

TEACHING WITH THE TEST (NOT TO THE TEST) IMPROVES LEARNING: EFFECTIVE TEACHERS PREPARE LEARNERS FOR EXAM WITHOUT DETRACTING FROM REAL LEARNING

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SUMMARY: Because both learners and teachers are evaluated based on how well learners perform in high-stakes exams such as the National Senior Certificate, many teachers end up teaching to the test. This means they only teach those concepts and skills that are most likely to be tested at the end of the year.

This policy brief outlines how teachers in schools that work teach *with* the test (not *to* the test) to improve learning. Using the following strategies, these teachers prepare learners for the final examinations without detracting from real learning:

- 🕒 Teaching the content domain
- 🕒 Benchmarking learners
- 🕒 Leveraging assessment data
- 🕒 Providing learners with incentives
- 🕒 Teaching test-taking strategies
- 🕒 Providing practice tests
- 🕒 Giving timed-tests
- 🕒 Dealing with exam anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Learners are assessed to make accurate inferences about the levels of mastery that learners have achieved with respect to a body

of knowledge or a set of skills. To make these inferences, examiners sample certain bodies of knowledge or skills because the amount of knowledge and skills in the prescribed curriculum is too vast to assess everything.

Feeling the pressure to improve the results on high-stakes assessments such as the National Senior Certificate (NSC), compounded by the fact that teachers do not know which knowledge and skills will be assessed before the exam is administered, many teachers are tempted to take short cuts, i.e. they teach to the test.

If teaching to the test is such a bad thing to do, what is the alternative? This policy brief outlines how teachers in schools that work¹ teach *with* the test (not *to* the test) to improve learning. These teachers prepare learners for the final examinations without detracting from real learning.

APPROACHES TO PREPARING LEARNERS FOR HIGH-STAKES EXAMS

Discussed below are two approaches that teachers use to prepare learners for the exams and to keep learners' stress levels under control. These are:

- 🕒 Item-teaching approach
- 🕒 Curriculum-teaching approach

¹ In April 2017, the Minister of Basic Education commissioned the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) to conduct the *Schools that Work II* study. This study sought to examine the characteristics of top-performing schools

in South Africa. The best practices discussed in this advocacy brief are based on the findings of that study. The full report is available on the Department of Basic Education website: www.education.gov.za/Resources/Reports.aspx
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ITEM-TEACHING APPROACH

Item-teaching—sometimes called *cram reviews*, a separated approach or teaching **to** the test—is a negative practice. Teaching to the test means that teachers focus on specific content areas in order to ensure that their learners get good results in the final exam. Teachers in schools that work understand that teaching something because it will show up in the exam:

- ❏ does not increase a learners' overall knowledge base
- ❏ does not correctly gauge learners' understanding of a subject
- ❏ does not provide learners with a full understanding of a topic
- ❏ is unethical because it deprives learners of understanding broader concepts and skills

In the item-teaching approach, exam preparation is allocated its own space in class time, often before exams start and after teachers have completed the syllabus (between May and September), apart from the rest of the year's work.

These schools tend to be data-driven in that they are mainly concerned about what results would look like in the NSC examinations. For this reason, teachers put a lot of energy on teaching topics or skills that are heavily emphasised in the exam. By only focusing on specific topics in a particular subject, a teacher may be overlooking important concepts or skills that are necessary for further studies.

CURRICULUM-TEACHING APPROACH

Curriculum-teaching is also called *review tactics*, an integrated approach or teaching **with** the test. In this approach, final exam preparation is integrated into the ongoing class teaching, as part of the curriculum delivery throughout the year. Put differently, teachers teach *with* the test, that is, they:

- ❏ focus on a wide range of skills and concepts within a particular subject
- ❏ focus on cognitive development and problem solving as opposed to the drill-like memorisation of the item-teaching approach

- ❏ empower their learners by setting up assessments, classroom activities and lessons throughout the year that match the NSC exam format

Schools which practise *curriculum-teaching* are data-informed. Their primary focus is the infusion of the exam preparation into curriculum delivery throughout the year. They use *formative* assessment to see where their learners are starting. They use *summative* assessment to see what learners have learned. Then, they keep assessing learners until they can demonstrate that they have learned the material taught in class.

EMPIRICALLY-TESTED EXAM PREPARATION PRACTICES

What can teachers do to ensure that their learners are prepared for the final exams? Discussed below are eight effective ways teachers in schools that work use to prepare learners for the exam without detracting from real learning:

- ❏ Teaching the content domain
- ❏ Benchmarking learners
- ❏ Leveraging assessment data
- ❏ Providing learners with incentives
- ❏ Teaching test-taking strategies
- ❏ Providing practice tests
- ❏ Giving timed-tests
- ❏ Dealing with exam anxiety

A

•Teaching the content domain

Teaching the content domain is not about learners passing the exam per se. It is about teachers aligning the curriculum and assessment by integrating appropriate exam preparation practices into regular classroom teaching and, in the end, this helps learners to do well in the exam.

Schools that work approach their “review tactics” as a year-long process. That is, they highlight topics prevalent in the exam and weave them into lessons and class activities. They review past questions with learners after completing a chapter, a concept or a topic.

What I do is, after teaching a concept, e.g. calculus, I use calculus questions from past exam papers to assess if my learners understood what I was teaching them. (Teacher, School LL-Quintile 2)



B**•Benchmarking learners**

Teachers in schools that work administer benchmark assessments (i.e. formal and informal formative assessments) several times throughout the year. This helps them to identify learners who are on track, ahead of grade level and those that have knowledge gaps. The frequency of monitoring learner progress ranges from weekly to monthly formative assessments in different schools.

A common practice is that benchmark assessments are not constructed by teachers. Teachers prefer to draw questions from the past NSC question papers. One beneficial outcome of regular benchmark assessments, which is widely touted in many schools, is that the consequence of learners performing badly is not an admonishment to “wait until next term or next year” but rather the promise that “you can do better next week.”

We conduct weekly tests. It is one of the strategies which helps to monitor learner progress on a regular basis. We can't wait until the end of the month or end of the term to check how learners are progressing. That would be too late to take the necessary corrective actions.

(Teacher, School ML-Quintile 1)

C**•Leveraging assessment data**

The next step that teachers take after administering an assessment is the analysis of results to inform actions “whether to proceed and teach the next concept or re-teach the concept if most learners did not perform well,” (Teacher, School EF-Quintile 3). In this step, schools do five interrelated activities: Analyse assessment results, identify teachers and learners who are having problems with particular topics, identify topics or concepts which are commonly found to be challenging, discuss results and take appropriate actions. See Policy Brief N-04 for detail.

Results from the analysis of assessment data allow teachers to gain more information about learner proficiency.

D**•Providing learners with incentives**

Schools that work create a strong culture of academic achievement by celebrating their successes and commiserating over their failures in different ways. These schools have a reward system to take some of the anxiety out of exam preparation and create a healthy dose of competition to keep learners motivated. Learners are given something to look forward to when they meet specific set goals and targets. Teachers use different kinds of incentives such as acknowledging high-performing learners at the assembly, award and prize giving day, honours day, or Principal awards day: “Everyone fights to be amongst the learners who are going to be called up in front” (Teacher, School KH-Quintile 4). Learners are rewarded with prizes, certificates, pins, trophies or badges.

E**•Teaching test-taking strategies**

Teachers in schools that work provide their learners with test-taking strategies to make them feel more at ease when the exam begins. Following are strategies that these teachers advise their learners to always pay attention to:

- ☞ Spend the first five minutes reading the instructions carefully before writing
- ☞ Read instructions carefully, look for key words in the instructions and be able to differentiate between ‘list,’ ‘explain,’ ‘discuss’ and ‘analyse’ to score maximum marks in a question
- ☞ Use time allotted to each question as a guide as to how much time must be spent answering a question
- ☞ Move on to the next questions if a learner comes to a question for which he/she does not know the answer and then return to the hard ones later
- ☞ Scan the exam question paper for easy questions for which they may immediately know the answer
- ☞ Go back and check the answers once finished answering all questions, if time permits

F**•Providing practice tests**

Applying the old adage “practice makes perfect,” schools that work collect NSC exam papers from prior years that are administered within a province and/or in other provinces and use them as practice tests. Schools use different approaches to practise past exam papers. They use an item-teaching approach or a curriculum-teaching approach or a



combination of the two approaches. Following are reasons why teachers use practice assessments:

- ☞ To help learners understand the exam structure and format for each subject so that they know what to expect in the exam question paper
- ☞ To acquaint learners with what the markers are looking for when they are marking
- ☞ To discuss the quality of answers with learners—analysing learners’ answers to identify appropriately those that would earn learners good marks and help learners hone their answering skills so as to maximise getting the possible marks
- ☞ To give learners tests with time limits to enable them to manage time properly in the exam and be able to answer all questions adequately

G

•Giving timed-tests

The NSC examinations, like all high-stakes exams, is like a timed distance race. Therefore, learners need to learn how to be strategic with their time. To help learners to do this, teachers in schools that work give learners numerous timed-tests and set a timer very similar to what it would be in the exam. In every practice timed-test, teachers monitor not only whether learners improve their time management skills, but they also check the quality of answers.

We tell them, ‘Look at the mark allocation. You cannot spend the same amount of time for a two-mark question and a ten-mark question.’
(Teacher, School MG-Quintile 4)

Teachers find this strategy helpful because it helps learners to understand the criteria necessary to write quality answers within strict time limits.

H

•Dealing with exam anxiety

The more exposure that learners have to both the subject matter and testing environment, the more comfortable they would be when the exam day arrives. To reduce exam anxiety, teachers in schools that work give learners practice tests under the same strict conditions that are similar to the actual NSC examinations. These conditions include making learners write practice tests and:

- ☞ Use the same room where they will write the NSC exam
- ☞ Use the same seating arrangement they will use on the exam day
- ☞ Follow the same strict rules prescribed for the NSC exams
- ☞ Write full-length exam papers using past NSC question papers

Different teachers explain how taking mock exams under conditions similar to that of the exam helps learners so that they no longer face the unknown on the exam day:

Learners have never had to write a test for three hours, never had to sit alone in a desk confronted with question paper in front of them with a stranger monitoring their every move. This is enough to make any learner nervous and this affects their performance in the exam negatively.
(Teacher, School EH-Quintile 3)

CONCLUSION

It is understandable that teachers may feel pressure for their learners to perform well. However, the problem with some teachers resorting the item-teaching approach (teaching to the test) is that this method of instruction is a short-term, narrow solution that does not prepare students for the world outside of the classroom. It also does not correctly gauge a learners’ understanding of a subject.

Teachers in schools that work say “no” to *item-teaching* and say “yes” to *curriculum teaching*. That is, they refrain from teaching **to** the test but teach **with** the test. This means that they adequately and appropriately prepare learners for the NSC examinations without detracting from real learning. These teachers focus on learning rather than just improving exam marks. They focus on providing quality teaching and, in the end, this helps learners to do well in the exams.

While teachers prepare learners for the exam, they still live with their conscience knowing that they do not resort to short cuts, as described in the scenario below:

Some teachers spend more time on drills which leads to learners getting their As or distinctions but does not increase learners’ overall knowledge base. With their distinctions, these learners do badly at universities because teachers drilled the answers and learners only crammed to ace the exam.
(Teacher, School KV-Quintile 2)

