

An Analysis of Education Assessment Policies in South Africa after 1994

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ABSTRACT Assessment practices and systems played a critical role in maintaining the oppressive apartheid policies and entrenching inequality at different levels in the South African education system. The changes in the education system after the 1994 elections brought hope and the promise of a fair assessment dispensation for learners and teachers. However, today assessment remains a contentious issue despite the Government's efforts to transform the education system, especially since national and international benchmark tests indicate poor achievement in numeracy and literacy by South African learners. The question can therefore rightly be asked: Who or what controls the assessment policy agenda in South Africa, and what are the consequences and possibilities? This article offers an analysis of educational assessment policies in schools. The tension between the centralising and decentralising forces is becoming more apparent in the way that the administration of the curriculum is operationalised; this article examines this tension. It is argued that the pendulum is rapidly swinging towards greater centralisation. Assessment, as mediated by policy in South Africa, has become primarily an instrument of managerial accountability and an indicator of systemic efficiency. The challenge of emphasising quality teaching and learning in assessment policy seems to be embedded in initiatives that can reconcile centralisation and accountability, on the one hand, with decentralisation and support for teaching, on the other.