

Curriculum Implementation and Learning Outcomes: The Backwash Effects of the Primary Leaving Examination in Uganda

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**Mary Goretti Nakabugo
(Executive Director, Uwezo Uganda)**

Abstract

Functional models of curriculum development assume that curriculum is evaluated partly through learning outcomes produced and that these outcomes are fed back to improve the implementation and possibly the content. In practice, however, this “virtuous circle” is often impaired by the ways in which learning outcomes are measured and used. Where curriculum implementation is distorted by selective attention to a perceived “high-stakes” measurement of learning, the circle becomes a vicious one.

This Keynote Address builds on the “Diploma Disease” theory and research of the later twentieth century, and on recent commentary and evidence from Uganda, to consider distortions in the implementation of Uganda’s primary school curriculum, all of which are linked to the selective function of the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE). Five types of distortion are discussed. The first type, underpinning the others, is the public under-funding of primary education, which is apparently linked to a priority for secondary and higher education. The second type of distortion is a focus on high achievers within primary education, and the third type, linked to the first two, is the increasing marketisation of educational services for the benefit of families that are able to pay. The fourth type of distortion is the relative neglect, and low status, of “non-examined” subjects, as revealed by research on local language and physical education. The fifth type is the ritualisation of the learning process, which enables a successful minority of learners to advance themselves “through competitive conformity” (Dore 1980), with no incentive for initiative or imagination.

The Address concludes with thoughts about how the ‘disease’ might be cured or treated. Where there are limited opportunities for secondary education of good quality, as in Uganda, abolition of the PLE would make educational selection even less meritocratic. Three types of improvement of the PLE are recommended: expanding the range of subjects examined, improving the quality of examination questions and complementing the examination with continuous assessment. The costs and benefits of such changes are seen as part of a wider issue of how to bridge the gap between advanced, 21st-century ideas about curriculum and public-sector primary schools which lack the basic essentials for effective learning.

1. Introduction: the general idea of 'backwash effects'

In conventional models of curriculum development, it is assumed that, when a curriculum is evaluated, measured learning outcomes will be one of many types of evidence considered and will be fed back to help improve curriculum implementation and possibly content. In practice, however, this 'virtuous circle' is often impaired by the ways in which learning outcomes are measured and used. Many critics of the formal education provided in complex modern societies have argued that the role of an educational system in occupational selection tends to overshadow its wider, humane goals of producing responsible citizens and developing individual potentials. Where children are subjected to high-stakes public examinations, preparation for these too easily distorts the implementation of the school curriculum – both in content and in pedagogy – and the fear of failure fuels more demand for 'standards' and for schools that produce high pass rates. In this way, the virtuous circle is replaced by a vicious one, on the lines shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Virtuous circle linking curriculum implementation and learning outcomes

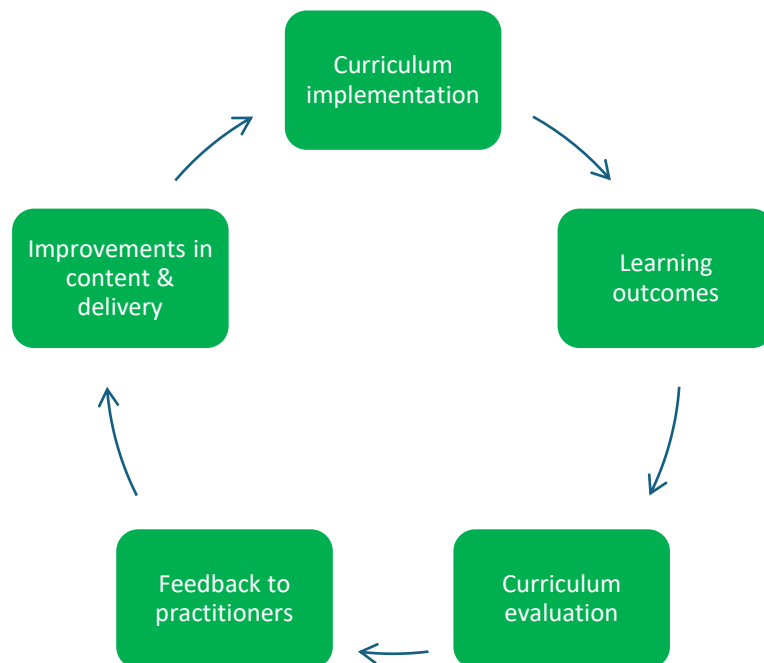
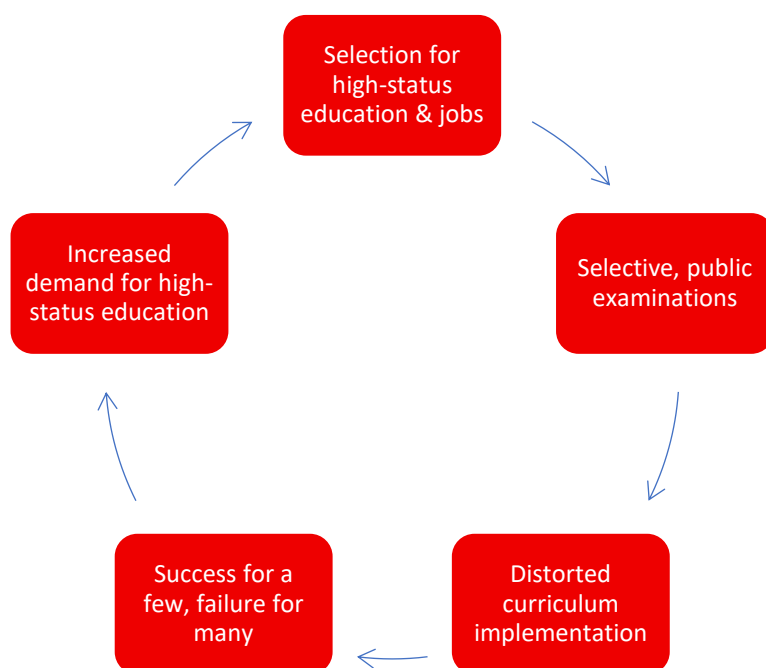


Figure 2: Vicious circle linking learning outcomes and curriculum implementation



2. From Ronald Dore to Jimmy Spire Ssentongo: the perennial Diploma Disease

A landmark event nearly fifty years ago was the publication of the book, *The Diploma Disease*, by Ronald Dore, an outstanding scholar of the University of Sussex (Dore, 1977). Dore presented this disease as one of societies and their educational systems, not of individuals. The essence of his argument was that “as jobs depend more and more on certificates, degrees and diplomas ... schooling has become more and more a ritualised process of qualification-earning” (Dore, quoted by Little, 1997a).

Awareness of the backwash effects of examinations, and of rising qualification requirements, was not new: but Dore’s theory tied these trends together to explain the diversion of education from its original purpose of ‘developing minds and characters’. By comparing the educational histories of England, Japan, Sri Lanka and Kenya, Dore also argued that, the later a country embarked on state-driven, bureaucratic modernisation, using general educational qualifications to fill senior positions in public services and corporations, the greater the effect of the Diploma Disease on education. Dore recognised that the competition for high-status qualifications could cause the governments of developing countries to give the expansion of secondary and higher education a high financial priority, possibly at the expense of primary education. He also recognised that schools in low-income countries had limited resources with which to offer a more learner-centred pedagogy and break away from the numbing regime of ‘chalk and talk, memorisation and testing’ (Dore 1977, p. 81).

Another landmark date was 1997, when the Diploma Disease theory and related research were discussed in a special issue of the journal, *Assessment in Education* (Volume 4, No.1). While much of Dore’s analysis had stood the test of time, various contributors felt that examinations themselves were not necessarily such villains as Dore had depicted them. Reporting research in Kenya, Anthony Somerset (1997) showed that examinations could be improved so that they tested applications of

knowledge rather than mere recall of facts, and that this could encourage improvements in teaching. Another perspective came from Angela Little (1997b), whose research in Sri Lanka showed that academic qualifications were valued as meritocratic criteria for selection, in a contrast with the widespread political patronage that had taken hold. Earlier work by Nigel Brook and John Oxenham (1984) showed that various attempts to reform school curricula in Africa had not been effectively supported by examination boards: for example, pre-vocational studies in Ghana had not been included in the middle-school leaving examination. The problem here (as we shall argue for Uganda too) is not so much the examination itself but its narrow scope.

The severity of the Disease in the Global South does not imply that countries in the Global North are immune from it. To give just one example, an evaluation of Scotland's school curriculum by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) finds a tension between qualification goals and broader educational goals in the Senior Phase of secondary education (OECD, 2021, p. 64).

Shortly after Ronald Dore's death in November 2018, some of his former colleagues wrote, in a tribute to him, that the Diploma Disease was now becoming a global pandemic, with rampant qualification inflation in high-income countries and in global market-places (Lewin, Little and Wolf, 2019).

Uganda can be seen as another 'late starter' in state-driven modernisation (considerably later than Kenya), with a spate of public institution-building and modern-sector growth in the period from 1990 to 2015. Educational expansion at all levels has also fuelled the demand for high-status qualifications. There are signs all around us that we have a bad case of the Diploma Disease here. For example, it would be hard to find any other country where primary schools hold *three* sets of examinations per term. Our 2024 Spotlight research on basic education completion and foundational learning in Uganda found that schools in the four districts studied administered an average of three exams per term in Primary 3 and six in Primary 7 (Nakabugo et al. 2024).

A few years after Dore's death Uganda's leading satirist, Jimmy Spire Ssentongo (whom we shall call Spire), identified the essence of the disease in his essay, 'How we make our humanoid robots' (Ssentongo, 2021, pp. 81-84). There he gives particular attention to the PLE, which he renames the Parrot Licensing Examinations. The PLE is of course the first high-stakes examination that children encounter on their educational journey, giving access to elite secondary schools for those who manage to obtain a 'good' Division 1 result. Those schools in turn confer good opportunities for access to higher education and eventually to high-status, salaried employment.

The wider context in Uganda, however, has an important new feature which belongs to the neo-liberal era: marketisation (i.e. commercialisation). Dore's original theory gave an emphasis to bureaucratisation and the meritocratic principle as drivers of the competition for qualifications and gave only slight recognition to competition through the market. Dore did later acknowledge the argument of Randall Collins (1979) that higher social classes use diplomas to legitimise their dominance, as they can afford schooling or tuition that enables their children to succeed in examinations (Dore, 1997, p. 27). In Uganda, we find that both factors are important, contributing to the distorted implementation of the primary school curriculum.

3. How Uganda's primary curriculum is distorted and impoverished

We shall consider five factors in the poor implementation of the primary curriculum: inadequate public funding; a focus on high achievers; marketisation of educational services; neglect of the "non-

examined” subjects, and ritualisation of learning. The PLE as a selection device underpins all of these factors.

3.1. Inadequate public funding of primary education

Government primary schools in Uganda depend increasingly on direct charges to households. School managers, finding the capitation grants insufficient for basic needs, routinely charge examination fees and levies for building maintenance. Due to the severe shortage of teachers on the government payroll, Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) and School Management Committees (SMCs) are increasingly hiring supplementary teachers by charging parents fees to cover their costs. These supplementary teachers now account for about 13% of the teaching force in government schools (Uwezo Uganda, 2024, pp. 29-30). The share is significantly higher in some regions, reaching 23% in the Western Region and 52% in the Central Region (Ibid.). There is some evidence that, in line with Dore’s theory, the underfunding is partly due to a priority given to secondary and higher education. In the four financial years from 2017-18 to 2021-22, for example, the share of the education budget allocated to secondary education increased from 4% to 21%, while the share for primary and pre-primary education declined from 51% to 34% (UNICEF Uganda, 2023).

3.2. A focus on high achievers

Such financial pressures on primary schools intensify the priority they give to preparation for the PLE, versus more general educational goals. The head teacher of one government primary school that our researchers visited was proud to report that, in the run-up to the PLE, the P7 pupils were kept in the classroom from 7 am to 7 pm! As Spire puts it, “the programming should be from dawn to dusk ... the first rule is: Do not allow them to rest; they are mere robots” (Ssentongo 2021, p. 82). In other cases, such schools have tried to imitate the private schools by opening boarding homes for P7 pupils, hoping for a good crop of Division 1 passes. In such a situation, helping the low-achieving majority to catch up and complete their primary education is not likely to be a high priority for teachers. As Dore comments, for those whose schooling may end at the primary level, meaningful preparation for “life and entry into work” is neglected (Dore, 1980, p. 2). And as Spire puts it, “we are not interested in those who fail. Let them just escort others all through the process at a minimal cost” (Ssentongo, 2021, p. 82).

3.3. Marketisation of educational services

The public under-funding of primary education and the focus on high achievers go hand in hand with increasing commercialisation within the sub-sector. Many parents try to improve their children’s chances in the PLE by sending them to private schools, which account for about 30% of the primary enrolment. Both in private and in government schools, some parents pay for private tuition or extra classes. Ten per cent of pupils in government primary schools and 31% of those in private primary schools are receiving private tuition (Uwezo Uganda, 2024).

The Uwezo data suggests that private tuition tends to be used for the lower achievers in private schools and the higher achievers in government schools. As Table 1 shows, private tuition is associated with higher rates of success in government schools, but not in private schools.

TABLE 1. READING IN ENGLISH AND NUMERACY COMPETENCE IN P3-P7, BY SCHOOL TYPE AND BY PRIVATE TUITION

A. Reading in English (% with P2 competence)		
School type:	Government-funded	Private
Private tuition – yes	36.4	42.6
Private tuition - no	20.9	41.6
All pupils	22.5	41.9
B. Numeracy (% with P2 competence)		
School type:	Government-funded	Private
Private tuition - yes	66.2	62.3
Private tuition - no	51.4	66.2
All pupils	52.8	64.9

We have already noted, too, that many PTAs in government schools are employing supplementary teachers – and this applies especially to the more prosperous communities. All these trends are means by which the better-off households try to secure advantages for their children in the competition for diplomas.

3.4. Neglect of the “non-examined” subjects

With regard to the subjects not tested in the PLE, we can begin with a quotation from Brook and Oxenham: “Gardening and crafts, music and physical education were either skimped or ignored” (page 159). This comment actually referred to Ghana’s lower secondary education in the 1980s: but it could equally be applied to Uganda’s upper primary grades today. For reasons that deserve sociological analysis, the PLE is limited to just four subjects: English, mathematics, science and social studies. In P6 and P7 especially, extra lessons are given in these subjects, either as a school initiative or through decisions by teachers.

The resulting status hierarchy among subjects, with English and mathematics in the first rank, science and social studies next, and all others below, has far-reaching consequences. As examples, we shall consider some evidence of the low status of local languages and of physical education.

Despite the national policy that a local language should be the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in P1-P3, Uwezo assessments of children’s reading in English and in local languages in P3- P7 show a substantially stronger performance in English. In 2024, as Table 2 shows, the proportion of these children who could read at the ‘word’ level or above was 69.7% in English but only 51.8% in a local language. An even more worrying finding is that 35.3% were complete non-readers in the available local language, while only 5.4% were non-readers in English.

TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF P3-P7 PUPILS BY LEVELS OF READING IN ENGLISH AND LOCAL LANGUAGE, 2024

Reading level	English (% by level)	Local language (% by level)
Story with comprehension	27.6	19.3
Story only (without comprehension)	0.8	0.8
Paragraph	14.5	11.4

Word	26.8	20.3
Letter	24.9	13.0
Non-reader	5.4	35.3
Total	100.0	100.0
Word level or above	69.7	51.8

Source: Uwezo Uganda, 2024.

In the upper primary grades (P5 to P7), after the transition to English as the LoLT, a local language is supposed to be kept as a subject. But Medadi Ssentanda, a researcher on the status of local languages, describes a typical situation in government schools as follows:

For instance, the timetable may read that at 10.00 am the MT [mother tongue] would be taught, but the teacher fills this time slot with another subject. The reason teachers gave for disregarding the teaching of the MT ... was that the MT is not examined at the end of primary schooling. It is therefore categorised as a minor subject (Ssentanda, 2016, p. 103).

The same author also shows that private schools (even in rural areas) market themselves as “English only”, escaping from implementation of the official language policy on the grounds that their pupils are of varied ethnicity. They do this despite the tendency of teachers (as directly observed) to use a local language for translation and codeswitching to English in the classroom. Some of the teachers observed professed to believe that the learners would benefit more from a strict use of English as the LoLT in the upper grades, an assumption also made in the earlier teachers’ guides (e.g. NCDC, 2007), even though their own practice was contrary to that approach. Awareness of the high-stakes PLE was the factor that underpinned this belief (Ssentanda 2016, pp. 103-105). The tensions for teachers could be even greater in rural private schools with boarding facilities, where pupils could be punished for not using English.

For comparison, we can now consider some evidence for physical education (PE) in primary schools. In recently published, qualitative research, Nemigisha Musoke and Kaahwa Taddeo (2026) observed the learning environment of PE lessons in P3 and P6, in a sample of five schools in the Central Region which included some private ones. Their main concern was with issues of gender equity but the work reveals much about the status of PE. An initial point is that, although PE has been a compulsory subject since 2008, “a number of schools at primary level do not teach PE while others teach it only to the lower primary” (page 55).

The reasons for this become clear from the evidence of teacher focus groups, which were asked about the main problems they faced in teaching PE. The first problem stated by a male teacher focus group in one government-funded school was “little or no support from school administrators and fellow teachers because PE is not nationally examined” and not even examined at school level. The authors comment that PE, having no examination results, “cannot market the school” (Musoke and Taddeo, 2026, p. 61).

The challenges that were related to this lack of support included large classes, insufficient equipment, lack of reference books, inadequate space, muddy playgrounds and “other teachers who do not want to teach PE”. In addition, very few schools have showers or changing facilities that would enable children to dress appropriately for PE.

The research reveals that typical, coeducational schools did not have clear plans for the handling of gender relations during PE lessons or for the extent to which boys and girls would engage in the same, or different, activities. As a result, there were cases of blatant discrimination against girls in

the use of equipment, and of violence by the larger boys that went unchecked. An additional problem is the traditional norm that “expects girls and women to remain clean” – an impossible requirement in muddy playgrounds (page 62). The main point for us to note is that the many challenges of organising PE, including the fostering of sportsmanship, fair play and improved gender relations, are less likely to be met because of the low status of this “non-examined” subject.

This point can be extended to the concept of developing the “whole child”. The new lower secondary school curriculum incorporates a broader vision of education that includes life skills and values alongside academic learning. However, this shift may come too late for many of the children, who reach secondary school level already shaped by the narrow, predominantly cognitive and examination-focused approach of upper primary education. Encouragingly, the ongoing review of the primary school curriculum is expected to help address this gap.

3.5. Ritualisation of learning

A core part of Ronald Dore’s concept of the Diploma Disease was his perception that “selection-oriented assessment, teaching and learning in schools” impoverished the educational process and deformed the characters of learners:

More qualification earning is *mere* qualification earning – ritualistic, tedious, suffused with anxiety and boredom, destructive of curiosity and imagination, in short, anti-educational (Dore, 1976, p. ix).

Dore lamented that the “successful” products of such a system would be socialised “towards self-advancement by competitive conformity to external (rather than internalised) authorities”, unlikely to show initiative or imagination (Dore, 1980, p. 2). Spire’s essay on the training of robots in Uganda has exactly the same message. “They are not supposed to invent anything; that is not robot work. At best they should be good imitators.” (Ssentongo, 2021, p.83).

In part, this impoverishment of learning is due to examiners and teachers who test knowledge that is very easy to measure. Many exercises require factual recall with little or no judgement or awareness of context. There is a premium on memorisation: hence the cramming sessions in the so-called “candidate classes”.

4. Is there a cure or remedy?

Dore’s diagnosis of the Diploma Disease has been much more popular than the remedies he proposed. These were, mainly, that employers in the modern sector should use aptitude tests, instead of examination results, for recruitment, and that examinations for educational selection should be limited to language and mathematics, as it is harder to “cram” for these subjects (Little, 1997a). But the latter approach would of course reinforce the status hierarchy among subjects.

A more extreme attempt at a cure is abolition. But the countries that have abolished their selective primary leaving examination are mostly ones that have universal secondary enrolment and a well-resourced curriculum in public secondary education. (The selective function then shifts to higher terminal examinations such as O and A levels.) As neither of those conditions exists in Uganda, abolishing the PLE would leave the life chances of children even more dependent on family wealth, political patronage and social networks. The PLE is at least meritocratic in principle. Getting rid of it would remove one of the few mechanisms that still tries (even if imperfectly) to judge children on what they know and can do, rather than on how rich or well-connected their family is.

Improving the PLE seems to be a better option. From the available evidence and the 1997 debate, we recommend consideration of the following:

- (1) Expanding the range of subjects examined to include all that are compulsory in the primary curriculum. This would require considerable investment but would put the authorities and teachers under pressure to provide adequate time and resources for subjects like local language and PE.
- (2) Improving the quality of examination questions to require a wider range of knowledge and skills, including understanding, insight, applications of knowledge, and creativity. Somerset (1997) provides evidence from Kenya that this kind of improvement, in the period 1973 to 1990, did much to encourage teaching and learning of higher quality in primary schools. The examiners managed to include a creative writing component in the language examinations
- (3) Complementing the examinations with continuous assessment (CA). This is already being attempted at the lower secondary level but will be a larger and more difficult task at the primary level. To be effective, it requires a strong supervisory network. This change will not remove the need for examinations, partly because of authenticity issues. There are high risks of impersonation and copying in CA work, augmented by the possible use of artificial intelligence for any creative writing tasks.

The costs and benefits of such improvements are part of a wider issue. Specialists have come to this conference with advanced, 21st-century proposals for the curriculum: but there is a danger that only private schools and affluent government-aided schools and their students will benefit from such innovations. How can we bridge the gap between these ideas and the 'ordinary' public-sector primary schools, just across the water to the east, where even the 19th-century technology for learning – teachers, classrooms, benches and chalk boards – is insufficient?

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