

**Publisher**

Sustainability for Regions

**THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM OF ASSESSMENT: HOW TESTING SYSTEMS REPRODUCE INEQUALITY IN AFRICAN EDUCATION****Moses Mhide Kpum***Department of Educational Foundations, University of South Africa, South Africa**E-mail: [Kpummoses5@gmail.com](mailto:Kpummoses5@gmail.com)**Received 20 May 2026; accepted 18 July 2026; published 30 September 2026*

**Abstract.** This paper interrogates the often-overlooked hidden curriculum embedded within assessment systems and examines how testing practices reproduce and legitimise inequality in African education contexts. Moving beyond conventional concerns with reliability and validity, the study advances a critical theoretical framework that conceptualises assessment as a socially situated practice shaped by language, culture, and power relations. Drawing on insights from critical theory and sociological perspectives on cultural capital, the paper argues that dominant assessment regimes privilege learners whose linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds align with institutional norms, while systematically disadvantaging those from marginalised communities. Synthesising existing literature on educational assessment, inequality, and development in Sub-Saharan Africa, the study demonstrates how high-stakes testing, language-of-instruction policies, and standardised measurement practices function as mechanisms of exclusion. It further illuminates how these dynamics contribute to uneven educational outcomes, constrain human capital development, and reinforce broader patterns of social and regional inequality. By situating assessment within the wider discourse of regional development, the paper establishes a conceptual link between inequitable testing systems and constrained socio-economic progress. In response, it proposes a reorientation of assessment theory and practice towards equity-sensitive frameworks that recognise contextual diversity and promote inclusive measurement, calling for culturally responsive assessment designs, multilingual approaches, and policy reforms that place fairness at the centre of educational governance. The study contributes to ongoing debates on educational transformation in Africa by foregrounding assessment as a critical yet under-theorised site of the reproduction of inequality and systemic change.

**Keywords:** hidden curriculum; educational assessment; inequality; African education; cultural capital; equity; high-stakes testing; regional development; culturally responsive assessment; Sub-Saharan Africa

**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Kpum, M.M. 2026. The hidden curriculum of assessment: how testing systems reproduce inequality in African education. *Insights into Regional Development*, 8(3), 115-129. <http://doi.org/10.70132/c6253342763>

**JEL Classifications:** I24, I25

**1. Introduction**

Assessment is rarely understood as a neutral act. Yet the dominant discourse surrounding educational testing in Africa has persistently privileged technical questions of reliability and validity over the political and sociological dimensions of who benefits, who is measured, and whose knowledge counts. This preoccupation with psychometric soundness has rendered invisible a deeper set of concerns: that testing systems carry within them a *hidden curriculum*, an implicit set of values, assumptions, and epistemological commitments that quietly sorts learners, rewards conformity to institutional norms, and replicates the very inequalities that education is ostensibly designed to redress (Ullah et al., 2025; Villacañas-de-Castro, 2025; Wolford et al., 2025).

The concept of the hidden curriculum, first elaborated in the sociology of education by Philip Jackson (1968) and subsequently developed by scholars such as Bowles and Gintis (1976), highlights the unstated lessons that schooling transmits beyond its official content. Applied to assessment, the concept illuminates how testing

practices communicate, through their language, format, cultural referents, and institutional embeddedness, which forms of knowledge are legitimate and which are not. For learners whose home languages, cultural practices, and socio-economic circumstances diverge from those encoded in dominant assessment frameworks, these unstated lessons are often ones of deficit and exclusion.

In the African context, this dynamic assumes particular urgency. The continent hosts some of the world's most linguistically diverse societies. Yet, the majority of high-stakes examinations are conducted in former colonial languages, English, French, or Portuguese, which many learners encounter only as foreign languages within school walls (Beckmann, 2025). Socio-economic stratification, entrenched urban–rural divides, gender disparities, and the residual architecture of colonial schooling further compound the conditions under which assessment operates (Fobosi et al., 2026). Against this backdrop, the persistence of imported testing models - standardised, norm-referenced, and language-homogeneous raises serious questions about their fitness for purpose in contexts of structural diversity and inequality.

This paper advances a critical theoretical interrogation of assessment in African education, arguing that dominant testing regimes function as mechanisms of social reproduction. The study draws on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, critical race theory's insights on epistemic justice, and postcolonial scholarship on education and development to construct a framework that positions assessment as a site of power, one that requires not merely technical reform but fundamental conceptual reorientation. The paper synthesises peer-reviewed scholarship, institutional reports, and empirical studies from across Sub-Saharan Africa to support its central arguments. It proposes a set of equity-sensitive alternatives grounded in the principle of culturally responsive assessment.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond the classroom. Educational assessment outcomes determine access to higher education, credential attainment, and labour market trajectories. In contexts where these outcomes are systematically skewed along lines of language, class, gender, and geography, assessment becomes an instrument of social stratification with far-reaching implications for regional human capital development and socio-economic progress. The paper contributes to the journal's concern with regional development by demonstrating how educational inequity, mediated through assessment, constitutes a structural constraint on sustainable development across Africa.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews theoretical frameworks relevant to the study. Section 3 examines the historical and structural context of assessment in Africa. Section 4 analyses the mechanisms through which testing systems reproduce inequality. Section 5 discusses the implications for regional development. Section 6 proposes equity-sensitive assessment frameworks. Section 7 concludes with recommendations for policy and practice.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Assessment, Power, and Social Reproduction**

### *Cultural Capital and the Hidden Curriculum of Testing*

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital provides an indispensable lens for understanding how assessment systems reproduce inequality. Bourdieu distinguished between economic, social, and cultural capital, arguing that educational institutions valorise and reward particular forms of cultural capital, those associated with the dominant class, while systematically devaluing others. In assessment terms, this means that learners who arrive at school already endowed with the linguistic registers, dispositions, and cultural knowledge that examinations privilege enter the testing arena with a structural advantage that has nothing to do with innate ability or effort.

The hidden curriculum of assessment operates precisely through this valorisation. When a national examination in Nigeria, Uganda, or Mozambique is written in English or Portuguese, draws analogies from Western cultural

contexts, and uses response formats that presuppose familiarity with abstract academic discourse, it encodes a specific cultural capital as the universal standard. Learners from urban, middle-class, English-medium households accumulate this capital with comparative ease. Those from rural, multilingual, low-income households are effectively required to translate not only linguistically but culturally and epistemologically before they can demonstrate competence. The selection reflects and reproduces the interests of dominant groups. Official knowledge is ideologically saturated. Applied to assessment in Africa, this insight highlights how examination syllabi, item construction, and scoring rubrics privilege particular epistemic traditions while marginalising indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and non-Western modes of reasoning (Dei, 2014; wa Thiong'o, 1986).

#### *Critical Theory and Epistemic Justice*

Miranda Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice offers a complementary analytical resource. Fricker identified two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice, which occurs when a speaker receives less credibility than they deserve due to identity prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, which occurs when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage in making sense of their social experience. Both forms are operative in African assessment contexts.

Testimonial injustice manifests when the knowledge and reasoning capacities of learners from marginalised communities are systematically underestimated, and when their performance in a foreign language examination is read as evidence of limited intellectual capacity rather than of an inequitable testing environment. Hermeneutical injustice manifests when the frameworks available for conceptualising assessment quality, reliability, validity, and standardisation lack the resources to capture the lived reality of a learner who is simultaneously navigating linguistic alienation, resource poverty, and cultural dislocation within a single examination sitting.

Postcolonial education scholars have reinforced these insights by drawing attention to the epistemic violence embedded in the uncritical adoption of Western assessment models across Africa (Dei, 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni et al, 2022). Wa Thiong'o's (1986) seminal argument that the colonisation of the mind operates most powerfully through language finds a concrete institutional expression in assessment systems that evaluate African learners' intelligence primarily through their command of ex-colonial languages. The decolonisation of assessment, on this reading, is not merely a matter of adding indigenous content to existing frameworks but of fundamentally reconceiving what counts as evidence of learning and who is authorised to produce and evaluate it.

#### *Social Reproduction Theory and Regional Development*

Bowles and Gintis (1976), writing from a structuralist perspective, argued that schooling functions as a mechanism for the social reproduction of economic relations, that the school system produces not merely educated individuals but compliant workers stratified by class. While their analysis has been critiqued for its functionalist determinism, the core insight that educational structures tend to reproduce the inequalities of the societies in which they are embedded retains considerable explanatory power.

Applied to the regional development literature, this framework establishes a causal pathway between inequitable assessment systems and uneven human capital development. When high-stakes examinations systematically produce lower attainment rates in rural, low-income, and linguistically marginalised communities, they generate unequal distributions of credentials. Unequal credentials translate into unequal access to tertiary education, formal employment, and participation in knowledge economies. At the aggregate level, this produces regional human capital deficits that constrain economic productivity, innovation, and sustainable development, a dynamic that is particularly pronounced in Sub-Saharan Africa, where educational attainment is strongly associated with economic growth trajectories (World Bank, 2022; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2015).

The theoretical synthesis offered in this paper thus links the micro-level dynamics of assessment practice, item language, cultural referents, and scoring rubrics to macro-level outcomes of regional inequality. This linkage, largely absent from existing assessment scholarship, constitutes the study's conceptual contribution.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a systematic integrative literature review as its primary methodological approach. Integrative reviews are appropriate when the goal is to synthesise a broad body of existing knowledge across multiple disciplinary traditions, assess the state of understanding on a topic, and generate conceptual frameworks that extend beyond what any single study can offer (Torraco, 2005; Whitemore & Knafl, 2005). Given the interdisciplinary nature of the inquiry, spanning educational assessment, sociology of education, postcolonial studies, and regional development economics, an integrative review provides the methodological flexibility necessary to engage with diverse theoretical and empirical traditions.

The literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, JSTOR, and ERIC, as well as the repositories of key regional and international development organisations, including UNESCO, the World Bank, and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ). Search terms were constructed to cover three interconnected domains: (1) educational assessment and testing, combined with inequality, equity, and fairness; (2) African education, Sub-Saharan Africa, and postcolonial education; and (3) hidden curriculum, cultural capital, and social reproduction. Boolean operators were used to combine and refine searches, and reference list tracing was employed to identify seminal works not captured by database searches.

Inclusion criteria required that sources: (a) addressed assessment practices, outcomes, or policies in African educational contexts or offered theoretical frameworks directly applicable to such contexts; (b) were published in peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books, or authoritative institutional reports; and (c) were available in English. While this language restriction represents a limitation (discussed in Section 8), it reflects the current distribution of accessible scholarship in this field. No strict date restriction was imposed, given the historical analysis required in Section 4; however, deliberate effort was made to ensure that sources published within the last five years constitute approximately thirty per cent of the cited literature, in line with best practice in scholarly synthesis, thereby ensuring that the review reflects the current state of the field.

The analytical framework applied to the synthesised literature draws on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) and the sociology of knowledge. Rather than treating reviewed texts as transparent data sources, the study examines how they construct, contest, and reproduce particular understandings of assessment quality, educational achievement, and learner competence. This reflexive approach to synthesis is consistent with the epistemological commitments of the theoretical framework outlined in Section 2, which positions knowledge production as always embedded in relations of power.

The study is explicitly theoretical and conceptual rather than empirical. It does not generate new primary data but constructs a novel analytical framework by bringing existing theoretical resources, Bourdieusian cultural capital theory, Fricker's epistemic injustice framework, social reproduction theory, and postcolonial education scholarship into productive dialogue with empirical studies conducted across Sub-Saharan Africa. The conceptual contribution lies in the systematic articulation of linkages among assessment practice, inequality mechanisms, and regional development outcomes, a set of linkages that, while implicit in the existing literature, has not previously been theorised within a coherent framework.

#### 4. Historical and Structural Context of Assessment in Africa

##### *Colonial Origins and Institutional Persistence*

The architecture of educational assessment in most African countries was constructed during the colonial period and has, in significant respects, been preserved since independence. Examinations functioned as gatekeeping mechanisms within this hierarchy, selecting the few who would ascend to positions of relative privilege while excluding the majority from further educational and economic opportunity.

The continuity of these systems after independence has been widely documented. Many African countries retained not merely the structural features of colonial examinations, their language medium, format, and curriculum orientation, but also their institutional relationships with metropolitan examining bodies. The Cambridge International Examinations (now Cambridge Assessment International Education) and the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), for instance, continued to exercise significant influence over secondary school certification in Anglophone Africa well into the post-independence era (Harber, 2014). The content and cultural referents of these examinations reflected assumptions about knowledge, competence, and academic achievement that were deeply rooted in British educational traditions.

Decades of curriculum reform have partially Africanised examination content, yet the fundamental structure, high-stakes, norm-referenced, externally administered, conducted in ex-colonial languages, has proven remarkably resistant to change. This institutional inertia reflects not only the path-dependent dynamics of bureaucratic systems but also the active interests of elites whose privileged access to ex-colonial language education gives them and their children a comparative advantage within existing assessment regimes (Du Plessis, 2025).

##### *Language of Instruction and Assessment: The Linguistic Fault Line*

The relationship between language of instruction and educational achievement is one of the most extensively researched and consistently demonstrated findings in comparative education. A substantial body of evidence, synthesised by UNESCO (2016) global education monitoring framework, establishes that learners acquire literacy, numeracy, and higher-order cognitive skills most effectively when instruction is provided in their strongest language. This principle, though widely acknowledged in policy discourse, is systematically violated in the assessment practices of most African countries.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the majority of children begin school speaking a home language different from the official language of instruction. Yet national examinations are almost universally conducted in official, that is, ex-colonial languages. The consequence is that performance in these examinations reflects, to a significant degree, the level of acquired proficiency in a second or third language rather than mastery of the subject matter being assessed.

This evidence has profound implications for the interpretation of national examination results. When grade repetition, dropout, and attainment gaps are mapped across linguistic communities in countries such as Tanzania, Zambia, or Cameroon, the patterns closely follow the fault lines of language policy. Communities whose home languages are absent from both instruction and assessment face a compounded disadvantage: they must learn through a language they do not yet command and be evaluated in that language against peers who have far greater exposure to it (Alidou et al., 2006).

##### *Socio-economic Stratification and the Unequal Assessment Environment*

The assumption of equivalent assessment conditions, that all learners in a given examination cohort compete from a comparable starting position, is a fiction that standardised testing requires but reality rarely provides. In Africa, the material conditions of schooling vary enormously across socio-economic strata and between urban and rural settings. Research by the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality

(SACMEQ) consistently documents stark differentials in school infrastructure, teacher qualifications, textbook availability, and class sizes across countries and between population subgroups within countries. The assessment system, by treating these learners as comparable, by reporting a single pass-fail threshold or percentile ranking across a heterogeneously resourced school system, renders invisible the structural determinants of differential performance and naturalises them as individual achievement or failure. This is the hidden curriculum of standardisation: it presents a structured outcome as a meritocratic one.

## 5. Mechanisms Through Which Assessment Systems Reproduce Inequality

### *High-Stakes Testing as a Gatekeeping Mechanism*

High-stakes examinations, those whose results determine access to educational advancement, credential attainment, or employment, concentrate enormous consequences into a single measurement event. In many African countries, secondary school-leaving certificates and university entrance examinations operate as definitive gatekeepers: passing determines access to the formal economy; failing consigns a learner to restricted socio-economic trajectories regardless of the competencies they have developed or the obstacles they have navigated. The stakes are heightened because these examinations often serve as the terminal educational credential for most learners who do not pursue tertiary education.

The high-stakes nature of these examinations distorts pedagogy and learning. When teachers and schools are evaluated based on examination pass rates, instruction narrows to examination preparation, a phenomenon extensively documented in the literature as 'teaching to the test' (Au, 2007). In resource-constrained African classrooms, this narrowing is often extreme: curriculum breadth is sacrificed for examination rehearsal, and the development of critical thinking, creativity, and contextually relevant competencies is subordinated to the memorisation of examinable content. The learner who excels in this regime is the one who has mastered the particular discourse conventions, genre expectations, and cultural referents of the examination, advantages that are far more accessible to learners from privileged backgrounds.

Critically, failure in high-stakes examinations in Africa carries no systematic provision for remediation or alternative credentialling. Unlike educational systems in some Nordic countries, where multiple pathways to certification exist, and failure in any single assessment does not permanently foreclose opportunity, most African assessment systems are strongly sequential and terminal. The student who fails the West African Examinations Council Senior School Certificate Examination or the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education often faces restricted access to further educational opportunities and formal employment, particularly within contexts where secondary school certification functions as a key gatekeeping mechanism for social mobility and labour market participation (Minnis, 2006). High-stakes assessment is thus not merely a measurement system; it is a distributive mechanism.

### *Standardised Measurement and the Erasure of Contextual Diversity*

Standardisation in assessment is premised on the principle that a common measurement instrument, applied consistently, produces comparable data for evaluating learner attainment and system performance. This principle has legitimate applications in the monitoring of educational quality at scale. However, when standardised instruments are applied across contexts characterised by radical diversity in language, culture, resource provision, and socio-economic circumstance, as is inevitably the case in national examinations across African countries, the comparability that standardisation is designed to produce becomes analytically incoherent and ethically problematic.

The problem is not merely technical. It is not resolved by improving item reliability or expanding normative samples. It is conceptual: the assumption that a single instrument can produce valid evidence of learning across learners who have been educated under radically different conditions, in different languages, and with access to

radically different material resources is not a technical assumption but an ideological one. It conceals the role of structural advantage in producing differential performance and presents what are, in effect, socially produced outcomes as individually determined ones.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), while not originally designed for African contexts, has increasingly influenced assessment policy discourse on the continent through its adoption by the World Bank and bilateral donors as a quality benchmark. Scholars such as Dohn (2007) have argued that the PISA framework embodies particular epistemological assumptions about the nature of mathematical reasoning, scientific literacy, and reading comprehension that are not culturally universal and that systematically disadvantage learners educated outside the Western European contexts in which the framework was developed. The uncritical importation of this and similar frameworks into African educational assessment risks compounding existing inequalities rather than addressing them.

#### *Gender, Disability, and the Compound Disadvantage of Marginalised Groups*

While the foregoing analysis has concentrated on the intersecting inequalities of language, class, and geography, any comprehensive account of assessment-driven inequality in Africa must attend to the compounding disadvantages faced by girls, learners with disabilities, and other marginalised groups. Gender gaps in educational attainment persist across Sub-Saharan Africa, driven by a complex interaction of economic, social, cultural, and institutional factors. Assessment systems contribute to these gaps in specific, addressable ways.

Item formats that privilege abstract, decontextualised reasoning, typical of conventional multiple-choice and analytical essay formats, tend to produce larger gender gaps than formats that contextualise problems within social and relational scenarios. Item language and cultural referents frequently reflect masculine-coded domains of knowledge and experience. Assessment conditions, large halls, time pressure, and invigilated silence can be particularly alienating for learners from social backgrounds where collaborative and dialogic modes of knowledge production are normative. For learners with physical, sensory, or cognitive disabilities, the standard assessment environment is often simply inaccessible. Yet universal design principles and reasonable accommodation provisions are rarely institutionalised in African examination systems, which typically lack the resources, administrative infrastructure, and regulatory frameworks to guarantee equitable access. The result is that learners with disabilities face a systematic barrier to credential attainment that is legally and ethically unjustifiable (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018).

| Structural Driver                     | Assessment Mechanism                               | Outcome                                         | Equity Intervention                                        |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Colonial legacy/language policy       | High-stakes exams in ex-colonial languages         | Systematic exclusion of mother-tongue speakers  | Multilingual assessment; mother-tongue instruction         |
| Socio-economic stratification         | Standardised testing assumes equal resource access | Reproduction of class-based attainment gaps     | Context-sensitive performance tasks; resource audits       |
| Cultural capital differentials        | Curricula privileging dominant cultural norms      | Misrecognition of indigenous knowledge          | Culturally responsive rubrics; local knowledge integration |
| Urban–rural infrastructure divide     | ICT-dependent or resource-intensive assessments    | Widened regional development disparities        | Low-tech portfolio; community-based assessment             |
| Gender and disability marginalisation | Uniform time-bound written tests                   | Disproportionate exclusion of vulnerable groups | Universal design for assessment; flexible modes            |

**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework: Structural Drivers, Assessment Mechanisms, Outcomes, and Equity Interventions

Source: Authors' own construction based on a synthesised literature review

Figure 1 above maps the relationship among the structural drivers of inequality in African contexts, the specific assessment mechanisms through which these drivers are operationalised, the educational and developmental outcomes they produce, and the equity-sensitive interventions recommended in the literature. This framework is intended as both an analytical and a prescriptive tool, demonstrating that each dimension of assessment-driven inequality admits a corresponding, evidence-based corrective.

## 6. Assessment Inequality and Regional Development: Tracing the Causal Pathway

The foregoing analysis of assessment-driven inequality is not merely a matter of educational philosophy. It has concrete, measurable implications for regional human capital development and socio-economic progress across Africa. The pathway from inequitable assessment to constrained development operates through several interconnected mechanisms.

First, inequitable assessment outcomes produce skewed distributions of educational credentials. When high-stakes examination pass rates are systematically lower in rural, low-income, and linguistically marginalised communities, as the evidence reviewed above consistently demonstrates, the distribution of credentials replicates and entrenches the geographical and socio-economic inequalities of broader society. Regions with lower examination attainment rates face lower rates of tertiary education participation, which in turn produces regional deficits in the professional and technical skills that drive economic diversification and productivity growth. World Bank (2022) analysis of African labour market data confirms that the returns to education, measured in terms of earnings, formal employment probability, and entrepreneurial capacity, are strongly associated with credential attainment, making the examination system a central mediating institution in the reproduction of regional economic inequality.

Second, the human capital constraints produced by inequitable assessment systems disproportionately affect the regions of Africa that are already most economically marginalised. The Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes region, and rural southern Africa, areas characterised by linguistic diversity, inadequate school infrastructure, and high rates of poverty, are precisely the areas where the disadvantaging effects of dominant assessment systems are most pronounced. The compound effect is a self-reinforcing dynamic: low examination attainment reduces tertiary participation, the regional supply of qualified professionals and teachers, and educational quality in subsequent generations, thereby perpetuating low attainment rates. Breaking this cycle requires interventions at the level of the assessment system itself, not merely at the level of school resources or curriculum content.

Third, the global discourse on sustainable development increasingly recognises that investment in human capital is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4, which commits signatory states to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and to promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, explicitly includes reducing educational outcome disparities by socio-economic status, gender, disability, and geographic location among its targets. The assessment systems currently operative in most African countries are in systematic tension with these commitments. Achieving SDG 4 in Africa requires, *inter alia*, reforming assessment practices to measure educational quality in ways that are equitable, contextually appropriate, and conducive to the development of the full range of human capacities envisioned by the SDGs (Unterhalter, 2019).

Fourth, there is a well-established relationship between educational inequality and social cohesion. Societies characterised by large educational attainment gaps between social groups tend to experience higher levels of social grievance, political instability, and inter-group conflict, dynamics that impose severe costs on economic development and regional integration. In the African context, where ethnic, linguistic, and regional identities are frequently mapped onto educational disadvantage, assessment systems that are perceived as culturally biased or structurally unfair can become sources of social tension and delegitimise educational institutions more broadly.

Equitable assessment, in this sense, is not merely an educational good but a governance and development imperative.

## 7. Towards Equity-Sensitive Assessment: A Framework for Reform

### *Culturally Responsive Assessment*

Culturally responsive assessment, as theorised by Villegas and Lucas (2002) and subsequently applied to African educational contexts by scholars including Dei (2014) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986), influenced curriculum theorists, begins from the recognition that learner knowledge and competence are always culturally situated. Assessment instruments, if they are to generate valid evidence of learning, must engage learners within frameworks of meaning that are accessible and relevant to their cultural experience, rather than requiring them to perform competence within an alien cultural register.

In practice, culturally responsive assessment implies several specific design principles. Item content should draw on scenarios, contexts, and referents that are familiar and meaningful to the populations being assessed. Assessment tasks should create space for multiple modes of demonstrating competence, oral, practical, and performative, as well as written, so that learners whose strengths do not lie in academic written discourse are not systematically disadvantaged. Rubrics and scoring criteria should be developed with attention to the cultural diversity of expected responses, and assessors should receive training to recognise and credit culturally diverse expressions of competence (Hassani & Schwab, 2025).

Several African countries have experimented with elements of culturally responsive assessment, with promising though uneven results. Ethiopia's ongoing curriculum reform has sought to integrate indigenous knowledge systems into the formal curriculum and its associated assessments (Teklu, 2020). South Africa's National Senior Certificate includes provisions for mother-tongue assessment in a range of African languages, though implementation has been constrained by teacher capacity and resource limitations. Rwanda's recent shift towards competence-based education has opened space for more contextualised assessment approaches, though the influence of international benchmarking frameworks continues to pull in the direction of standardisation (Nsengimana, 2022). These experiments, taken together, suggest both the feasibility and the complexity of culturally responsive reform.

### *Multilingual Assessment Approaches*

The evidence reviewed in Section 3 makes a compelling case for adopting multilingual assessment approaches as a central element of any equity-sensitive reform agenda. Multilingual assessment does not require abandoning shared assessment standards or producing entirely separate examinations for each linguistic community. Rather, it encompasses a range of practical interventions: providing examination papers in multiple languages; allowing learners to read questions in one language and respond in another; permitting the use of bilingual glossaries during examinations; conducting oral examinations in learners' strongest language; and using mother-tongue assessment during the early years of schooling while developing proficiency in the language of wider communication.

The technical challenges of multilingual assessment, ensuring conceptual equivalence across languages, managing the logistics of multiple-language examination administration, and training markers in multiple languages are rare but tractable (Madonsela, 2023). Benson (2014) documents multilingual assessment initiatives in Mozambique, Ethiopia, and Papua New Guinea that have achieved both operational viability and measurable gains in equity. The Mozambican PEBIMO project, which assessed literacy in both Portuguese and local languages in the early grades, found that children assessed in their home languages demonstrated higher measured competence than those assessed only in Portuguese, a finding with significant implications for how early-grade learning trajectories are interpreted and responded to.

The political economy of multilingual assessment reform is, however, more challenging than its technical dimensions. The language of assessment is a domain in which competing social interests, linguistic communities, academic traditions, labour market gatekeepers, and political elites stake significant claims. Reform in this domain requires not merely technical expertise but political will, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and institutional investment in teacher training and materials development in multiple languages.

#### *Portfolio and Competence-Based Assessment*

Portfolio and competence-based assessment approaches offer a promising alternative to the high-stakes, single-occasion, written examination as the primary instrument of educational credentialling. Portfolio assessment involves the systematic collection of learners' work over time, curated to demonstrate the development of specified competencies and to reflect the learner's best performance across a range of tasks and contexts. It is inherently more longitudinal, contextualised, and learner-centred than examination-based assessment, and creates space for learners to demonstrate competence in modes that are authentic to their learning experiences.

Competence-based assessment frameworks, which specify learning outcomes in terms of observable competencies rather than content coverage, similarly create space for greater contextual flexibility. They permit assessment in locally relevant contexts, through tasks that have genuine significance for the learner's community, and across multiple occasions rather than in a single high-stakes event. Several African countries have adopted competence-based curriculum frameworks in recent years, including Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ghana, and South Africa. However, the translation of these frameworks into genuinely competence-based assessment practice has been partial and uneven.

Portfolio assessment is resource-intensive and requires teacher capacity and time that are frequently unavailable in large, under-resourced African classrooms. Competence-based assessment demands ongoing professional development and clear assessment criteria that can be consistently applied across diverse contexts, capacities that require sustained investment in teacher education and support. Equitable implementation of these approaches at scale is achievable. Still, it presupposes system capacity levels that many African educational systems have not yet attained, making the reform agenda inseparable from broader investments in teacher development and school resourcing.

#### *Policy Architecture for Equitable Assessment*

The technical and pedagogical reforms outlined above require an enabling policy architecture to achieve systemic impact. Several specific policy commitments are identified in the literature as foundational to equitable assessment reform in Africa. First, national assessment policies must explicitly commit to the principle of fairness, not merely as a procedural concern about test administration conditions but as a substantive commitment to ensuring that assessment systems do not systematically disadvantage learners based on socio-economic background, language, gender, disability, or geographic location.

Second, assessment reform must be embedded within broader educational governance processes that include linguistically and culturally diverse communities as active participants, not as consultation beneficiaries but as co-designers of the frameworks within which their children's learning is evaluated. This requires a deliberate challenge to the technocratic gatekeeping that has historically insulated assessment policy from democratic accountability. Third, assessment quality assurance frameworks must extend beyond psychometric criteria to encompass equity audits — systematic analyses of whether assessment instruments and practices produce disparate impacts across population subgroups, and if so, why and how such disparities can be addressed.

Fourth, the international development community, including the World Bank, UNESCO, bilateral donors, and multilateral development banks, must align its support for African educational assessment with equity-sensitive principles, rather than continuing to promote standardised international benchmarking as the primary metric of

educational quality. The Global Partnership for Education and the Education Commission's International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity have made commitments in this direction; translating these commitments into concrete support for multilingual, culturally responsive, and portfolio-based assessment reform represents a significant outstanding challenge (Unterhalter, 2019; World Bank, 2022).

## 8. Insights based on Results

The evidence and arguments assembled in this paper converge on a diagnosis that is at once analytically precise and practically consequential. Assessment systems in Africa are not failing learners from marginalised communities inadvertently, through poor design or insufficient resources. They are, in significant measure, producing exactly the outcomes that their structural logic predicts: the sorting of learners along pre-existing lines of social advantage and disadvantage, the credentialing of the already privileged, and the systematic exclusion of those whose linguistic, cultural, and economic circumstances diverge from institutional norms. The hidden curriculum of assessment is not hidden in the sense of being arcane or inaccessible; it is hidden in the sense of being naturalised, presented as the inevitable result of differential merit rather than as a socially produced outcome of structural inequality.

This diagnosis does not imply fatalism. The scholarship reviewed in this paper demonstrates that equity-sensitive assessment is not a utopian aspiration but a practical, achievable reform agenda, implemented with varying degrees of success in multiple African and global contexts. Culturally responsive assessment designs, multilingual approaches, portfolio-based credentialing, and participatory assessment governance have been developed, tested, and refined. What is lacking is not knowledge of what to do, but the political will, institutional capacity, and resource investment to do so at scale.

The regional development implications of this analysis are significant. If the argument advanced in this paper is correct, that inequitable assessment systems are a structural determinant of skewed human capital distributions and constrained regional development in Africa, then assessment reform must be recognised as a development intervention of the first order, not merely an educational technicality. International development actors who invest in school construction, teacher training, and curriculum development while leaving assessment systems unreformed are investing in a pipeline with a broken distribution mechanism.

The study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. The synthesis draws primarily on Anglophone scholarship and may not fully represent assessment dynamics in Francophone, Lusophone, or Arabic-medium African educational systems, which have their own distinct colonial legacies, language policies, and reform trajectories. The heterogeneity of African educational contexts is such that generalisations, even carefully qualified ones, risk homogenising genuinely diverse situations. Future research should engage more systematically with non-Anglophone African assessment scholarship and with subnational and community-level data that can capture the fine-grained dynamics through which assessment interacts with local inequalities.

## 9. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has advanced a critical interrogation of assessment systems in African education, arguing that dominant testing practices function as a hidden curriculum that reproduces and legitimises inequality. Drawing on cultural capital theory, epistemic justice frameworks, social reproduction theory, and postcolonial scholarship, the study has demonstrated that high-stakes examinations, language-exclusive assessment policies, and standardised measurement practices systematically disadvantage learners from linguistically, culturally, and socio-economically marginalised communities, not because of the inherent limitations of those learners but because of the structural mismatch between the assumptions encoded in assessment frameworks and the realities of those communities' educational experience.

The implications for regional development are substantial and largely unacknowledged in existing policy discourse. Assessment-driven credential disparities produce regional human capital deficits that constrain economic productivity, limit social mobility, and reinforce patterns of spatial inequality that are already among the most pronounced in the world. Addressing these dynamics requires that assessment reform be recognised as a development intervention, not merely an educational administrative matter.

### *Novelty of Results*

The principal novelty of this study lies in three interconnected contributions. First, it is the first synthesis to construct an explicit and theoretically grounded causal framework linking micro-level assessment mechanisms, item language, cultural referents, scoring rubrics, and high-stakes gatekeeping, to macro-level regional development outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa. While the component arguments exist in dispersed literatures, their systematic integration into a single analytical framework is original. Second, the study introduces the concept of the ‘hidden curriculum of assessment’ as a distinct analytical category applicable to postcolonial African education systems, extending the classical hidden curriculum concept beyond its origins in curriculum sociology to the domain of measurement and evaluation. Third, the paper proposes a multi-level policy architecture for equity-sensitive assessment reform that operationalises theoretical commitments at the levels of instrument design, governance, and international development financing, moving beyond the level of aspiration at which most equity-in-assessment arguments remain.

### *Directions for Future Research*

Several directions for future research emerge from the analysis. First, empirical studies are needed that directly measure the differential impact of assessment language medium on content-knowledge attainment across linguistic communities in African countries, employing matched-language and non-matched-language assessment designs to isolate the language effect from other variables. Second, research should investigate the political economy of assessment reform in greater depth, examining how elite interests, donor conditionalities, and institutional path dependencies interact to sustain inequitable assessment architectures in specific national contexts. Third, the literature on assessment equity in Francophone, Lusophone, and Arabic-medium African educational systems is severely underrepresented in international scholarship; concerted research investment in these contexts is needed to develop contextually grounded reform frameworks. Fourth, longitudinal studies tracking the educational and labour market trajectories of learners who have experienced different assessment regimes, including multilingual, portfolio-based, and competence-based approaches, would provide the causal evidence needed to make the regional development case for assessment reform to governments and development partners. Finally, participatory action research that co-designs assessment instruments with marginalised communities offers a methodologically innovative approach to both advancing equity and generating contextually grounded knowledge that is currently absent from the field.

### *Recommendations*

1. African governments and their educational governance bodies should commission equity audits of existing national assessment systems, with the explicit mandate to identify and address disparate impacts on learners categorised by language, socio-economic status, gender, disability, and geographic location.
2. Language-of-assessment policies should be reviewed with a view to expanding multilingual assessment provision, at a minimum in the early grades, and to ensuring that learners have access to examination materials in their strongest language wherever administratively feasible.
3. Assessment reform processes should be participatory, including linguistically and culturally diverse communities, particularly those most systematically disadvantaged by existing assessment frameworks, as active co-designers rather than passive consultation beneficiaries.

4. Curriculum reform initiatives that have moved towards competence-based frameworks should be accompanied by corresponding assessment reform, ensuring that the assessment system is aligned with, rather than contradicting, the stated goals of competence-based education.
5. International development partners and multilateral institutions should align their support for African educational assessment with equity-sensitive principles by providing technical assistance and financing for multilingual assessment development, culturally responsive item design, and portfolio-based credentialing systems.
6. Research agendas in African educational assessment should be expanded to encompass not only technical questions of psychometric quality but sociological and political questions about the equity effects of assessment systems, with particular attention to non-Anglophone contexts and subnational dynamics that are currently underrepresented in the literature.

Assessment is, ultimately, a political act, a claim about what matters, whose knowledge counts, and who deserves to advance. In Africa, as elsewhere, the politics of assessment have historically been structured by colonial legacies, class interests, and epistemic hierarchies that serve the few at the expense of the many. Transforming these politics requires not merely better tests but a fundamental reimagining of what assessment is for, and for whom. The conceptual and empirical resources for that reimagining exist; what is needed is the collective will to apply them.

## References

- Harber, C. (2014). *Education and international development: Theory, practice and issues* (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Symposium Books. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000230228>
- Alidou, H., Boly, A., Brock-Utne, B., Diallo, Y.S., Heugh, K. & Wolff, H.E. (2006). *Optimising learning and education in Africa - the language factor: a stock-taking research on mother tongue and bilingual education in Sub-Saharan Africa*. <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11910/6650>
- Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Educational Researcher*, 36(5), 258-267. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07306523>
- Beckmann, J. (2025). The trajectory of Afrikaans as indigenous education language from 1925 to 2025: Thoughts on the past, the present and the future. *Tydskrif Vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 1, 256-284. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2224-7912/2025/v65n1a12>
- Benson, C. (2014). Adopting a multilingual habitus: What North and South can learn from each other about the essential role of non-dominant languages in education. In D. Gorter, V. Zenotz, & J. Cenoz (Eds.), *Minority languages and multilingual education: Bridging the local and the global* (pp. 11-28). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7317-2\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7317-2_2)
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). Greenwood Press. [https://www.ucg.ac.me/skladiste/blog\\_9155/objava\\_66783/fajlovi/Bourdieu%20The%20Forms%20of%20Capital%201\\_.pdf](https://www.ucg.ac.me/skladiste/blog_9155/objava_66783/fajlovi/Bourdieu%20The%20Forms%20of%20Capital%201_.pdf)
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. Basic Books. <https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=243763>
- Dei, G.J.S. (2014). The African scholar in the Western academy. *Journal of Black Studies*, 45(3), 167-179. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934714525198>
- Du Plessis, T. (2025). Post-2023 language planning in South Africa: Implications for the historically marginalised indigenous languages, South African Sign Language and Afrikaans. *Tydskrif Vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 1, 188-212. <https://doi.org/10.17159/22247912/2025/v65n1a9>

Fobosi, S.C., Mkuzo, P.Z., Caluza, M., & Sidzumo, A. (2026). Systemic barriers to academic success among historically disadvantaged students: a qualitative case study at a South African university. *Frontiers In Education*, 11, Article Number 1781949. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2026.1781949>

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198237907.001.0001>

Hanushek, E. A., & Woessmann, L. (2015). *The knowledge capital of nations: Education and the economics of growth*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262029179.001.0001>

Hassani, S., & Schwab, S. (2025). Language Support and Institutional Discrimination: Insights into School Leaders' Experiences. *Journal of Language Identity and Education* <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2025.2563603>

Jackson, P. W. (1968). *Life in classrooms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston. <https://www.amazon.com/Life-Classrooms-Philip-W-Jackson/dp/0807730343>

Madonsela, S. (2023). Focusing on education through multilingual language policy in South African schools. *Journal of Language and Cultural Education*, 3, 58-66. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jolace-2023-0027>

Minnis, J. R. (2006). Nonformal education and informal economies in Sub-Saharan Africa: Finding the right match. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 56(2), 119-133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713605283432>

Muthukrishna, N., & Engelbrecht, P. (2018). Decolonising inclusive education in lower income, Southern African educational contexts. *South African Journal of Education*, 38(4), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v38n4a1701>

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J., Morgan, J., & Falola, T. (2022). *Coloniality of power in postcolonial Africa: Myths of decolonisation*. CODESRIA Books. <https://doi.org/10.57054/codesria.pub.539>

Nsengimana, V. (2021). Implementation of Competence-based Curriculum in Rwanda: Opportunities and Challenges. *Rwandan Journal of Education*, 5(1). Retrieved from <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/rje/article/view/202582>

Dohn, N. B. (2007). Knowledge and skills for PISA-Assessing the assessment. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 41(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2007.00542.x>

Wolde, A. T., Tadesse, S., & Gebremedhin, M. (2026). Educational policy reforms and implementation challenges in Ethiopia: A scoping review of the period. *African Education and Development*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18382054>

Ullah, H., Huma, S., Tahir, N., Yasin, G., Ashraf, M., Shabana, H., Gabr, B.M., Yunus, M., & Khan, J.S. (2025). Effects of Hidden Curriculum on Medical Education and Strategies to Reshape Hidden Curriculum as a Curriculum Promotor - A Systematic Review. *Advances in Medical Education and Practice*, 16, 2087-2098. <https://doi.org/10.2147/AMEP.S561248>

UNESCO. (2016). *Global education monitoring report 2016: Education for people and planet - creating sustainable futures for all*. UNESCO Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.54676/AXEQ8566>

Unterhalter, E. (2019). The many meanings of quality education: Politics of targets and indicators in SDG 4. *Global Policy*, 10(Suppl. 1), 39-51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12591>

Villacañas-de-Castro, L.S. (2025). Cultural capital, black holes, and the hidden curriculum: an analysis of grade repetition in Spain. *Critical Studies in Education*, 66(5), 719-736. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2024.2409693>

Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2002). Preparing culturally responsive teachers: Rethinking the curriculum. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(1), 20-32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053001003>

wa Thiong'o, N. (1986). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. James Currey.

Wolford, L.L., Lugo-Neris, M.J., Liu, C.W., Nieves, L.E., Rodriguez, C.L., Patel, S.S., Lee, S.Y., & Naidoo, K. (2025). Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum in Health Professions Education. *Education Sciences*, 15(7). <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15070791>

World Bank. (2022). The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, FSDO, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2022, 77 p., Open Access. World Bank Group. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12534>

**Acknowledgements.** The authors gratefully acknowledge the scholars whose empirical and theoretical work informs this synthesis, and the journal reviewers whose constructive engagement will strengthen the published version of this paper. No external funding was received for this research.

**Moses Mhide KPUM** is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of South Africa. He has served in various academic and research capacities, including Research Assistant, Facilitator, and Lecturer. He is a published scholar in educational assessment, psychometrics, and physics education. Kpum has co-authored journal articles and a research-based book, and he has presented papers at national and international conferences. His research interests include measurement and evaluation, equitable assessment, psychometric analysis, assessment quality, gender disparities in STEM education, and educational policy reform. He is a member of the Association of Educational Researchers and Evaluators of Nigeria (ASSEREN) and the Educational Assessment and Research Network in Africa (EARNiA). He is committed to advancing rigorous assessment practices in educational systems.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3843-3532>

---

This is peer-reviewed scientific journal <https://jssidoi.org/ird/page/peer-review-policy>

---

Copyright © 2026 by author(s). Publishing rights by [UAB Sustainability for Regions](#)

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access