

Neoliberalism: Shaping Assessment and Accountability Regimes in South African Education

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ABSTRACT Debates as to the purpose of assessment have been raging since time immemorial. There is little consensus as to what the purposes of assessment should be. There is however, little contention that the ideological orientation of the ruling political elite very often shape the fundamental principles that eventually translate into assessment policy for the nation. This paper argues that the ideological position that a nation assumes with regard to what purpose assessment should serve, is strongly related to what the nation sees as the *purpose* of education. South African curriculum policy documents are unambiguous in declaring a familiar neoliberal orientation, namely, that education should be geared towards economic growth. In other words, purpose of education should be to serve the economy and that assessment regimes should support the achievement of this end. Neoliberal ideology has influenced our discourses on assessment in such powerfully insidious ways that even highly respected thought leaders in education have been seduced by its allure. The question is, how do can this neoliberal trap be sprung and the assessment discourses challenged. How can the ideology that drives recent trends in assessment internationally and locally be brought to the fore in ways that sharpen understanding and critiques thereof? This paper draws on a range of international research on the consequences of high stakes testing and accountability regimes to suggest a cautionary approach to policy borrowing. It argues for a research informed approach to assessment policy that is sensitive to the effects of high stakes and standardized testing on learners and on teachers pedagogic practices.