

## 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.

### INTRODUCTION

*There is a predominant view that we truly know something is valuable when it can be objectively measured and statistically manipulated. This view conspires with preoccupations with individualism and competitiveness, the indispensable role of hard work leading to success...*" (Mathison 2008: 534).

In the above quote, Mathison provides a profound insight into what we have been socialized into believing is valuable and connectiveness of this belief to values of individualism and competition. This unquestioned belief in objective measurement and statistical manipulation through standardized testing and accountability regimes have shaped and influenced educational policy and practice internationally in the past three to four decades (Ball 2008). This orientation began to gain increased prominence in the United States during Reagan administration and in the United Kingdom, during Thatcher regime. A distinct neoliberal discourse around measurement, quantification, standardization, individualism, benchmarking and accountability began to aggressively infuse into the educational arena during this era. Similar trends began to emerge strongly in post-apartheid South African education (Harvey 2007).

### STANDARDISED TESTING AS AN EMERGING PHENOMENON IN SOUTH AFRICA

In the last decade in particular, results of standardized tests and national examinations have been punted as important indicators for school resourcing and teacher professional development. The thrust of the arguments for standardized testing on a national level is unambiguous as is evidenced in the extract from National Senior Certificate Technical Report 2012 below (Education 2012a: 14-82):

*"The implementation of the Annual National Assessment (ANA) and the focus on the early years of schooling will collectively ensure that the interventions target the lower levels. This will allow for early detection of learner shortcomings which will then allow for these to be turned around well ahead of the Grade 12 examination. For the ANA rollout, districts were expected to set targets and to ensure that the district and school performance targets were met. The DBE provided exemplars for schools to assist teachers and learners in their preparations for the ANA tests. School support plans were developed by districts to also assist schools in their teaching and learning and preparation for the ANA... Teachers were to be held*

*accountable for curriculum coverage and for the quality of teaching and assessment tasks given to learners...*” (14)...

*This report (National Senior Certificate Technical Report 2012), together with the School Performance Report, the School Subject Report and the National Diagnostic Report on Learner Performance, will constitute the armoury of all curriculum and assessment officials who will be traversing the length and breadth of the our country, confronting and engaging with the impediments of quality education. The Department of Basic Education is convinced that the schooling sector, despite its serious challenges, is beginning to move forward on the trajectory of improved school performance (82).*

From the above tone and direction of The Technical Report, it becomes clear that South African education, its assessment strategy, approach to curriculum and to teachers has taken on a particular ideological orientation. This paper engages a discussion as to the ideology shaping a standards-based assessment regime and examines the consequences for South African education. This paper is not an attempt to dismiss or denounce teacher accountability. This was clearly an issue several keynote speakers at the conference and presenters believed was a crucial factor that accounts for the current state of South African education. Like Lingard, this paper supports the view that there is a need for education accountability (Lingard 2010), especially in a context like South Africa where teacher accountability, commitment and work ethic varies considerably across schools, with high fee-paying public and independent schools in the main, applying significantly stronger accountability apparatus than poorly resourced and managed schools. Of concern is the ‘blanket’ application of standardized testing and accountability across all schools in South Africa as if relative homogeneity exists.

So in the context of declining student performance and political consternation about South Africa’s educational underperformance, Umalusi, the quality assurance and standards body for school education in South Africa hosted an International conference with the theme “*Standards in Education and Training: The Challenge*”. In his address, the chairperson indicated that “educationally sound practice is the bedrock on which we build all our approach-

es and interventions...” (Umalusi 2012:2). He went on to describe the ‘new mandate’ for Umalusi which was to set standards for the schooling sector and hoped that the conference would provide “... an opportunity for serious challenge and rigorous debate” (Umalusi 2012:2). As with any conference, the keynote speakers and high profile academics and thought leaders presented positions on the theme, and in this instance on the issue of standards for South Africa. Of concern though, was that there appeared to be common sense rationality that at this juncture in South Africa’s educational history, standardized assessment and increased teacher accountability was what was needed if education were to make any impression on student performance in South African schools. There appeared to be a thinking that suggested that the public disclosure of school performance will automatically instigate school renewal and community enthusiasm to restore schools that may have performed poorly, or will inject new public and teacher energy into schools to raise the level of performance of learners.

This sentiment was echoed by several local keynote speakers at the Umalusi conference. The erosion of confidence and faith in teachers’ ability to effectively do their jobs appeared to be a compelling factor that fueled this orientation. What is of significance is how in a South African context, there appeared to be a perception that because of the strong link between high stakes testing and accountability (William 2010) that this strategy is likely to rid the country of its current crisis. An issue that this paper takes up is that in the overt messages of each keynote talk and panel discussion scant attention was paid to the subtext; the ideology that underpins the move towards national assessments. The starting point was clear; that of an uncritical acceptance that this assessment regime is what the country needed at this point in time; an unquestioned belief that this was a national necessity. Umalusi may have unwittingly signaled a particular orientation to standardised testing through the choice of both national and international keynote speakers; all unapologetic disciples of standardized testing and accountability regimes.

While there was some discussion about the unevenness of educational resource provisioning and access across the country and that this was likely skew test scores in particular ways,

there appeared to be a deafening silence on how consequences of national and international testing and benchmarking was likely to impact on and shape what counts as useful knowledge, pedagogy and assessment in South Africa. While speaker after speaker lamented the poor state of South Africa's education system, 'blaming' teachers, the curriculum, trade unions, and issues related to language of instruction, there appeared to be an alarmingly uncritical acceptance of the ideological imperatives that drive international and national testing regimes and the value systems on which they are based. A repeated common sense argument was that when the results of national and international assessments are made public, this would trigger an almost automatic move towards an improved education system. In other words, when teachers realise the standard of achievement of their students it would have the effect of positively altering curriculum and pedagogy. There are several flaws in this argument which this paper will attempt to illuminate.

#### **A Cautionary Note about Blind Policy Borrowing...**

It is indeed remarkable that after more than a decade of intense critique of blindly adopting and implementing borrowed policy, Curriculum 2005 and Outcomes Based Education in particular (Harley and Wedekind 2004), South African education 'strategists' appear to have learnt little from such 'plagiarisms'. Lingard in his caution on policy borrowing notes that "To be effective, policy borrowing must be accompanied by policy learning, which takes account of research on the effects of the policy that will be borrowed in the source system, learning from that and then applying that knowledge to the borrowing system through careful consideration of national and local histories, cultures ..." (Lingard 2010: 132).

Given the diverse nature of South African schools and teachers, it can be argued that such diversity necessarily requires a differentiated approach. Well-functioning and well-managed schools with well-qualified teachers, and good resources and infrastructure are likely to find standardized testing and accountability regimes particularly frustrating. Curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test may well be the orientation some teachers and schools unwittingly

embrace. Given the pressures that are likely to come from the public parading of schools' performance. This paper is also sensitive to the fact that an argument for differentiation is politically sticky and likely to draw reaction and resistance from various constituencies. There is likely to be few that would disagree with the claim that there are a significant number of teachers with poor content and pedagogic knowledge. In these cases, curriculum narrowing and teaching to the test is not an issue. A crude way of putting it is to ask whether there is in fact any substance to even narrow. These are tough comments and open to challenge and if the challenge emerges supported by evidence-led contestation that refutes this claim, then this paper would have done its job. Continuing professional development interventions for teachers, increased prescription, monitoring and evaluation of progress may well be warranted as a societal and educational necessity. Other (research) questions begin emerge; what should be the mechanisms for accurate diagnosis, frequency, complexity and intensity of interventions, sustainability, duration and weaning off periods etc. This is a field of knowledge that we are yet to develop in the diverse and complex education landscape in South Africa.

This paper contends that the academic fraternity in South Africa is yet to embrace the debates around national and international testing in the country's diverse contexts. This relative silence; the absence of public discussion and critique becomes fertile ground for uncritical education bureaucrats to proceed headlong with assessment policies the consequences of which have not been adequately debated in the South African context. What is prevalent and very present though is the increasing international hype and media propaganda around national and international standardized testing. Aggressive international marketing has propelled the psychometrics industry for example to gain currency, paving the way for pseudoscience to gain legitimacy and the creation of derivative professions and submarkets. Education corporates (Juta, Pearson, McGraw-Hill) expeditiously develop item banks, tests, packaged knowledge, tutorial programmes designed to increase a student's chances of success (Mathison 2008). The 2012 Umalusi conference was one such space where corporates in the international testing market nonchalantly plied their trade.

Research has shown that major international tests such as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) have shaped educational policy in OECD countries (Lunneblad and Carlsson 2012) as has the Australian National Assessment Program (NAPLAN) in Australia. While proponents of standardization and high stakes testing tout, benchmarking, objectivity, closer alignment of curricular and testing, diagnostic potential and motivational potential of national and international testing (Phelps 2006), there is a growing body of research that argues that there is a need to proceed with caution, a caution call South African education should give due consideration to heeding. It is indeed not difficult to be entranced by the allure of 'instantaneous' measurement, quantification comparison and the rapid application of a 'recipe' to fix ailing elements in education. South African politicians and educational bureaucratic elites, eager to demonstrate performance appear to be convinced by the rationale that international comparative studies on educational achievement will strengthen global economic competitiveness if we can ascertain where our national economic competitiveness ranks in relation to the international world. This is particularly the case for comparative studies such as the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and the International Assessment of Educational Progress (IAEP) (Bracey 2008). The argument is that nations (like SA) can learn from their international counterparts. The South African Government appears to be embracing this mentality and is starting to posit a discourse around why this is the way to proceed with the education of the nation. It is rather disconcerting when leading national scholars uncritically endorse such orientations as was evidenced by the overt and implicit support for such assessment regimes at the Umalusi 2012 conference especially when a significant body of international research is suggesting that if South Africa does not proceed with caution, the long-term effects of high-stakes testing and standardized tests are likely to be counterproductive. The academic community and the Department of Educa-

tion have not engaged sufficiently with this body of knowledge.

### **THE SEDUCTIVE LURE OF AN 'APPEALING' NEOLIBERAL DISCOURSE**

High-stakes testing and strong accountability regimes have their roots in neoliberalism (Lingard 2010). In the last 25 to 30 years neoliberal economic imperatives have been driving the strategic direction of education policy across the world (Harvey 2007, 2010; Nussbaum 2010, 2011). As mentioned above, standardized testing and teacher accountability regimes gained currency and legitimacy at a distinct time in the history of two key western powers in particular, during the Reagan and Thatcher regimes in the US and UK respectively. It was during this era that neoliberal performativity discourses began to feature in educational discourses; the emergence of a new naming/labeling, new categorisations for public consumption and comparison (Stronach et al. 2002). Arguably the most profound and defining characteristic of neo-liberalism is its tendency to bring all human action into the domain of the market (Harvey 2007, 2010). Ball cautions about new neo-liberal policy technologies that translates into school and policy choice shaped by market rationality (Ball 2008). Neoliberalism supports a value system grounded in '... self-discipline (with punishment for lapses), self-reliance and the accompanying pursuit of self-interest' (Parker 2011: 438). Competition is presented as an acceptable, moral characteristic. According to Mathison (2008), implicit values in neoliberal market oriented models for education include the notion that accountability is a valued expectation, that "simple parsimonious means for holding schools accountable are also good, that choice or competition will increase quality and that it is morally superior to seek employability over other purposes of education" (Mathison 2008: 532).

Such persuasions are beginning to infiltrate education thinking. This is evidenced in the performative knowledge, pedagogical and assessment regimes that are taking root in South African education. South Africans appear deeply immersed and entranced by assessment as a societal necessity that they fail to question the very core ideological underpinnings of what resembles an assessment wave that is sweeping across the globe and is now threatening South African education. This assessment tsunami derives its obliterative energy from the deep frac-

tures that are intimately and complexly connected to what the nation is led to believe should be the purpose of education. So in other words, what is believed to be the purpose of education and school education in particular, very strongly influences what determines and shapes how a nation views assessment and testing (Mathison 2012). As long as the nation remains convinced by the neoliberal political and bureaucratic elite that the purpose of education is to advance economic growth, education gets drawn into curriculum theorizing and assessment that is performance driven; the market then signals what counts as valuable knowledge, pedagogy and assessment. In other words, the market sets the standard. Lingard reminds us that "... policy is the authoritative allocation of values, which means that ideology (values) is an important component part of any policy". Seldom is policy directly influenced by research. Of concern is that market-choice discourses work from the fundamental premise that improved educational performance and stronger accountability mechanisms will be the outcomes of inter-school competition and pressure from parents; an argument that coheres with neoliberal ideology. Student test results begin a chain of events or occurrences. For both schools and students, this could either mean rewards or punishment for under-performance. Mathison notes that "(t)he assumption is that the threat of failure will motivate students to learn more, teachers to teach better, educational institutions to be better, and the level of achievement to continue to rise" (Mathison 2008: 533). We see a similar market orientation and discourse emerging in South Africa. In searching for a solution that will emancipate the nation from its current crisis as it relates to low achievement levels of the majority of South African students, the nation unwittingly fall prey to the neoliberal master narrative that is shaping education worldwide (Harvey 2007; Nussbaum 2010, 2011). Reflecting on the Latin American education scenario, Davidson-Harden caution that neoliberal discourses and educational policy formulations have historically rendered dismal education development targets (Davidson-Harden 2008).

#### **IS INCREASED NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL TESTING 'GOOD MEDICINE' FOR SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION?**

This is indeed a moot question, the answer to which the lay community is likely to take an

affirmative position on. "The idea of education as a commodity has been naturalized... teachers, parents and even students are drawn into and live this rhetoric" (Mathison 2008: 534). In a South African context where the quality of teacher knowledge has been the focus of much recent debate, it may sound intuitively plausible to make a case for holding teachers 'accountable'. This was vociferously argued in the opening keynote address at the Umalusi conference; teachers need routine and they must be held accountable. What this argument masks though is that it is such a position is less about teachers' ethical responsibility but more about putting in place mechanisms for the verification of teachers' efforts. The degree of contempt and suspicion with which schools and teachers are held is reflected in the report of the Annual National Assessment 2012 which contains an explicit statement that some schools will deliberately produce poor results in the Annual National Assessments in order to secure more resources and that this would not be tolerated by the Department of Education (Education 2012b). Poor performance would not translate into increased resource provisioning. This is a fascinating position as the jury is still out as to the ability of the Department of Education to effectively deliver on any other kind of supplemental provisioning including continuing professional development of teachers. Furthermore, it presents as a stark declaration of the level of desperation in many under-resourced schools. Yet South African education continues to march forth believing that more national and international testing is what is needed.

In the discussion that follows, this paper engages a troubling of common sense assumptions about the potential of national and international testing. By drawing on international research, the paper contends that there are key lessons to be learnt about the effect of high school testing on teachers, learners, curriculum and pedagogy. It requires little convincing of the need to generate local, research-based knowledge on this phenomenon. Perhaps a useful point of departure to make the case would be to reflect on the often cited success of the Finnish education system. Of particular significance though is that in Finland, high-stakes and standardized testing does not exist. In fact, the key factors that have contributed to the Finnish success center around the Finnish teacher, one with

strong educational qualifications, high pedagogic competence, respect from the Finnish community, earning lucrative remunerative endowments, enjoying self-affirming, high levels of professional autonomy and practicing in an ethnically homogenous society (Sahlberg 2007). Given these proven hallmarks, this paper troubles the fundamental premise from which the conference deliberations departed. National and international testing and benchmarking was presented as a normal and acceptable practice that we the nation should embrace. It is 'good medicine' which the nation should consume because it has enormous curative potential. In taking such a position, South African education defaults on two accounts: firstly, there is an uncritically acceptance of the neoliberal ideological imperatives that drive such a position; secondly, in so doing, there is a systematic decentering of the (human) subject; teachers and students in particular.

Arguably the most important determining factor influencing student learning is the nature of the student-teacher relationship. Teachers value developing meaningful social relations with their students and students find such relationships positively motivating (Mausethagen 2013; Troman 2008). This is under threat as there has been a firm and decisive alteration in the official pedagogic discourse towards typical of performance models (Barret 2009). Teacher altruism as it relates to caring, nurturing and developing children is a powerful and central feature of teachers' lives and motivations. This is being threatened by an external accountability agenda that is starting to reshape the nature of teachers' work (Locke et al. 2005). Novice and pre-service teachers in particular, who aspire towards the ideals of the teaching profession (i.e. developing rich and meaningful experiences for students) express anxiety at the prospect working in an environment where there is a high degree of surveillance and accountability regimes that demand repetitive testing, measurement of performance and subsequent censure for deviations from expectations (Ng 2006).

Measurement of student and teacher performance through standardized testing regimes systematically dehumanises students; it reduces students from human being to number (Barret 2009). In a study of how teachers understand empathy in their interactions with students, Barrett argues that standards and testing

compromise deep, rich relationships between teachers and students. Teachers unwittingly focus on the aggregate at the expense of the individual. Developing individual relationships with students changes as a priority issue for teachers (Barret 2009). Increased pressure to provide measurable results is achieved at the cost of care and connection between teachers and their students (Day et al. 2007; Valli and Buese 2007). Gu and Day report that a distinct consequence of spending enormous amounts of time on testing and marking leaves much less time to build relationships both between teachers and their students and between teachers themselves. This is crucial especially given that relationships influence teachers' efficacy, commitment and perceived effectiveness (Gu and Day 2007). In some cases, the need to perform has soured relations between teachers (Jeffrey 2002). Sustained and unrelenting pressure is placed on both students and teachers (LaBoskey 2006). As a result, it is likely to contaminate and destroy years of developed collegial relationships, creating unprecedented anger and frustration in both teachers and students (Laskey 2005). In a study of teachers' reaction and response in 'worst' performing schools, Elstad reports that teachers become distinctly more strict and demanding with students as a result of the adverse publicity. Strictness and punitive compulsion do not necessarily translate into rich quality learning (Elstad 2009). There appears to be a distinct shift in the focus of care. The emphasis becomes caring about performance as opposed to caring for and nurturing students (Jeffrey 2002). In contexts of high stakes accountability regimes, teachers' ability to develop trusting relationships is severely constrained as students become suspicious of their teachers intentions, questioning who stands to benefit from high performance. Questions arise as to who gets the (dis)credit for performance and at what cost (Laskey 2005).

It is not unusual to expect that teachers may react in particular ways to the perception of increased surveillance and judgment. One such reaction is the move towards developing and entrenching more teacher-centred practices in order to better 'control' the pedagogic encounter. In a study of veteran and early career teachers, Barrett argues that accountability regimes brought on by high stakes testing have reinstated more teacher-centred practices, with ear-

ly career teachers demonstrating more instrumental orientations than veteran teachers. This signals a new wave with newer teachers more easily influenced and likely to internalize teacher-centred dispositions with likely negative long term effects (Barret 2009). The imposition of national assessments may result in more reductive forms of teaching and learning and an increasing conception of learners as deficit as teachers resort to identifying specific skills and competences required by learners that would ensure success in tests (Grant 2000). Lingard argues that the current fetish for measurement runs the risk of ignoring the measurement of what counts as significant in the teaching and learning process in favour of measuring what appears easier to measure (Lingard 2010). Pedagogy that degenerates into teaching to the test is likely to overlook careful diagnosis of students' actual needs (Wong 2008). Standardised testing regulates the use of time (Lunneblad and Carlsson 2012); teachers spend less time *with* students (Laskey 2005). It reprioritises teachers time with more time set aside for actual test preparation as opposed to teaching (Valli and Buese 2007).

With the imposition of external accountability regimes, learner-centred practices that focus on the genuine well-being of students are threatened (Locke et al. 2005) and may well compromise the quality of the learning experience (Au 2011). The outcome is likely to be a distortion of teaching by shifting the focus from substantive teaching, to test preparation based on narrow information and content required for success in high stakes tests (Lunneblad and Carlsson 2012; Valli and Buese 2007). Teachers' ability to autonomously decide content and pedagogy becomes restricted. Teacher professionalism is threatened as they feel that they are becoming increasingly managed under the guise of increased professionalism; a kind of managed professionalism (Wong 2008). This 'pulling of the carpet' from under teachers result in teachers experiencing what Ball refers to as ontological insecurity; imposed 'new' reality as to what constitutes teachers' work as they start to question the quality, integrity and basis of everything they do in relation to others (Ball 2003). Public comparisons of schools, learner performance and subsequent inferences about teacher performance cause nervousness, anxiety, stress, and widespread national over-reaction from the media, politicians and the community (Ball 2003).

Lingard warns that labeling, naming and shaming are the likely consequences when test results are released into the public domain (Lingard 2010). Schools that are already suffering from low standing and poor reputation are likely to bear the brunt of such public flogging, with severe long term consequences for teachers and principals; personal security and safety become real issues. What we are unsure about is the likely 'collateral' damage that the results of standardized testing may have on the teachers, principals and district officials as they attempt to justify the results that their learners have achieved (Thomas 2005). Clearly, test results alone is an over-emphasised indicator of school quality and when conformity to accountability is rationalized as *the* and only way to manage teachers takes root, it creates what Hallet refers to as epistemic distress (a complete lack of meaning) amongst teachers. It results in a kind of turmoil that has negative implications for educational outcomes and may prompt veteran teachers to exit the system (Hallet 2010).

Standardised tests and national assessments ride the myth of objectivity as they assume that equal measurement is possible. It disregards socio-economic contexts thus presenting unequal practices as normal (Au 2011). It reflects class and culturally insensitivity (Menken 2008) and reproduces race-based and class-based inequalities (Au 2011). Similarly, Peters and Oliver warn that the needs of disempowered and marginalized groups are likely to be ignored by standardized tests (Peters and Oliver 2009). Standardized assessments impedes efforts at equity and equal access to a quality and rigorous curriculum (LaBoskey 2006). In a country like South Africa, socio-economic status and student performance are closely related. It is not unrealistic to venture that in poverty stricken communities in South Africa, parental support and the absence of environments conducive to effective study at home are factors that are likely to affect the level of performance of learners from such contexts. As indicated earlier, the ANA report of 2012 reflected the education authority's suspicion that schools may deliberately doctor results to reflect low performance in order to secure more funding for resources. Inherent in this suspicion is also an acknowledgement by authorities that schools will resort to such measures, just to secure more resources. The situation is likely to appear even more confounding

when one considers that the system trusts that existing local school structures are sufficiently capacitated to effectively run such tests and that there is absolute faith in the honesty and integrity of such systems. Grade inflation as a result of **in-house marking** could also be a consequence.

The irony is that the Department of Education national and international test administration machinery has demonstrated little evidence of its potential to take into account contextual differences; there can only be 'one' test for all. Schools begin to view weaker learners as economic risks and may engage a process of weighing up the risk return dilemma. Schools may become reluctant to take under-achievers as they would tarnish the overall profile of the school's achievements. Such students place a strain on already strained resources. There is also no guarantee that even with the additional economic investment in attempting to bring such learners 'up to speed', that they will reach the levels that raise the average performance of the school. Economic rationality and market imperatives instead of moral imperatives begin to dictate student selection processes at schools. Furthermore, constant public comparison fuels unhealthy competition between schools and even amongst students and can be more destructive than productive (Cooper 2004). Both weak learners and high achievers experience learner stress and anxiety and a sense of futility (Peters and Oliver 2009). Inundation of testing regimes impose physical, psychological and emotional stress on students which is aggravated by the annoyance of having to sit through such processes and confusion as to what learners think the test is meant to do (Flores and Clark 2003).

### CONCLUSION

Clearly, South African education is witnessing a trend where knowledge has been reduced to that of commodity that needs to be standardized and measured. By implication, this orientation renders the human subject to a kind of sameness. If one ridicules and ignore difference then one falls foul to the clutches of the one reigning metanarrative – neoliberal performativity and its associated curriculum, assessment and standards regime. South African education is moving into an era of test-focused schooling on the shaky assumption that this is likely to improve

learner performance and education in general. Evidence as to whether standardized testing is reliable as a diagnostic tool is unconvincing. In other words do the tests accurately diagnose specific student difficulties? Another layer of complexity is the extent to which teachers themselves are able to use such test for these purposes. In the complex and fragile South African education context one can almost anticipate long lag times between diagnosis and intervention. Furthermore, there is understandable trepidation about the ability of South African teachers to use such test results from an informed perspective of diagnosis and remediation. The conceivers of Annual National assessments for South Africa may well have articulated professional development interventions in response to where 'need' may arise. Enactment and follow through however has been our proverbial Achilles heel. So the issue is, having generated volumes of data on student performance at some static point in time, does the South African education system have the machinery to use such data in rich qualitative ways.

A further issue is that if the rationale for national and international testing is to make public so-called under-performing schools in South Africa, the consequence of this is that there will be a flight of parents and pupils from these schools to 'better' performing schools. This epitomises a market model that is based on a dubious notion of quality and value. The Department of Education would unwittingly have triggered a 'new' social engineering via the market as communities are 'encouraged' not to support failing schools but to rather move their children to schools that have a demonstrated record of success as captured by the indicators. The development of league tables has become a feature of countries where high-stakes testing has taken root, receiving widespread media coverage in which schools are compared and ranked. A phenomenon of 'white flight' from low socio-economic schools has become a feature of American society. In SA we are witnessing a combination of both 'white flight' and 'class flight', a trend that is draining poor communities of much needed resources. This punitive political agenda will see schools struggle to make internal adjustments to both curriculum and pedagogy as they fall victim to an externally imposed 'standard'. Socio-economic status and student performance are closely related in a context like SA.



It is no secret that under-performing schools are likely to be located in poor communities.

The researcher recognizes that teachers are not mere pawns in a game of ideological chess. Rex and Nelson's study for example demonstrates how teachers in enacting the curriculum (in the US) argued that they needed to mediate the effects of accountability laden educational policies on their students. Teachers felt that their students needed protection from such measures. These teachers were guided by their personal ethical and moral code as to what counts as the work of teachers, believing that school management should support such resistance to unhealthy education policies. In a context like South Africa where teacher sophistication and sense of autonomy and professionalism is under question, whether such moral arguments will gain currency or whether such moral arguments are capable of conception and articulation remains uncertain. Whether school managers close ranks with government (via policy prescriptions) or whether they are in a position to buffer the effects of accountability measures is a moot question, a question which is ripe for research.

How can we resist the urge to want to normalize and homogenize and control? When we do this we fall hopelessly into the neoliberal trap! If we wish to dethrone the meta-narrative of success defined by national testing and international benchmarking tests, we need continual reevaluation, rethinking, critique and research of assessment policies and practices in South Africa.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends the need for South African education to proceed with circumspection and caution with regard to national assessments. In particular, the results of standardized tests have to be handled with much sensitivity and if managed appropriately, such results should be seen as a first step in the diagnostic process. Situated diagnosis and a situation specific response especially as it relates to developing continuing professional development programmes for schools is necessary.

A second, arguably more important recommendation is the need for longitudinal research in the light of various challenges that international research suggests is likely to be the outcome of blinkered approaches to standardized assessment.

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