

Recycling of Examination Questions and Academic Integrity – An Opinion Paper

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Abstract:- This study explores on recycled examination questions and academic integrity. Examination is a fundamental component in most systems of education. Recycling examination questions has been prevalent across educational institutions at different levels thereby raising some notable concerns on its effects on students, teachers, and academic integrity. This practice is examined in different views. Though it gives short-term advantages such as less load on teachers and examiners, it also poses major risk to the main aim of education. The repetition of past examination questions encourages rote memorization rather than true comprehension of concepts, thereby impairing students' abilities in critical thinking and problem-solving. This practice arises as a result of the pressure to produce excellent examination results; it narrows the curriculum, inhibits teachers' creativity, and reduces the overall quality of education. This paper emphasizes the significant impact of recycling past examination questions on academic integrity and how it undermines the fairness and legitimacy of evaluations. The Rawls' concept of "justice as fairness," is reviewed in this study. Other perspectives which assert that repeating past questions guarantees equity and feasibility in evaluation are rigorously reviewed. Interestingly, it is noted that the benefits are eclipsed when compared with the negative impact on student learning, teacher instructional strategies, and the integrity of academic institutions. This study advocates for reconsideration of this practice by suggesting alternative evaluation methods such as formative assessments, project-based learning, and open-ended inquiries which enhance engagement with the content and stimulate creativity. This study notes that academic integrity and meaningful learning outcomes necessitate institutions to prioritize examinations that accurately reflect genuine understanding, creative and critical thinking abilities rather than mere dependance on past examination questions. **Keywords:** Examination, Assessment, Recycling questions, Academic integrity, Rote memorization, Critical thinking.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ghana and many other nations worldwide have long considered examinations as a fundamental component in their system of education, it serves as a medium to assess students' knowledge, understanding, and application of what they have learned. Examinations are conducted in different modes and at different times across all levels of education. Due to the unending assessment of teaching and learning, repetition of past examination questions has become almost inevitable. This practice of repeating past examination questions has become very common among teachers in different educational levels as well as major examination bodies such as WAEC, and BECE. Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011), repetition of past examination questions is the academic equivalent of a greatest hits album, where students jam to the same old tunes, hoping the classics will get them through the final performance. Some teachers consider this practice a convenient and efficient way to assess students without considering the possible consequences that undermine the fundamental objectives of education across various levels. It compromises the intellectual growth, critical and creative thinking of students and also affects teachers' pedagogical approaches, ultimately jeopardizing the integrity of the educational system as a whole. This practice has a notable negative effect on student learning. Education fundamentally aims to cultivate a deep understanding of concepts in a particular field, analytical reasoning, and the ability to apply knowledge in innovative ways. Miranda and Freire, (2011), the primary objective of educational institutions is to cultivate knowledgeable, respectful, and responsible persons. When students are aware of the likelihood that past questions will be repeated in examinations, their focus shifts from acquiring a deep understanding of the subject matter to simply memorizing answers to specific questions. This shift leads to rote learning, where students memorize information without truly understanding it, resulting in immediate success in examinations but fails to equip students with the necessary critical and creative thinking skills and problem-solving abilities crucial for success in real-life situations.

Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel (2014), noted that simply repeating information does not necessarily improve comprehension or memory but rather strengthens superficial knowledge that is easily forgotten. The repetition of past questions often causes teachers to adopt a narrow teaching approach that emphasizes test preparation over comprehensive teaching. Teachers, knowing that their students will likely be assessed on previously asked questions, may feel compelled to tailor their instruction to these specific questions rather than encouraging a broader exploration of the subject matter. This "teaching to the test" phenomenon limits the content covered and stifles creativity and innovation in the classroom. Teachers may focus on drilling students with answers to potential examination questions instead of inspiring them to think critically and engage deeply with the content. This approach contradicts the educational philosophy advocated by Dewey (1938), who emphasized the importance of experiential learning and critical thinking as central to meaningful education. The repetition of past questions reduces the variety of the educational experience for both teachers and students by confining the curriculum to what is likely to appear in examination. Beyond its impact on student learning and teaching practices, it also raises concerns about academic integrity. Examinations are meant to be a fair and impartial test of students' abilities, but the reuse of previous questions creates an uneven playground. Having past questions gives students an unfair advantage. This technique compromises the impartiality of the assessment process and fosters a culture of unethical behavior. Academic integrity is the cornerstone of a legitimate and trustworthy educational system and activities that weaken academic integrity ultimately devalue the certifications that students receive. McCabe, Butterfield, and Treviño (2012), said that when students perceive that the system is unfair or that others are cheating, they are more likely to engage in dishonest behavior themselves (p. 143). The repetition of past examination questions also poses a danger to the credibility of academic institutions. Universities and schools are supposed to maintain rigorous academic standards and produce graduates equipped with critical thinking and innovation. When the same exam questions are repeated year after year, the validity and reliability of the assessments are called into question. Exam scores should reflect students' actual understanding. If students can succeed in tests merely by memorizing answers to past exam questions, the educational value of the qualifications they acquire is diminished. This, in turn, has broader ramifications for the reputation of academic institutions and the value of their degrees in the labor market.

II. DISCUSSION

A. Impact of Recycling Examination Questions On Students

➤ The Common Believe

Repeating past examination questions have several benefits especially on the side of students. Entwistle (2009), this practice allows students to familiarize themselves with the organization and structure of examination questions, decreases anxiety, and enhances overall performance. Students acquire a deeper picture of what to expect and may focus their study efforts accordingly when they see past questions. This consistency can reassure students particularly those who battle with test anxiety (Carless, 2007). Repeating past questions encourages students to shorten their study process by focusing on regions most likely to be tested (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005). This tailored approach is particularly helpful for students who have restricted time owing to other responsibilities. From a cognitive perspective, the notion of dispersed practice implies that repeated exposure to similar problems promotes long-term recall and a better grasp of key topics (Brown et al., 2014). Repeated inquiries assist cement knowledge and improve problem-solving ability (Roediger & Butler, 2011). This practice can boost student motivation and confidence as students who feel more prepared for examination tend to perform better and suffer less stress (Zimmerman, 2002). This confidence can transfer into higher examination performance and a more positive attitude toward learning (Bandura, 1997). Sadler, (1989), recycling of examination questions also conforms with formative assessment ideas, which stress continuous feedback and development.

➤ Researchers Point of View

The numerous benefits of recycling exam question notwithstanding, it has several significant problems on students, teachers, and on academic integrity. It encourages rote memory rather than profound learning of concepts. Biggs (2011), when students expect repeated inquiries, they prioritize memorizing answers over building full knowledge. This focus on surface-level learning impairs the educational process and students pass tests without gaining the fundamental skills and concepts necessary for future success (Entwistle, 2000). The reliance on past examination questions can generate a misleading impression of readiness. Bloom, (1956), students feel secure while encountering common questions but struggle when confronted with unique or complex topics demanding critical thinking and problem-solving. The emphasis on repetition can also impact students' long-term learning and adaptation (Terenzini et al., 1995). This practice further exacerbates educational inequity. Students from wealthy backgrounds with access to past examination papers and tutoring, are more likely to profit from this practice than their less-advantaged counterparts (Hernández-Julian & Looney, 2016).

This mismatch can promote inequities in educational performance, especially in systems where tests are crucial for future possibilities (Jerrim, 2013). Students who rely on past questions are likely to forget what they learned shortly after the examination, making their learning superficial (Roediger & Butler, 2011). This method of learning is fundamentally restrictive, it fails to stimulate critical thinking and the application of knowledge which are needed for academic and real-world success. Deci and Ryan's (2000), Self-Determination Theory, intrinsic motivation is fueled by the inherent satisfaction of learning and mastering new abilities. When educational systems incentivize rote learning, students may lose interest in the subject and disengage from the learning process. This technique also affects students' motivation and involvement with the subject matter. This practice give rise to examination malpractice. Obasi, (2009), defined as any irregularity aimed at gaining undue advantage. Kpangban, Ajaja, and Umudhe (2008), asserted that examination misconduct is prevalent in virtually all assessments. Kofi and Kwabena (2014), defined examination malpractice as any act of omission or commission by an individual, aimed at fraudulently obtaining an unfair advantage for themselves or others, in a manner that violates established rules and regulations, thereby compromising the validity, reliability, and authenticity of the examination and ultimately the integrity of the certificates issued. Students may focus primarily on areas expected to occur in tests, which limits their educational experience and diminishes the range and depth of knowledge they gain (National Research Council, 2000). This limitation is particularly problematic in disciplines that demand profound comprehension for further academic or professional activities. In an age where critical thinking and adaptation are valued, dependence on past questions fails to challenge students to think independently or engage with new ideas (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). This limits students' intellectual curiosity and their capacity to apply information to real-world issues (Kuhn, 2015).

B. Impact of Recycling Examination Questions on Teachers

➤ *The Common Believe*

Recycling past examination questions have several perceived benefits on the side of teachers and examination bodies. Repetition of previous examination questions is generally considered a time-saving strategy. Carless (2007), found out that recycling past questions allows teachers to spend more time on other instructional obligations such as lesson planning, grading, and providing feedback to students. Producing of new, high-quality examination questions is consumes a lot of time and labor-intensive, teachers with lots of workloads may enjoy the efficiency offered by recycling previous examination questions. It also guarantees uniformity and standardization in evaluations. Gibbs and Simpson (2005), stressed that recycling examination questions allows teachers to measure student performance across different cohorts in a comparable manner which is particularly advantageous in

larger schools where many teachers administer the same tests. It also streamlines the grading process as marking schemes are already established enabling teachers to evaluate papers more efficiently and decrease their burden (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Past questions also serve as a useful teaching tool, familiarizing students with typical question styles helps minimize examination anxiety and increase students' performance. This benefits teachers as students' better performance are assume a reflection of their instructional success, and they can focus on reinforcing key curriculum areas that are likely to be assessed. Brown and Race (2012), observe that recycling past questions can expedite examination preparation, making teachers' work more manageable and boosting students' chances of success.

➤ *Researcher Point of View*

Despite the advantages outlined above, recycling past examination questions has several profound influences on teachers which influences their instructional methods and overall attitude toward teaching and learning process. Teachers play a very crucial role in conducting examination, they determine how students interact with the material, and ensures academic integrity. However, recycling past examination questions create problems that affect instructors' capacity to complete their function efficiently. Biggs and Tang (2011), noted that recurrence of old examination questions can promote surface learning where students focus on rote memorization rather than actual understanding, building critical thinking and problem-solving skills (p. 102). Mere memorization of concepts is encouraged when students know they can rely on past questions to achieve good scores. This practice weakens teachers' role in encouraging deep learning, and reduces their capacity to guide students toward a better comprehension of the subject matter. It also reduces the possibility for facilitators to create a dynamic learning environment, thereby lowering the overall quality of education. Another notable impact of recycling past questions is that, it leads to unforeseen outcomes such as academic dishonesty and cheating. Students may regard tests as predictable and turn to dishonest methods. Whitley and Keith-Spiegel (2002), noted that promoting academic integrity is not simply about monitoring tests but building a learning environment that encourages honesty (p. 78). If examination bodies such as WACE and BECE repeatedly recycle questions, teachers may feel pushed to focus only on preparing students for these specific areas and questions, leading to an approach described as "teaching to the test." Au (2007), defines "teaching to the test" as restricting the curriculum to only those topics most likely to be tested in examinations, this in turn lowers opportunities for creative and innovative teaching. This approach lowers the depth and diversity of the teaching and learning experience, restricting students' exposure to various knowledge and limits teachers' capacity to stimulate critical and creative thinking. Teachers may feel that their efforts to develop meaningful lessons are undervalued leading to professional unhappiness and lowering their

incentive to adopt more student-centered teaching techniques. Darling-Hammond (2010), showed that the overemphasis on standardized testing stifles teachers' creativity and autonomy resulting in less engaging classrooms and lower educational quality (p. 98). Recycling of examination questions weaken teachers' passion for professional progress. When teachers rely on old questions the ability to interact with new educational standards and novel teaching practices is completely missing. Swaffield (2008), devising new assessments is vital for teachers' professional growth as it fosters reflection on pedagogy and maintains their subject knowledge up to date. Contrary, recycling past examination questions leads to stagnation, lowering the intellectual rigor of the teaching process. Brookhart (2013), contended that this practice leads to obsolete and stagnant evaluation systems, failing to represent the changing nature of subject matter and the evolving standards of education. As educational objectives shift towards promoting critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills; recycling of old questions hinders the ability of teachers to test these higher-order cognitive abilities efficiently. Repeating old exam questions weakens instructors' ability to act as active educators. Harlen (2007), teachers who continuously repeat past questions risk disengaging from the process of designing evaluations that reflect the individual needs and learning progress of students. This method of evaluation limits the intellectual involvement of both teachers and students, restricting the opportunity for tailored education and reflection on learning outcomes. Teachers may become less motivated to provide creative, diversified assessments, which inhibits their professional advancement and diminishes job satisfaction. Recycling examination questions establishes a culture of "teaching to the test," where students' learning is constrained to what they need to know for purpose of success in examination rather than a deeper comprehension of the subject. Wiliam (2011), warns that the focus on test preparation encourages rote memorization and decreases the educational value of both teaching and evaluation.

III. CONCLUSION

Having examined the seemingly several benefits of recycling past examination questions against its demerits, it is evidently seen that recycling examination questions poses a significant threat to educational institutions and academic integrity and the professional development of both students and teachers. It appears convenient and efficient; however, it ultimately undermines the fundamental aim of education which is centered around cultivating critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills. The negative impact of recycling examination questions on students' intellectual development, academic integrity, problem-solving, and overall preparedness for future difficulties far outweighs the supposed temporal infinitesimal benefits. In light of these concerns, it is obvious that recycling examination questions should be actively discouraged in current education system if not completely eliminated. When students are trained to recall

answers to previously assessed questions, their learning becomes superficial, and they fail to develop the abilities essential for higher-order thinking. Biggs and Tang (2011), stressed the hazards of surface learning, emphasized that students who participate in this style of learning are less ready to apply their knowledge in complicated, new circumstances (p. 102). Recycling also threatens academic integrity and encourages dishonest acts and malpractices. Access to information is easier due to advancements in technology, students can easily get past examination questions through multiple sources which raises the probability of cheating. Instead of verifying their knowledge and grasp of new material, students rather inclined to mere recall of answers to previously tested questions thereby weakening the credibility of their academic achievements. This erodes trust in the educational system as parents, and employers begin to question the value of the degrees gained through such exams. Whitley and Keith-Spiegel (2002), claimed that true academic integrity extends beyond avoiding cheating during examination and should encompass the formation of an educational atmosphere that supports honest efforts and innovative ideas (p. 78). The recycling of questions significantly undermines instructors' professional development and effectiveness. Teachers are crucial to the educational experience in presenting content and evaluations that encourage students to think critically and interact fully with the subject matter. When teachers are driven to "teach to the test" because of focus on recycling of examination questions, their creativity and ability to innovate are inhibited. Au (2007), states that "teaching to the test" narrows the curriculum, depriving learners' exposure to numerous topics and limiting teachers' authority to explore different instructional methods. It also prevents teachers from regularly updating their expertise and instructional skills, which are crucial for establishing a vibrant and dynamic learning environment. Recycling past questions in examination creates inequality in the school system, students who have access to past tests through tutoring facilities are at a distinct advantage over those who do not. This creates an uneven ground where students' success is influenced more by their access to past examination materials rather than their actual grasp and mastery of the subject.

The overall impact this practice is negative to the society as a whole. Surface learning, academic dishonesty, and less intellectual engagement by reason of recycling examination questions produces graduates who are ill-prepared to address the challenges of an increasingly complicated and dynamic world. Brookhart (2013), evaluation methodologies should be developed to reflect the changing demands of society, favoring higher-order cognitive capabilities above rote memorization (p. 75). Therefore, recycling questions in examination across various education level especially at the Senior High School and University should be discouraged.

RECOMMENDATION

The following recommendations are made from the discussion and conclusion on recycling of examination questions and academic integrity:

- Different forms of examination such as essays, projects, and case studies, which allow students to use knowledge in new ways, rather than depending on rote memory should be employed. Brookhart, (2013). (p. 75).
- Assessments should target analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, rather than mere recall of data. Biggs and Tang (2011), noted the need for assessments that encourage deep learning and knowledge application across multiple contexts (p. 102).
- Teachers should be provided with opportunity to strengthen their skills through professional development, concentrating on novel assessment methods and critical thinking education.
- Schools should focus more on formative assessments, which offer continual information and provide holistic feedback on student progress. This will help move away from the "teaching to the test" approach.

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