation of The Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) in 1993, a number of other examinations had been used as means of assessing student achievement on a national level. However, several factors, all of which relate to the nature and structure of the assessment measure, affected their adequacy and thereby precipitated the evolution of the BGCSE. These factors could be summarized as: currency, accessibility, certification, comprehensiveness and culture.

Currency and Accessibility

In the early 1940s examinations were administered by school inspectors of the Board of Education during their visits to schools. These examinations, however, had limited currency as their main purpose was to serve as the means of identifying potential teachers or monitors and to decide on the promotion of teachers. The external examinations offered by the Cambridge Overseas Examination Board at three levels: preliminary, junior and senior levels had more currency because they had the potential to serve matriculation purposes (Ministry of Education and Culture, Annual Report 1970 - 71). However, they were accessible by a limited portion of the population.

In 1945, the Board of Education instituted its first inter-school examination which replaced the Cambridge Preliminary examinations. Known as the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination, this examination was taken in grade six and served as acknowledgment of the successful completion of primary school by students enrolled in all-age and senior schools (Ministry of Education and Culture, Annual Report 1970 - 71).

Certification

In 1953 the Cambridge Junior Certificate Examination was discontinued, and a year later The Bahamas Junior Certificate was introduced for students completing primary education. The Cambridge Senior Certificate became known as the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate. As this was the examination aimed at by academically ambitious high school students, only a small percentage of the school population sat these examinations. Certificates were awarded on the basis of a group of subject passes such that the person who failed one paper was disqualified and unable to obtain certification. Indeed failure in one paper amounted to failure of the entire examination (Ministry of Education and Culture, Annual Report 1970 - 71).

In 1963 selective secondary schools⁴⁹, began entering students for the London or Cambridge General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level Examinations, both of which offered certificates based on single subject passes. As these examinations were available mainly to students enrolled in these schools it is clear that only a small percentage of the student population sat these examinations. As a result, the majority of the population were leaving secondary school without any national or international achievement record (Ministry of Education and Culture, Annual Report 1970 - 1971).

Students enrolled in senior schools and evening institutes and perceived to be less academically able were entered for less academically rigid examinations administered by such other over-seas authorities as the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), Pitman, City and Guilds and the Associate Examining Boards (Ministry of Education and Culture, Annual Report 1970 - 71).

A major advantage of GCE was that it had more currency than all other examinations as it could be used for both matriculation and employment purposes. Admission into institutions of higher learning mainly outside the country was usually based on GCE performance. As well, entry into certain levels of the economy in both public and private sectors was based on passes in GCE. However, access to GCE was generally limited to students enrolled in one of the selective secondary schools (high schools following a grammar type curriculum e.g. The Government High School, St. John's College, St. Augustine's College, St. Anne's High etc.). A significant portion of the population was therefore incapable of advancing to further studies and debarred from certain jobs in the economy. This situation concerned educators and other liberal minded ideologues; not the least because it facilitated unequal access to social and economic success and served as a means of social control.

One attempt to redress the inequity occasioned by selective access to GCE was the reorganization of the secondary school system along comprehensive lines and the consequent liberalization of access to public secondary schooling achieved by the abolition of the Common Entrance Examination in 1974. The comprehensive approach to secondary education enabled a variety of programmes usually academic, technical and vocational to be offered under the one roof with the academic programme culminating in the writing of the GCE. The appeal of the comprehensive approach to secondary education was that it enabled students other than those enrolled in grammar schools to write GCE.

⁴⁹ High schools which followed a grammar school curriculum and selected their populations by means of an entrance examination.

Comprehensiveness

GCE, however, assessed performance mainly in the academic subjects and was intended for that part of the population (roughly 10%-15%) whose inclination resided therein. Thus, as Figure 1 indicates students who performed best on GCE were those enrolled in schools concentrating mainly on the academic curriculum: the private grammar schools which continued to select their clientele based on academic criteria (Johnson, 1988).

A further shortcoming of GCE was its failure to take account of work produced over the course of the school year. Achievement was determined solely according to performance in the examination.

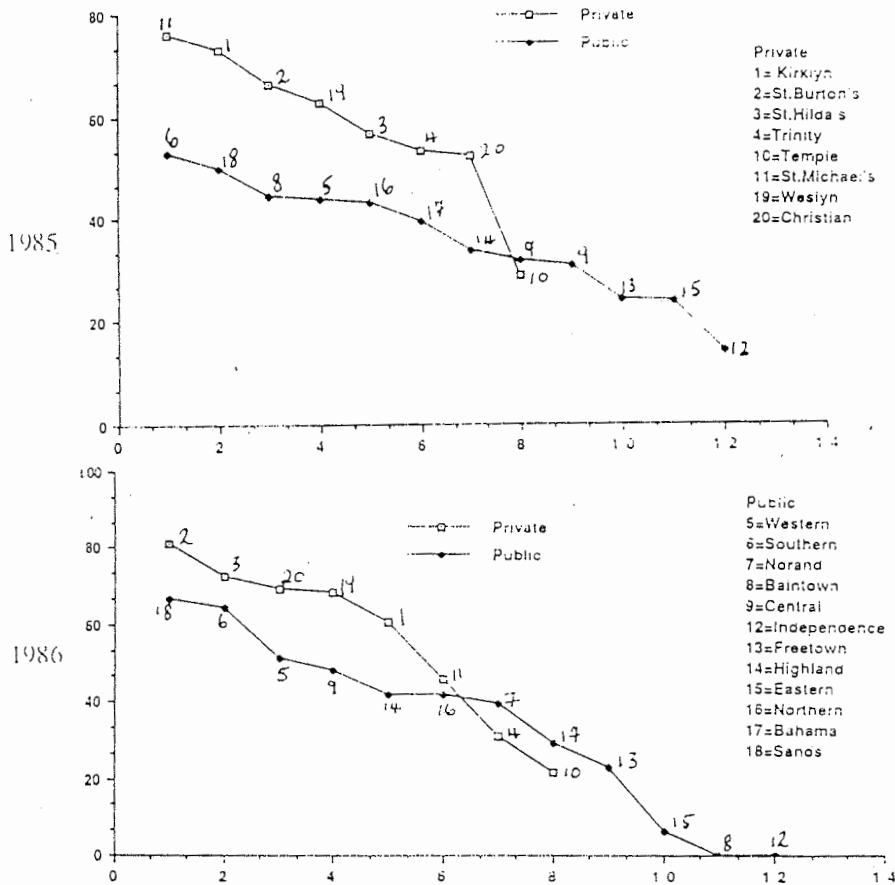


Figure 1-1: School Performance on GCEs, 1985 and 1986

Culture

Moreover, GCE a British based examination was often criticized for its display of cultural bias which some quarters claimed also affected the level and pattern of achievement. Thus, the population leaving secondary school with any national or international achievement record did not significantly increase as a result of the expanded accessibility to GCE.

In the face of the shortcomings inherent in the several measures of assessment, it was felt that the problem was best resolved by introducing a national examination whose development would take account of all observed deficiencies in the previous examinations. In 1975, therefore, the Government's intention to introduce a national secondary certificate examination to coincide with the end of the secondary school programme was communicated to the House of Assembly (Communication to Parliament, 1975). Shortly thereafter the Testing and Evaluation Unit of the Ministry of Education was established to give effect to the Government's intention.

It was not until 1988, however, after "the United Kingdom decided to change its examination system from the 'O' Levels GCE to the GCSE" (BGCSE, Testing and Evaluation Report) that the decision to introduce the Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education in 1993, was taken (Report on The BGCSE, 1992). It was intended that the examination would eventually replace all relevant existing overseas secondary school examinations.

In order to ensure credibility and integrity of the national examination during the developmental and transitional periods, The Bahamas entered into an agreement with the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) to provide consultancy and training services for the new examination (Report on The BGCSE, 1992).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BGCSE

The BGCSE caters to 80 - 85% of the ability range found across the full spectrum of The Bahamas Secondary Schools. However, the standards of the examination are no less exacting than those required for the GCE 'O' level examination. The philosophical view is that this examination should serve as an evaluation tool to examine the achievement of students after five or six years of secondary education.

It is a single-system examination and ensures that all those achieving a measurable degree of success will gain some recognition. The assessment procedures are designed to measure the achievement of different abilities by using common

question papers as well as differentiated question papers.

Subjects offered include academic, technical and vocational areas. Twenty-five subjects comprised the initial offering in 1993, with additional subjects being introduced in subsequent years. It is envisaged that the BGCSE will:-

- i) enforce the study content, relevant to the culture of The Bahamas;
- ii) encourage the pursuit of a rounded education encompassing the basic academic disciplines;
- iii) serve as a reputable measure of school learning attainment acceptable for relevant employment or for further study;
- iv) take into account the worth of wide range of individual achievement and be applicable to the majority of school leavers.

GRADING SCHEME AND EQUIVALENCY

Ideologically, the examination sets out to recognize positive achievement, taking into account the varying and different abilities, rather than the relative levels of failure. Its design therefore ensures proper differentiation so that candidates across a wider ability range are in fact given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, abilities and achievements and to show what they know, understand and can do. Thus, the assessment procedure which includes practical and oral skills, continuous assessment, projects and greater emphasis on independent and small group learning, relies on the use of various schemes. Some subjects, for-example Literature, History, Art, offer common papers and are graded on the A to G scales according to the level of response or level of ability. Other subjects such as the Sciences, Languages and Business Studies, offer a core or common paper for which Grades C to G only are applicable. Candidates seeking a higher grade must write extended papers designed to test performance at the A or B levels⁵⁰.

In order to reflect the wide ability range, therefore, grades are awarded on a seven point scale with the upper limits A, B and C being equivalent to the A, B and C grades of the GCE 'O' levels and CSE grade 1 examinations. The lowest grades D to G, are awarded for an acceptable performance at a modest level and not for a poor performance on too difficult a question paper. These grades have standards at least as high as CSE grades 2 to 5. Candidates who do not reach the required standards are ungraded and do not receive certificates.

⁵⁰These approaches should motivate students to work harder and help to foster initiative and the ability to work as part of a team.

The grades nevertheless are anchored to the traditional GCE 'O' level standard and accordingly recognized as equivalent to the United Kingdom's GCSE and IGCSE examinations.

Another feature of this examination is the Coursework: work undertaken during the final year or two of the course of study. This may take the form of projects, samples of written assignments, fieldwork, or practical work and enable the assessment of skills not easily assessed under normal examination conditions. Although all subjects do not have a coursework component, where applicable, it is mandatory and contributes from twenty to thirty percent of candidates' final grades. The assessment of course-work is undertaken by classroom teachers and subsequently moderated by external examiners (Report on The BGCSE, 1992).

The BGCSE is also more helpful than 'O' level to teachers and pupils in that it is criterion-referenced to a larger extent. That is to say the examination uses describe in detail the levels of performance that are required for the award of the higher grades. There is no question of grades being awarded to predetermined percentages of candidates (the process known as norm-referencing).

ACCREDITATION

It is realized that public examination results have a direct effect upon the education system of a country; they speak directly to its effectiveness. The BGCSE, therefore, attempts to ensure that the assessment procedures for school leavers reflect relevance to the Bahamian situation while simultaneously maintaining standards which are credible and have currency within and outside the country. From an internal perspective, these standards are no less exacting than those of the overseas examinations which have been respected and relied upon over the past sixty years. However, it is recognized that credibility is not exclusively an internal and domestic matter. During this transitional period therefore accreditation of the examination has been sought of the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES).

Accreditation by UCLES takes the form of a public statement that the standards of the scheme of assessment administered by the Testing and Evaluation Unit of The Ministry of Education, Bahamas, are valid and reliable. To ensure validity and reliability, UCLES provided and continues to provide detailed involvement and support at every stage of the examination process. Officers from UCLES worked closely with Testing and Evaluation officers from the drafting of uses to the writing of question papers and the award of grades.

Trained and experienced subject specialists participated in the Cambridge International Training for the implementation of this project thereafter, subject panels

were charged with the responsibility of developing the new uses for the examinations.

The uses and the question papers for the new examination have been developed and written under the direct supervision of the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES), with considerable input from all the secondary schools in The Bahamas.

UCLES monitored and moderated the development of all the question papers to ensure that the level of the papers was of a parallel standard to the examinations in the United Kingdom. The first "live" examination was conducted in May/June 1993. UCLES monitored the post-exam procedures: marking, grading and awarding to ensure the comparability with the examination in the United Kingdom.

UCLES also provided computer-based support to ensure the integrity of the data and the processing of results.

As a final stage, the certificates awarded to students carry the crests of the University of Cambridge and the Crest of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas. To ensure full security of the results and the certificates, UCLES is responsible for the printing of the certificates.

BGCSE AND EQUALIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

A major shortcoming of GCE was that it excluded a considerable portion of the population, essentially those enrolled in public schools. Moreover, even when public schools entered students, the pass rate favoured private school candidates with the result that private school graduates were more likely to gain entry into institutions of higher education. In 1991, for example, two out of every three students entering The College of The Bahamas originated from a private school (COB Enrollment Statistics, 1991). The success of BGCSE in equalizing educational opportunity could therefore be assessed according to the number of students achieving success on BGCSE. Thus we should expect more students from the public schools to achieve passing grades on BGCSE than on GCE. We should also expect a narrowing of the gap between private and public schools candidates on performance.

Such data that are available indicate that the discrepancy in performance between private schools and public schools observed with GCE, continues. For example, in the 1994 sitting the total number of grades awarded in the A to C range amounted to 5958. Of this number 58.7% were earned by candidates from the private schools and 36.4% were achieved by the public schools.

**Table 1: BGCSE 1994 Sitting A-C Grades
by School Type**

School Type	Total A-C	%
Public: New Providence	1148	19.3
Public: Family Island	1022	17.1
Private	3503	58.8
ContEd/Private	285	4.8
All Bahamas	5958	100.00

Private candidates and persons enrolled in continuing education programmes in public and private schools accounted for the remaining 4.8%. What is more, proportionately more candidates from private schools achieved grades of C and above in English and Mathematics making their acceptance into the College of The Bahamas more likely⁵¹.

Data from the 1995 sitting indicate that "for a number of subjects, the percentage increase in the A-C category may have been minimal, [however], the D-E levels showed that substantial improvements have been made by students in this ability range" (Ministry of Education Press Statement, Nassau Guardian, 10th August, 1995, p.4A). While it is too early and the data too limited to be certain, this statement suggests that as students in public schools become more accustomed to the idea of being entered for national secondary examinations, improvement in performance is occurring. It is expected that this improved performance, albeit slight and gradual, would eventually result in a narrowing of the gap between private and public schools.

CONCLUSION

When compared with the GCE it is obvious that the BGCSE is more

⁵¹ In order to be admitted into college level programmes at COB normally, the candidate must have passed a minimum of five BGCSEs, including English and Mathematics, with grades of C or better.

responsive to the expectations of the school's curriculum, the idiosyncracies of the culture and the characteristics of the student population. While the disparity in achievement between private and public schools is still extremely noticeable a trend of upward mobility from lower grades is developing. In other words, more students are achieving grades in the D-E range than in the D - G range. This is consistent with the argument that the BGCSE is a means of equalizing educational opportunity in The Bahamas.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. COAKLEY, L.N. (1975) Communication to Parliament, Nassau: Bahamas Government Printing Department.
2. College of The Bahamas Statistics, 1991.
3. JOHNSON, P. (1988) Effective Secondary Schooling: Factors Affecting Academic Achievement in The Commonwealth of The Bahamas. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.
4. Ministry of Education & Culture (1972) Annual Report 1970-1971. Nassau: Bahamas Government Printing Department.
5. _____ (1992) Report of The BGCSE.
6. The Nassau Guardian (1995) Performance of Candidates in the BGCSE Exams Improve.

AUTHOR

Mr. Leroy Sumner is the assistant Director of Education with responsibility for the Testing and Evaluation Section of the Ministry of Education.

He holds a B.Ed. in Secondary Education, an M.Ed. in secondary School Administration and Supervision, an M.Sc. in Educational Psychology-Testing and Evaluation and a Certificate in the Principles of Testing and Evaluation from the University of Cambridge, Local Examination Syndicate.

He is actively involved in a number of professional and civic organizations and has made presentations on aspects of the teaching profession in Testing and Evaluation at Seminars and workshops, both locally and internationally.