

18th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers in Mauritius

Quality of education and English proficiency: MES Reports reveal many weaknesses at learners' level and major lacunae at teaching level

The 18th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (18CCEM) was held at the Swami Vivekananda International Convention Centre (SVICC), Pailles, Mauritius, from Tuesday 28 to Friday 31 August 2012. The theme for this year was 'Education in the Commonwealth: bridging the gap as we accelerate towards achieving internationally agreed goals'.

The CCEM is a triennial event where the Education Ministers of the 54 countries of the Commonwealth meet to discuss issues of mutual concern and interest. Such meetings contribute to broaden the Commonwealth goals of development, democracy and human rights as set out in the Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan. In 2012, there were delegations from 39 countries. Around 23.3 million primary age children remain out of school in Commonwealth countries and approximately 460 million adults still cannot read and write, two thirds of these being women.

The Republic of Mauritius is one of the multilingual and multicultural countries of the Commonwealth. English is the official language. French is extensively used. Mauritian Creole and Asian languages also form part of the linguistic mosaic. All these languages are taught in government and government-funded schools. English is the official medium of instruction and the demand for English from pupils, parents, teachers and employers remains strong. Parents believe that everything is planned in Mauritian schools to give quality English instruction to their children. To what extent do Mauritian pupils at the end of primary schooling master English language?

An analysis of primary documents in the form of CPE examination reports for English language published by the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate (MES) for the last 17 years from 1994 to 2010 reveals many weaknesses at learners' level and major lacunae at teaching level. From 1991 to 1994, the overall performance of candidates stagnated at 68% (MES NDa: 2). Then, a new format of the CPE English examination paper was designed to take into account a wider range of abilities and better distinguish between the two levels of difficulty testing -- Essential Learning Competencies (ELCs), and Desirable Learning Competencies (DLCs). The 105-minute paper consisted of two sections with three questions in each. Section A assessed ELC, testing the acquisition of basic skills and abilities and carried 60% of the total number of marks. Section B assessed mainly DLC and tested higher order skills. (In Section A, question 1 tests "knowledge of grammar and vocabulary". Question 2a tests "reading with understanding" (Different types of texts or reading material well within the experience of Mauritian children such as posters) and question 2b tests the "understanding of a narrative

text". Question 3 tests "writing skills at sentence completion level within a given context oral or written". In Section B, question 4 tests "application of grammar", question 5 tests "reading with understanding" while question 6 tests "composition writing".)

Negative teacher attitudes were highlighted in the 1994 report. Although teachers were informed about changes brought to the examination paper and a specimen paper was sent to each school, candidates were not fully informed about the new format. As candidates faced many difficulties during the 1994 examination, the setting of the examination paper was reviewed in 1995 to make it more pupil-friendly. Degree of familiarity with different situations presented in the comprehension passage was checked as well as its readability level. Multiple-choice questions were reduced. Such measures brought some improvement in quality as more candidates were trained by teachers to develop writing skills. In 1996, evaluators observed that more competencies were taught in line with the new CPE syllabus, leading candidates to develop a systematic approach to examination strategies (MES NDc: 2). In 1997, Section A had a Facility Index of 64.5% (MES 1998: 1).

Nevertheless, 1998 examination results indicated a drop in quality although the paper setting was identical. The decline in learners' performance was largely attributed to factors extrinsic to the paper setting, namely a shift in teachers' attitudes. They became more examination and competition-centered. Instead of focusing on the real mastery of linguistic competencies, teachers developed mechanistic teaching/learning of language skills and most often "rigid rote learning of rules was given priority over good English" (MES NDc: 2). Conversation skills were rarely developed in classroom situations. Existing pedagogical tools in different government-funded institutions were sparsely used to expose candidates to spoken English (MES 1994) and to practice listening and reading English. No improvement was noticed in 1999 (MES 2000: 1):

"The mean of the English Paper was 45.3 as against 48.2% in 1998. Many candidates failed to show competence in the ELC Section of the paper. Almost 40% of CPE candidates have not developed the most basic reading and writing skills in English after 6/7 years of schooling. Teaching patterns have to be more interactive to break new ground towards higher performance thresholds."

The paper was slightly modified in 2000 to verify whether candidates reproduced mechanically learned knowledge or had really acquired skills tested. Unsatisfactory results pointed towards a major alteration in the teaching and learning process. Although a slight progress was noted in the overall percentage pass subsequently, overall results of more than one-third

of the candidates were poor and performance in ELC was below expectations (MES 2000: 3; 2006: 1).

Table 1: Overall percentage passes at CPE examination from 2000 to 2010

200 0	200 1	200 2	200 3	200 4	200 5	200 6	200 7	200 8	200 9	201 0
72.9 0	70.5 0	70.3 0	68.8 0	71.3 3	74.4 0	76.7 0	76.4 0	76.6 2	74.7 4	76.4 8

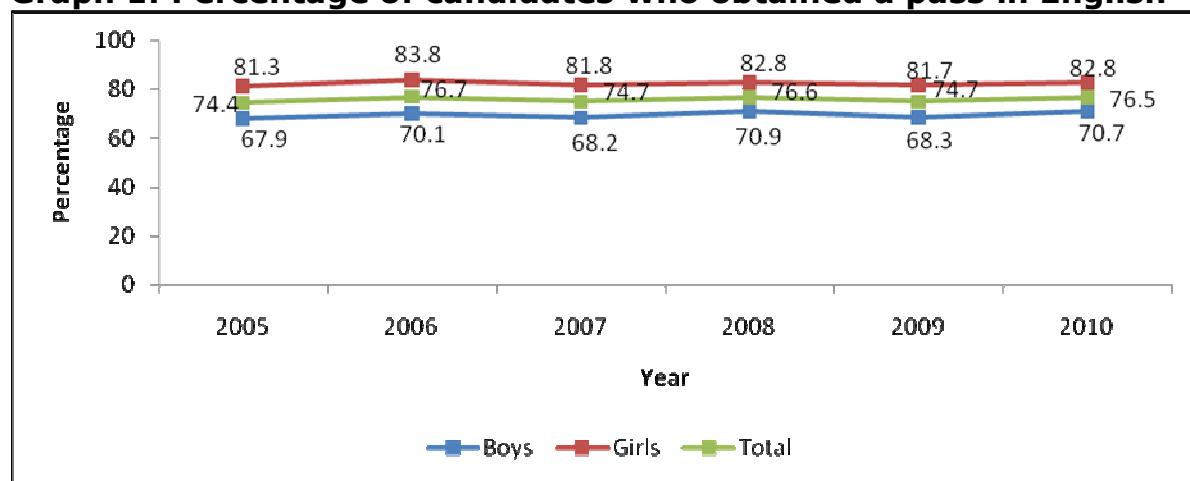
Source: MES reports

Results were best in 2006 for both pass rate and mean mark of 56.1. Mean mark for questions 2a and 2b of Section A were 6.84 out of 10 and 14.2 out of 20 respectively. Around 25% of brilliant candidates did well in DLC in 1996. Few candidates excelled in Section B afterwards. Higher order skills were not acquired by most candidates (MES 2005: 1):

"The trend observed over the last years concerning the decline in the level of reading and writing is persisting and very worrying. Too many candidates scored 0 in Section B, adding weight to a general feeling that some candidates may not be prepared for Section B of the paper. They may have been trained and conditioned to score maximum marks in Section A. Unfortunately this attitude proved disastrous to many candidates (...) Many (...) who just scraped through or failed in English will face serious problems when exposed to texts in English for their secondary schooling."

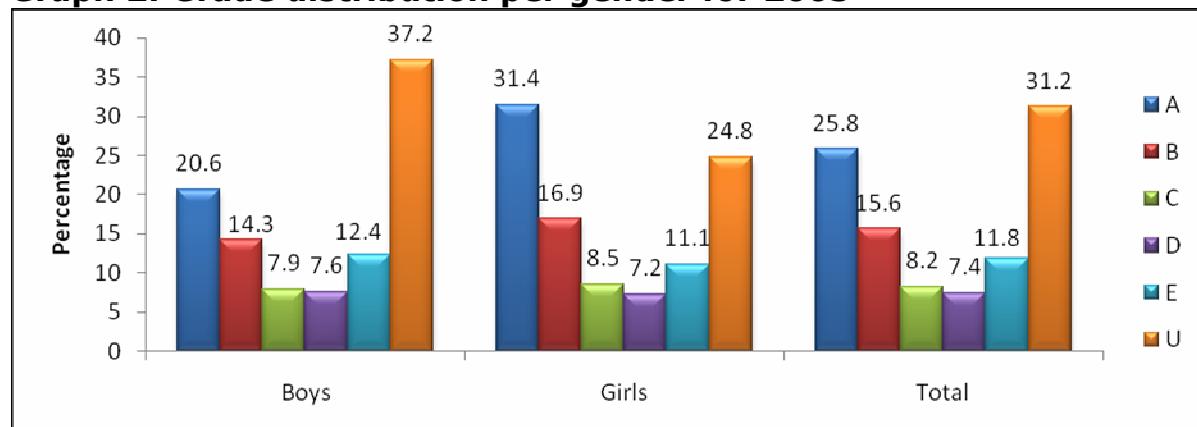
Results also confirmed the trend that there were more boys than girls in the two lowest ability groups (in the range 0-39 marks).

Graph 1: Percentage of candidates who obtained a pass in English



Detailed grade distribution given for 2003 revealed that girls scored higher grades (A, B, C) than boys. Rate of failure remained very high for boys (Grade U).

Graph 2: Grade distribution per gender for 2003



Source: MES 2004: 2

At the Conference, the need to concentrate efforts on teacher professional standards and school leadership to improve quality education was highlighted as well as the application of standards frameworks which could be applied nationally and regionally.

Let us hope for the best...

Sources:

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