

An Analysis of Education Assessment Policies in South Africa after 1994

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KEYWORDS Assessment. Policy. Centralisation. Decentralisation. Schools. South Africa

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.

INTRODUCTION

A plethora of policies, inspired by different agendas and aimed at reconceptualising and restructuring the South African education system post-apartheid, were formulated after 1994 to reduce historical inequalities. One of the key education priorities in the subsequent curriculum transformation was to use assessment in such a way that every South African learner could experience quality teaching and learning.

After the African National Congress's electoral victory in 1994, South Africa faced the challenge of building a new democratic dispensation and implementing deep educational and economic reforms, which also included changes in the role of the Government. Moving from an era of a highly centralised government, the new Government needed to find alternative ways to decentralise certain functions in order to accommodate the views and needs of especially the masses that had been marginalised.

The first years of the new democracy saw the Government taking action to provide the legal framework that would guide the way in which the new South Africa would develop. With *The South African Qualifications Authority Act (No. 58 of 1995)*, *The National Education Policy*

Act (No. 27 of 1996) and *The South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996)* in place by 1997, the basic foundations for a new education and training system were laid (Graaff et al. 1997: 1).

- ♦ *The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act* provides for development and implementation of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and establishment of the SAQA for this purpose.
- ♦ *The National Education Policy Act* identifies the policy, legislative and monitoring responsibilities of the Minister of Education, and formalises relations between national and provincial authorities. It therefore also embodies the principle of co-operative governance.
- ♦ *The South African Schools Act* promotes access, quality and democratic governance in the schooling system. The Act's principal goal is eradication of race-based educational inequalities.

Having these policies in place to regulate the education sector was only one of the complex dimensions of policy-making at that time. A number of other factors impacted and continue to impact on the policy process today. Not only are there the demands of globalisation with its call for international connectedness, but as the

democratic dispensation developed in South Africa other realities and agendas started to impact on policy-making. With the absence of clear strategies from the centre to operationalise the bureaucracy to ensure effective implementation, the possibility of a disjuncture between policies and practice in reality creates tension. For Naidoo (2004: 225) the reason for such a situation is that “policy ideas are received and interpreted differently within different architectures, infrastructures, and ideologies. The policies are re-worked, tinkered with, and nuanced through complex processes of influence, dissemination and re-creation in contexts of practice.”

Problem Statement

The literature indicates that policy, especially in an accountability and performativity regime, has a major impact on how teachers teach and perceive their profession. In line with this standpoint, Brundrett and Rhodes (2011: 11) argue that: “As the power of the state has been extended, so a new form of ‘contract’ has emerged between government and educational institutions. In essence, this contract consists of the notion that central government will devolve power, including financial control, outwards while at the same time increasing the regulatory framework within which institutions operate.”

With the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and other Government partners such as SAQA and Umalusi (the quality assurer in the General and Further Education and Training bands) calling for compliance to the quality assurance measures, schools and teachers are increasingly required to account for the quality of their work and the educational outputs they are expected to deliver. It can therefore be argued that this ‘contract’ between Government and educational professionals has ushered in an era of performativity, which causes tension and frustration at many levels. The situation becomes even worse when those who must implement policies are not aware of the ‘bigger’ forces that impact, in this case, on assessment policy-making.

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? Furthermore, the tension between the centralising and decentralising forces, which seems to become more apparent in the way administration of the curriculum is operationalised, is also examined.

METHODOLOGY

This article offers a preliminary exploration of education policies related to school assessment in South Africa since 1994 using content analysis. As the focus will be on describing and discussing the trends and principles in these policies, the impact of forces towards centralisation and decentralisation in school assessment policy will also receive attention. Understanding the trends and underpinning discourses in policy-making is a complex undertaking. According to Fowler (2009: 7), this is so because “[s]ometimes the nature of the policy being followed becomes apparent only after an analysis of consistent patterns of government action and inaction”.

Conventional methods of policy analysis are mainly geared towards understanding policy and the policy-making process so that better policy solutions can be developed. Hewitt (2009: 4-5) identifies four common features in public policy research:

- ♦ investigating the actions of Government and the bureaucracy of the State;
- ♦ questioning the policy-making process – the legitimacy of policy decisions and exercise of control over policy processes;
- ♦ examining elements of the policy process, such as policy formulation, implementation and evaluation, while acknowledging the complexity of the process; and
- ♦ understanding the complex sets of institutions/organisations through which the State implements policy.

However, any attempt to develop a more nuanced understanding of trends in school assessment policy will require more. It will have to focus on the impact (positive and negative) those policies may have on society and groups of people such as teachers and learners. Accordingly, the assumption is not that those in power can simply impose their rules and regulations on those who are supposed to implement

them; on the contrary, the significance of understanding the interplay between different stakeholders and resultant trends in policy-making is to grasp how the actions or non-action of stakeholders reproduces or changes assessment practices.

Official documents (for example, Government Gazettes and various departmental guidelines, such as the Subject Assessment Guidelines for Geography) and secondary sources (related research nationally and internationally) were used in the analysis of trends and tendencies in school assessment policies. These documents will be used as the data source, with the focus on the actual written texts of policies.

The article is structured as follows: firstly, a historical background of school policy and main curriculum changes will be presented to contextualise assessment approaches and practices in South Africa. The second section elaborates on notions of decentralisation and centralisation as forces operative in the policy-making processes. This will be followed by an analysis of the policies that have informed assessment practices in schools since 1994 to investigate the interrelationship between policy and practice. Different broad 'curriculum phases' will be used to structure the policy analysis. Finally, a discussion of the findings of the study concludes the article.

Policy and Assessment

Many of the South African educational reforms, both in terms of policy-making as well as in the practice of teachers, can be described as assessment-led educational reform (Reddy 2004: 31). Driven by a growing acceptance of and compliance with socio-constructivist teaching and learning approaches that came with the implementation of outcomes-based education, the role of assessment changed from being dominated by mainly examinations/tests at the end of school terms to an assessment regime in which a greater variety of more 'authentic' assessment activities were prescribed on a continuous basis.

While these changes were new for most learners and teachers in South Africa, assessment-based reforms are not new in education internationally. Rhoten et al. (2000: 2) cogently argue that what in essence happened is that the purpose of assessment changed from traditionally

"measuring intelligence, tracking of students, standardising learning and evaluating applicants into new forms of judging the quality and equity of schooling". Assessment in South Africa became an integral part of the contract between Government and educational professionals. Increasingly, teachers are expected to conduct assessment according to prescribed learning area or subject' guidelines and in compliance with related administrative requirements, which erode most of the teachers' teaching time (Chisholm et al. 2005: 183). This introduced an era of performativity, which according to Brundrett and Rhodes (2011: 12) "services as a measure of productivity, displays of quality or moments of inspection".

The South African educational system under apartheid had a long tradition of central control with limited possibilities for individual choice. Most of the education policy reforms towards the end of the apartheid era emanated from recommendations in the De Lange Commission's report of 1981. In trying to show the impact that wider socio-cultural agendas of political structures have on the policy-making process, Alexander (1990: 120) argues that before 1994 "even the essentially harmless recommendations of that Commission that tended in the direction of opening up the system and giving a greater say to parents in the determination of what shall be taught, who shall teach it and how they shall teach it were unacceptable to government for which group identity, that is, the maintenance and promotion of ethnic consciousness, [remained] a holy cow."

By the time of the establishment of the first democratic Government, it was especially the masses that had been silenced and marginalised through oppressive policies that were expecting the new Government to start to decentralise – both in terms of control and consultation. The reality, however, is that education policy in South Africa is part of the legal framework that tends to rule and govern the conduct of teachers. In a sense it is regarded as binding by the State and can, if necessary, be enforced (Sishi 2009: 22).

The relationship between (assessment) policy and what happens in schools is multifaceted and complex. Unravelling this complexity could start with the question: Who or what controls the assessment policy agenda in South Africa and what are the consequences and possibilities? Apart from major economic changes and

demographic trends, ideological shifts appear to be among the reasons for changing education policy environments. In order to contextualise the policy environment in terms of school assessment in South Africa, the notions of decentralisation and centralisation will now be examined more closely.

Decentralisation and Centralisation

One of the key ideological shifts in education policy-making, according to Boyd and Kerchner (1988), has been from addressing issues of equality to dealing with issues of excellence, accountability and choice. Muller (2004: 221) describes the contestation around assessment in South Africa as playing itself out between those for whom assessment in the classroom for pedagogic purposes is primary (decentralisers), and those for whom assessment as a signalling system for systemic performance is primary (centralisers)."

The attempt to address the issue of centralisation/decentralisation is regarded in the literature (Derqui 2001; Bray 1999) as one of the most significant contemporary discourses on governance in education. This is especially so because it entails prioritising the interests of those who govern and control and those who teach

and learn. These two policy preferences – which Kulipossa (2004: 769, cited in Dyer 2005: 140) refers to as “productive complementarities” – are more likely to be realised where the responsibilities and powers of the respective central and local institutions are clearly defined. Striking the right balance between centralisation and decentralisation is highly challenging. Likewise, developing appropriate institutional capacity to discharge new responsibilities is difficult and often neglected (Leat 2007: 139).

Decentralisation

Derqui (2001: 562) defines decentralisation as “the transfer of responsibility for planning, management, and resource raising and allocation from the central government and its agencies to either lower levels (territorial decentralization) or more specialized units of government (functional decentralization).” Three types of decentralisation are referred to in the literature: deconcentration, delegation and devolution.

According to Patel et al. (2006: 6), deconcentration involves “shifting [some functions or] management responsibilities from the central to [regional or] other lower levels, while the center retains overall control (center decides, local level implements). Delegation occurs when central

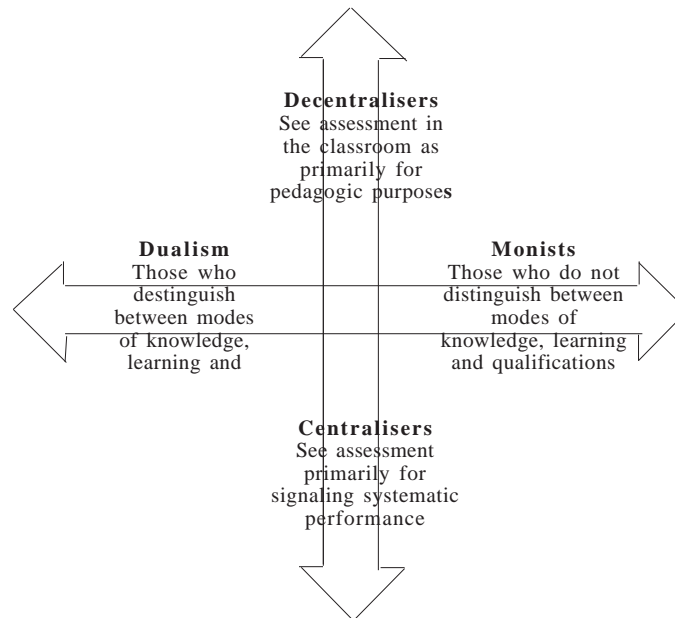


Fig. 1. Axes of contestation in assessment and qualifications in South Africa

authorities lend authority to lower levels of government, or even to semiautonomous organizations, with the understanding that the authority can be withdrawn, local level can decide, but decisions can be overturned centrally”.

Devolution, on the other hand, entails the “transfer of authority over financial, administrative, or pedagogical matters that is permanent and cannot easily be revoked. Devolution may result in stronger local authorities and is one pathway to achieving community financed and managed schools” (Patel et al. 2006: 6). However, when a loss of control in certain situations is perceived as a result of decentralisation, it may be necessary for the authority devolved to be reclaimed. This is a process sometimes referred to as re-centralisation. While decentralisation is generally conceived in terms of different levels of government, Derqui (2001: 562) indicates that “it can also refer to relationships between government and the individual citizen”. In the latter case, it may be especially in terms of pedagogical matters (such as teaching and assessment) that decision-making may be decentralised to teachers.

Derqui (2001: 562) suggests the following (sometimes interrelated) rationales for governments to implement decentralisation policies:

- ♦ *Financial Rationale* – “decentralisation allows central governments to shift the cost burden of education to local governments and communities”;
- ♦ *Efficiency Rationale* – “more decentralized units of government can allocate resources in a more productive way and can be more easily held accountable for their decisions”;
- ♦ *Quality Rationale* – “the specific character of particular schools and groups of [learners] require more freedom at local levels to match those characteristics with the national or central learning agendas or curriculum”;
- ♦ *Redistribution of Political Power Rationale* – “to empower those groups in society supporting central government policies or to weaken groups posing obstructions to these policies”; and
- ♦ *Democratisation Rationale* – “educational decentralization can be advocated as a means to increase participation of parents, teachers and local communities in decision-making processes, since, it is argued, they

have a right as citizens and education workers to influence those processes.” In this case the consequent participation takes place irrespective of the support of groupings of government policies.

While these rationales offer an analytical tool to investigate decentralisation processes, the difficulty is that policies directing school assessment, for example, are embedded in the integrated nature of these different rationales and the political imperatives of the ruling government.

Centralisation

Horn (2004: 33) states that proponents of centralisation “propose that education needs to be nationally standardized in order to promote a common culture based upon common core knowledge and values”, mostly communicated through the system by policies. By implication it can be argued that ‘the centralisers’ will devalue the diversity and difference that prevail in the ‘lower hierarchies’ of the education system. Underpinning the notion of centralisation is the idea that allowing teachers’ the opportunity for decision-making, particularly about classroom matters such as assessment, creates the danger that they will choose ways of doing that are not appropriate or productive for learner achievement (Gamoran et al. 1994: 7). The latter argue further that the exponents of bureaucratic centralisation are “sceptical about the training, skills, and goals of teachers” and therefore support the view that teachers should “follow a prescribed plan that has demonstrated effectiveness of externally defined goals”. What is not questioned in this conception of operationalising education is the training, skills and goals of the policy-makers and the assumption that what is stipulated in policy will produce the intended outcomes.

Most policy statements are expressed in generic terms, aiming to stipulate the minimum requirements that will be applicable in most contexts in a country. As policies became more centralised (as in the case of the new assessment protocols in South Africa), the need arose for the Government to elaborate increasingly on the details of policy statements to ensure that those who implement them will do what was required. According to Fowler (2009: 5), these details usually take the form of rules and regulations that Government departments develop. The way that these rules and regulations are written is important. When rules are formulated broadly, teach-

ers who are lower in the education hierarchy will have more flexibility in how they plan and implement their assessment programme than if they are narrowly formulated in great detail, allowing them very little flexibility.

It is clear that the principles of centralisation and decentralisation are in tension with each other. In the case of centralisation, power is concentrated at the centre and it is indicated when control, uniformity and efficiency are prioritised. Decentralisation refers to concentration of power at the periphery and becomes apparent when freedom, differentiation and responsiveness are preferred (Leung 2004; Harman 1989: 3).

The South African education policy context is not free from these centralising and decentralising forces; both have a contribution to make in a young and struggling education dispensation. The question, however, is not which one is the best or worst - but rather, where the productive middle ground might be. In order to get a better understanding of this, the next section analyses the trends that are starting to emerge.

An Analysis of South African Assessment Policy

Before 1994 the Government controlled the racially divided school curriculum centrally, to ensure that the ideals of apartheid were entrenched in education. Policies biased towards centralisation emphasised ideological and oppressive aspects of an exclusive system of education; in South Africa this led to an absence of quality education for all. Gilmore et al. (2001: 345) argue that the “curriculum of the past was largely seen as a conveyor belt for the political agenda of the dominant society.” On the one hand, progressive pedagogies (with an accompanying individualising thrust) supported a better-quality teaching and learning in the minority white and private schools (Muller 2004: 222). On the other hand, segregated Black public schools were required by law to teach a curriculum that sought to cultivate a sense of inferiority in teachers and learners, the sole requirement being bureaucratic and political compliance (Jansen 2001, cited in Ndimande 2009: 125).

During this period assessment was examination-driven and norm-referenced, and was used mainly for summative purposes - to determine whether a learner passed or failed. Assessment focused primarily on recall of content and was

generally viewed as separate from teaching processes. Consequently learners experienced assessment as something that teachers do to them. The matriculation examination - which was different for different racial groups - was the main instrument that not only assessed the ability of the learner, but also gave an indication of the success of schooling. Although education policies reflected a centralised perspective, Muller (2004: 222) argues that these also had a “low-key under-specified position on school-based assessment”, because all the different education departments² focused on the matriculation examination (“the only systematic assessment instrument”), while neglecting assessment in the rest of the school system.

In the next section three phases are outlined in order to organise analysis of assessment policy development since 1994. This specific categorisation is used because with every curriculum change or revision, seemingly different educational priorities emerged. There is also the possibility that different ministries, although part of the same political party, may have introduced policies for specific political/educational reasons that strengthened or weakened the forces of centralisation and decentralisation.

Phase 1: Original Curriculum 2005 (C2005)

The formulation of assessment policy for schools after 1994 started with a discussion document entitled *Towards a policy framework for assessment in the General and Further Education and Training phases in South Africa* (DoE 1997b). At the time limited assessment reforms had been “introduced in a piecemeal fashion without the much-needed context of a *new nationally agreed policy on assessment* which would bring coherence and innovation within this field” (DoE 1997b: 8, emphasis in the original). Furthermore, the Government realised that working within the old assessment paradigm while implementing new policies aimed at transforming education and training created major problems, especially at classroom level.

A key imperative right at the beginning of the new political dispensation was to improve the quality of life of every South African, especially those who had been robbed of a quality education - hence the emphasis on the learner. Policies introducing the C2005 OBE curriculum for schools placed a significant focus on peda-

gogies built around the needs of the individual learner. Indicative of this thrust, the C2005 policy document for the Senior Phase (DoE 1997a: 9) states that “[t]he individualistic nature of OBE, where each learner would be working at his/her pace, would enable the learner to accelerate through the curriculum.”

In order to comply with this idea, teachers were expected to be facilitators of learning by using assessment to determine where each learner was along their “zones of proximal development” (Vygotsky 1978). With reference to learners with varying abilities and in a move to delegate authority, the document stipulated that “each province ... should determine its own policy whether acceleration or enrichment or both will form the basis of education for the gifted” (DoE 1997a: 9).

C2005 was less focused on detailed knowledge and facts, and more so on constructs as embodied in the critical outcomes, such as problem solving, effective communication, organisation and management, cooperative learning and understanding the world as a set of related systems (DoE 2003a: 11). While teachers were expected to plan around broad content themes in the curriculum, they were also required to integrate the constructs mentioned. In this way the authority and responsibility to plan teaching and assessment were delegated to schools and teachers. However, despite the possible assumption that at provincial and school level content and assessment may have been significantly adapted to reflect and address local realities, the curriculum and its (critical) outcomes remained centralised.

The first official assessment policy document for the GET band³ (DoE 1998: 7) aimed to “provide the pedagogic basis for [the] new education and training system”. This policy gave provincial education authorities the responsibility to design their own assessment policies, and they would therefore become vital partners in shaping educational practice in schools. The stated intention of outcomes-based assessment was that different assessment opportunities would be used throughout the year to help teachers and learners to work towards achieving the intended learning outcomes. In this way assessment should form an integral part of both teaching and learning.

In order to direct the learning process, criterion-referenced assessment is preferred in different assessment types such as group, self- and peer assessment. Assessment is therefore not only intended to identify problems, but also to provide valid information about the learners’ level of achievement that can be used to inform teaching and indicate the next steps for the learner to progress.

To delegate pedagogical authority in this way reveals a trust in the system and in those working in it. However, an important question remains whether those entrusted with this responsibility have the capacity and resources to guide the process to reach the intended outcomes. Dzvimbo (1997: 12) helps to shed light on this matter in arguing that “[t]he discourse of OBE stays very much a discourse of exclusion because teachers do not own the key concepts”. This situation can to a large extent be ascribed to inadequate training of teachers, an inability of teachers to implement what can be seen as radically new assessment methods, and the fact that most teachers experienced the language and concepts associated with C2005 as too complex, confusing and often contradictory (Jansen 1997: 147).

During this phase the provincially based matriculation examination was still the main assessment activity. While it evaluated what learners knew at the end of 12 or more years of schooling, it also provided insight into the efficiency of the education system. Such forms of systemic assessment were, according to Muller (2004: 223), seen as “summative, unfairly comparative and hence discriminatory”. This situation was further complicated by what Ndhlovu et al. (2006:3-4) describe as “low numbers of passes, inconsistent integrity in the administration processes, frequent irregularities, and low levels of enrolment to sit for the matriculation examination”. In an attempt to start to address these issues, the Government at the time prioritised consolidation of a single examination system.

A significant change in the nature and purpose of assessment in schools came with the incremental introduction of continuous assessment (CA) into the South African school system – in three provinces in 1999, in four more on a trial basis in 2000 and the rest in 2001. The stated rationale for CA was “to improve performance of learning and teaching, the quality of the Se-

nior Certificate” and to increase the number of “learners who obtain a meaningful qualitative pass at matric” (Nduna-Watson, n.d.). However, research indicated that in South Africa CA is regarded merely as a technical solution to the educational problem of having to base certification at the end of schooling on only one final (matriculation) examination.

Pryor and Lubisi (2001: 674) found that the implementation of CA “alienated and distracted teachers from more interactive pedagogy”. Instead of using CA formatively to scaffold learning and inform the interaction between teacher and learner (DoE 1998: 9), it is used summatively, aimed at producing a final mark on which promotion or certification is based. Since the latter use of assessment results seems to be the norm in South African schools, it can be questioned whether decentralising responsibilities to teachers to plan and conduct assessment for learning had the desired effect.

Grade 9 marks the end of the compulsory phase of schooling in South Africa (DoE 2003a: 4). As prescribed by SAQA, an exit assessment is used to fulfil the requirements to obtain a GET Certificate at the end of the GET band. In order to meet the SAQA requirements, a Grade 9 learner will be promoted when he/she has demonstrated the expected competence in school-based assessment (constituting 75% of the final result) and in the external summative assessment or Common Task for Assessment (CTA) (constituting 25% of final result). Although the planning and co-ordination of the CTA is done by the national Department of Education, the tasks of designing and development were decentralised to provincial Departments of Education (DoE 2003b: 7). At local level the responsibility to conduct the CTA has been delegated to teachers and schools. Administering the CTA in the province became the responsibility of provincial Departments of Education. However, the execution of these delegated responsibilities was impeded every year by poor logistical planning and assessment tasks, the quality of which was questioned.

While in the era before 1994 policy-making focused on centralising control and political power by the flagging Government, this phase is characterised by a tendency to increase decentralisation, which seemingly emanates from a desire to equalise educational opportunities

and promote more learner-centred teaching and learning. Together with this, deliberate moves were made to devolve control to provincial DoEs, education districts and school governing bodies. It is also significant to note that the first assessment policy document supporting OBE at that time already expressed the principle that “systemic evaluation shall be conducted on a nationally representative sample of learners and learning sites ... at grades 3, 6 and 9” (DoE 1998: 16).

It can only be assumed that amid a strong thrust towards decentralisation in this phase, tension started to build as the need to centralise became stronger in the policy-making processes. The following phase sees the first major revision of C2005.

Phase 2: Revised National Curriculum Statement

According to Jansen (2002), this phase marks the shift from a period when the policies of the first five years of democracy served as political symbolism within a context during which policy laid the foundation for significant changes in classroom practice. One of these policy processes was the revision (streamlining and strengthening) of C2005. Among the main changes in this process was closer alignment between the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) and assessment policy contained in the Assessment Policy (Government Gazette No. 19640 of 1998) (DoE 2003a: 19). The RNCS curriculum provided the design features (critical outcomes, learning outcomes and assessment standards) that governed classroom practice. Greater clarity was given about content as well as the role of school-based assessment. Assessment was based on the attainment of learning outcomes in terms of the related assessment standards, which described the minimum level, depth and breadth of what is to be learnt and how conceptual progression would occur in a learning area or in a subject (DoE 2003a: 5).

In spite of these governmental guidelines, which in a sense further centralised assessment, teachers continued to feel ill-prepared to implement the proposed assessment changes. This, according to Fowler (2009: 8), is why many teachers who felt that they were not acknowledged as professionals and given proper support “become fatalistic about the new [policy] environment,

perceiving it as a storm to be weathered passively because no one can do anything about it.”

School-based assessment (CA) formed an integral part of assessment in the RNCS. Where CA contributes to 75% of the total assessment programme in Grade 9 (on which promotion is based), in Grades R–8 it contributes 100% to assessment of the learner. In this way assessment policy creates opportunities where an assessment *for* learning regime may be promoted – where insights from assessment may be used formatively to scaffold learning and improve teaching practices throughout the school year. In the FET band this situation differs completely, as CA contributes only 25% to the final promotion mark (DoE 2005a: 13). The emphasis is therefore much more on assessment *of* learning. In both the GET and FET bands criterion-referenced assessment is encouraged to enhance transparency and opportunities for learner self-assessment through use of analytical and holistic rubrics.

With responsibility for school-based assessment being decentralised to education districts, schools and teachers, research indicates that many assessment tasks are designed below par and that standardisation processes are poor (Van der Berg and Shepherd 2010; Vandeyar and Killen 2007). This is partly the result of the emphasis on quantity (a focus on the number of different types of assessment tasks in different learning areas/subjects for different grades), and the absence or deliberate silence on any indication in the policy documents of what constitutes a quality assessment task in that specific learning area/subject in a specific grade. Because of the discrepancies and varying quality between CA and the standard in the matriculation examination, year marks with a deviation of more than 10% are not used. Research by Van der Berg and Shepherd (2010: 4) found that assessment leniency (inflated CA marks) across subjects throughout the system and low assessment reliability (poor correlation between the CA and examination mark) contribute to a mismatch between the intended formative value of CA and how well learners are prepared for the matriculation examination.

The need for and nature of moderation as a verifying process of CA and external assessment have been briefly mentioned in most national assessment policies (see DoE 2007: 25).

The decentralised responsibility for quality assurance to ensure that CA “adheres to the principles of fairness, validity, reliability, consistency, practicability and [that it] is well-designed and well-managed” falls to the provinces, who act on behalf of Umalusi, which is also responsible for certification of qualifications. According to the Western Cape Education Department (WCED), failure by the province or any school within it to comply with the requirements of Umalusi will mean that Umalusi is unable to guarantee that the province has followed due process; this could in turn impact negatively on issuing of GET and FET certificates in any year (WCED 2002: 7-8).

As far as the matriculation examination is concerned, Ndhlovu et al. (2006: 3-4) indicate that reform of the schooling exit examination was prioritised during this phase. They point out that “indications started to emerge of improvement in the pass rate with a concurrent focus on the equity and quality of participation and passes. These achievements can be linked to support interventions of learners before the examinations as well as at subject level for schools in need.” These reform initiatives of Government were important to show that learner achievement in schools was improving. The reality was that the increase in the pass rate did not mean that the quality of the passes had also increased. This led to greater centralising of initiatives to support schools to improve results in Grade 12 (DBE 2010b).

In a definite move to delegate management and control over assessment to schools, provincial DoEs issued assessment guidelines and requirements for the GET band in 2003, with the request that all schools ought to develop their own school assessment policy (WCED 2003a). In a further decentralisation initiative, principals were tasked by the provincial DoE “to ensure that thorough [internal] moderation is done”, and teachers reminded that they “must assess continually ... and the items that *best represent* the *overall* achievement of the learner must be selected for progression and moderation purposes” (WCED 2003b, emphasis in the original).

The issuing of the National Protocol on Assessment for Schools in the GET and FET bands (Grades R-12) (DoE 2005b) centralised Government’s control over the assessment process and pedagogical guidance to schools. The Protocol had a dual purpose: firstly to regulate recording

and reporting, and secondly to reduce the workload of teachers. While learning area/subject heads are accountable for the annual programme of assessment, teachers receive learning area/subject assessment guidelines to drive implementation of this protocol. According to the Protocol (DoE 2005b), each teacher is required to submit an annual formal programme of assessment to the Subject Head and Management Team of the school in order to formulate a school assessment plan. For the first time since the implementation of OBE it was clearly stipulated that teachers are accountable for a specific number of pieces of evidence (per learning area/subject and per grade) that should be submitted in the teacher and learner portfolios. The way in which the school assessment records should be managed was also indicated.

Many reports in the last decade have indicated high levels of inefficiency and dysfunctionality in the school system, especially in terms of teacher accountability and learner achievement. In response, the National Policy on Assessment and Qualifications for Schools in the GET band, which revoked previous school assessment policies (DoE 2007: 27), was promulgated on 12 February 2007. This policy initiative, which forms part of a number of other policies aimed at improving the quality of teaching, assessment and learning, manifested a strong centralising initiative of Government. Where previous policy statements on school assessment accommodated the initiatives of schools and teachers, this policy stipulated clearly what Government expected to happen in classrooms. The Government also clearly addressed issues of accountability (who is responsible for what in assessment processes) and performativity (what is it that is expected from teachers) in school assessment (DoE 2007). So while some functions and responsibilities are decentralised to the school level, centralised compliance to the stipulated requirements became quite evident.

Unlike other preceding assessment policies and guidelines, the abovementioned document (DoE 2007) is the first that promotes a more progressive pedagogy focusing on the summative but especially the formative purposes of assessment. The emphasis now is that assessment should be used “as an on-going part of the teaching and learning process. This means that assessment should be used to inform and evaluate teaching and learning” (DoE 2007: 10). The

focus is therefore placed on the pedagogical use of assessment.

The role that individual teachers can play in enhancing learning through assessment is consequently acknowledged. However, isolated policy statements on pedagogy such as these will give limited support to the agenda of the decentralisers. Establishing a pedagogical environment that focuses on learning demands a much more holistic approach. Policy itself should contextualise the rationale for a regime of assessment *for* learning for teachers and other stakeholders. Departmental officials should have a thorough understanding of the curriculum, including its pedagogical rationale, so they can meaningfully support teachers in innovatively implementing context-specific ways of assessment and teaching. In order to support learners effectively along their zones of proximal development, the currently high teacher/learner ratio⁴ should be seriously reconsidered to enhance opportunities for thorough feedback and feedforward (Hounsell 2007: 101-113).

Poor CA implementation together with indications from international learning achievement assessments – such as the 1999 and the 2003 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, which indicated that South African learners are not achieving in the way hoped for, ‘forced’ the government to consider alternative ways to measure the effectiveness of the system and also the accountability of those working in the education system. This situation led to systemic evaluation at Grades 3, 6 and 9 and implementation of the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) to support the professional development of teachers.

Taking into account the greater emphasis in assessment policies on the responsibilities of teachers and implementation of the IQMS, it is clear that policy-making became much more teacher-centred. According to Derqui (2001: 562), this new form of shifting centralisation/decentralisation is seen as linked to “the new liberal restructuring of [government], to pressures from globalisation processes and forces, and to various internal demands for improving quality and efficiency in the delivery of education”.

In reaction to these and other challenges, another revision of curriculum and assessment

was announced in 2010. Although the new policy documents have not yet been gazetted, the next section reflects on some of the proposed policy changes.

Phase 3: Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)

Despite the plethora of new policies to establish a just education system in South Africa after 1994, there are indications that point to a failure by the system to ensure quality teaching, assessment and learning in schools. Because of the lack of clarity of the RNCS, the expectation is that the new Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) will provide clearer guidelines on what teachers should teach and assess on a grade-by-grade and subject basis.

With the announcement of this new policy initiative (DoE 2009), the Minister of Basic Education also recommended the discontinuation of learner portfolio files (formal compilations of assessment tasks), a reduction in the number of projects as part of school-based assessment, and the discontinuation of the Common Tasks for Assessment. Together with this, regular external systematic assessment of Mathematics, Home Language and English First Additional Language in Grades 3, 6 and 9 will be implemented.

According to Wilmot (2005: 72), assessment is increasingly viewed as an instrument of monitoring system reform or as system management, and is linked to powerful global discourses of performativity, efficiency, quality assurance and accountability. The assumption is therefore that assessment systems can reveal deficiencies in schooling. Likewise, systemic assessment may also potentially contest the legitimacy of Government, as it is responsible for providing educational services. In such a scenario it may be expected that Government will, instead of admitting bureaucratic inefficiency, rather redirect attention to the inability of teachers and schools to ensure learners' achieving the intended outcomes (Benveniste 2002: 90).

With dwindling learner achievement at Grade 12 level and insufficient credible measurement of the quality of teaching and learning below Grade 12, establishment of a system of standardised annual national assessment (ANA) in key Grades 3, 6 and 9 was identified as a priority to improve learner performance in line with com-

mitments made by Government. For Government ANA is expected to have four key effects on schools: "to expose teachers to better assessment practices, make it easier for districts to identify schools in most need of assistance, encourage schools to celebrate outstanding performance and empower parents with important information about their children's performance" (DBE 2010a: 4).

However, it would be naïve to ignore the political context of the ANA, especially when Government tries to defend or establish its record. Benveniste (2002: 95) argues that there is no doubt that assessment is a political process as "it is the product of competition and negotiation among social actors who vie to influence the determination of norms and values that the state will uphold over others."

Since the establishment of a new political dispensation in South Africa after 1994, the inputs and outputs of assessment have been contested not only by opposition parties but also by academics, teacher unions and parents, because political imperatives are not producing quality education (Jansen 1997; Muller 2004; Chisholm et al. 2005). Another tension regarding the ANA is that it may be used to control education results rather than to seek information. According to Benveniste (2002: 96), "[a]uthority over the disposition and interpretation of testing outcomes signifies authority to sway policy making, resource allocation and public perceptions". Analysing the process after announcement of the 2010 ANA results confirms Benveniste's argument. In spite of bureaucratic inefficiency and problems emanating from the legacy of apartheid, teachers and their perceived inability to implement policy are the first to be blamed. Systemic assessment, in the form of the ANA, tends to become a political instrument that controls the relationship between Government and teachers.

The significance of the current assessment changes will become clear as this phase of curriculum development in South Africa unfolds. What is starting to emerge, however, is a greater awareness of the gap between policy-making and its implementation. For better or worse, this awareness is an important first stage in closing the gap.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of assessment policies indicates a continuous tension and interplay be-

tween forces that advocate centralisation and/or decentralisation. It appears as if the particular policy preference is always a product of control and authority at the centre, even when there is calculated decentralisation of responsibilities to lower hierarchies of the education system.

An even stronger impact currently on policy preference in South Africa is the perception of the legitimacy of Government in the eyes of those whom they are supposed to serve. With continuing failures in learner achievement, the pressure will mount to demonstrate that the taxpayers' educational rand has been well spent. Against this background, it is not strange that the policy pendulum is rapidly swinging to greater centralisation – using assessment to signal successes and failures in the education system. This is accompanied by accountability and performativity measures, which are increasingly becoming the hallmarks of what is viewed as important in education.

Having said this, it is evident that the forces of centralisation and decentralisation operate simultaneously. The current situation in South Africa is similar to the situation in Australia in the 1990s, when “policies ... for increased decentralisation [were] often largely unsuccessful because of the strength of new centralising forces, often not anticipated or perhaps poorly understood even by key policy-makers themselves” (Harman 1989: 3). The reality is that situations like this do not only lead to a sense of disempowerment and loss of direction at school level, but also to a sense of failure and subsequent urgency to formulate more interim policies at Government level.

Assessment policy is experienced by most teachers as far from clear and self-explanatory, because it does not sufficiently address the pedagogical dimensions referred to above. The National Protocol for Assessment (DoE 2007: 2), the policy directing assessment in schools, makes only a two-sentence reference to pedagogy: “Classroom assessment should be both informal and formal. In both cases regular feedback should be provided to learners to enhance the learning experience”. The rest of the 48-page document consists of positioning this policy in terms of other related education policies, the way that recording and reporting should be done in the different phases and grades, requirements for the assessment portfolio of teachers, and the way the assessment processes and prod-

ucts should be managed at school level. Subject-specific assessment guidelines emphasise quantity instead of quality. The Subject Assessment Guidelines for Geography (DoE 2008), for example, focus on the type and number of tasks that teachers are required to conduct in different grades throughout the year, rather than on elaborating on how to design quality assessment activities that can produce valid evidence which can be used formatively as a catalyst for improved teaching and learning.

With no clear and substantive unpacking of how assessment becomes part of a productive pedagogy, teachers find it difficult to understand that assessment can fulfil purposes other than producing a mark against which a learner will be promoted or kept back in a specific grade. The lack of prioritising of the integral role that assessment plays in informing development and use of learner-specific teaching methods to support the diversity of learners along their zones of proximal development remains an obstacle in the way of improved learner achievement. Teachers are bombarded with policies that foreground measurable outputs, to be used primarily by education authorities to evaluate the success of curriculum implementation and not to establish teacher practices that have the needs and interests of learners at heart.

What is sometimes forgotten is that those who must implement policies are knowledgeable agents who mediate between their own cultural/professional capital and the educational realities at grassroots level. All policies are interpreted and changed during implementation. According to Smit (2001: 68), “policy developers cannot control the meaning of their own texts so teachers will reject, select, ignore or deliberately misunderstand certain texts.” Therefore, to determine what the ‘real policy’ is, it is essential to consider how the policy is implemented (Fowler 2009: 7). Policy-makers should realise that their policies will only have the intended impact if the knowledgeable agents responsible for their implementation understand and accept the underpinning ideas as something that will add value to their practice.

As a consequence of their own initial professional training, most teachers in schools today are not trained to work in an outcomes-based and learner-centred teaching context (Killen 2007: 64; Jansen 1999:147). They consequently find implementation of “outcomes-based” as-

assessment policies challenging. It can therefore be argued that the way teachers implement or do not implement outcomes-based assessment is a case of “practice undermining policy” (Chisholm 2004: 199). However, with conflicting policies appearing one after the other (decentralising policies and then centralising policies), should it not rather be acknowledged that policy is in fact undermining practice?

CONCLUSION

The literature (Derqui 2001: 563; Rondinelli et al. 1983) suggests “that the central debate is not between centralization versus decentralization, but about what functions or responsibilities should or could be decentralized and to what levels, whose interests are advanced by different types of decentralization, and about the trade-off among different values (for example, efficiency, quality, equity, participation, choice).” The question therefore remains whether real decision-making power is transferred or just the responsibility for the implementation of centrally designed policies and for achieving good results.

As in other countries, centralisation and decentralisation will be part of assessment policy-making in South Africa, but will always be subject to Government initiatives to meet its stated objectives, and to the way that the Government responds to the needs of the community they are meant to be benefitting. The eventual success of any policy preference will depend on whether the realities and needs of all stakeholders in the education system have been taken into account.

Indeed, what is the sense of trying to prove the authority and efficiency of the education system, if those in schools and classrooms fail to see and experience the relevance of the same policies?

NOTES

1. One of the changes after the implementation of Curriculum 2005 (C2005) was the replacement of the 42 school subjects offered to learners in South African primary schools by eight learning areas. The rationale was that learning areas combine old subjects. In this way a more holistic and integrated approach will be promoted. Each learning area has curriculum-linked outcomes which learners should attain through engaging with learning activities. The learning areas are Languages, Mathematics,

Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Economic and Management Sciences, Technology, Arts and Culture and Life Orientation. In high schools subjects rather than learning areas are offered.

2. Under apartheid South Africa had 19 different educational departments separated by race, geography and ideology. Apart from the Department of National Education (NDE), which was responsible for setting and monitoring norms and standards there was:
 - ♦ the Department of Education and Training (DET), responsible for the education of Africans outside of the homelands;
 - ♦ one department for each of the four so-called independent homelands;
 - ♦ one department for each of the six non-independent homelands (or self-governing territories);
 - ♦ one department for each of the houses of the tri-cameral Parliament: the House of Assembly (for Whites), the House of Representatives (for Coloureds) and the House of Delegates (for Indians);
 - ♦ one department for Whites in each of the then four provinces (answering to the House of Assembly).

For an historical overview of higher education under apartheid refer to 1996 National Commission on Higher Education Report (Pretoria: Government Printers).

3. The South African schooling system is divided into two bands. The General Education and Training (GET) band includes Grades R (Reception) to Grade 9. The Further Education and Training (FET) band includes Grades 10 to 12. The exit examination at the end of Grade 12 is called the matriculation examination.
4. The learner-teacher ratio in primary schools in South Africa is 31:1 and in secondary/high schools 29:1. <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/south-africa/pupil-teacher-ratio-primary-wb-data.html> (Retrieved September 8, 2011)

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