

## Challenges Besetting Teachers in Classroom Assessment: An Exploratory Perspective

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**KEYWORDS** Classroom Practice. Assessment. Methods. Techniques. Practices. Learning

**ABSTRACT** The purpose of this research was to investigate the challenges affecting teachers' classroom assessment practices and to explore how these challenges influence effective teaching and learning. The study was qualitative and employed an instrumental case study approach. Semi-structured interviews, observation and document analysis were used in the investigation. Hargreaves's theoretical framework underpins this study, which involves a case study in the North West Department of Education. The data were collected through classroom observations and interviews. Document analysis was used to triangulate the information collected through observations and interviews. Textual data were analysed using content analysis. The results revealed major challenges such as policy interpretation, assessment planning, implementation of assessment, the use of a variety of methods in assessment and time for assessment. Recommendations were formulated to strengthen classroom assessment practices.

### INTRODUCTION

This study shows that assessment guides the entire process of teaching and learning by providing mutual feedback to learners and teachers in order to improve in their respective tasks. There is substantial evidence to indicate that assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning and of education as a whole. It covers the learning process, often referred to as summative assessment, and generates meaningful feedback to the learning process, often referred to as formative assessment. The assessment methods, tools and techniques used by teachers thus depend on the curriculum model being implemented, but all types of assessment have demanding requirements and therefore pose challenges for teachers. While various researchers (McMillan 2003; Hamidi 2010; Alkharusi 2007) argue that teachers need to understand and be familiar with a variety of essential assessment concepts, principles, techniques, tools, strategies and procedures, relatively little emphasis continues to be placed on the challenges or factors that influence teachers' classroom assessment practices. Teacher assessment practices are vital elements of classroom reform. According to Kotze (2002), during the process of educational reform in South Africa, substantial emphasis was placed on issues, but less emphasis on causes. Assessment needs to be seen as both an instrument and an agent for reform. The foregoing argument implies that assessment as an agent for reform is affected by the specific

pressures and demands of real life as well as by the existing changeable South African context (Kotze 2002).

Various scholars (Gatullo 2000; Chen 2003; Edelenbos and Kubanek-German 2004; Hsu 2005) reveal that demographics, teacher beliefs, teacher training, class size and teacher experience in actual classroom teaching may influence teacher assessment practices. In addition, these empirical studies reveal that teacher understanding, beliefs, opinions and perceptions are closely related to their assessment practices. These are teachers' beliefs about the educational advantages of classroom assessment and about the pedagogical benefits of implementing classroom assessment. Furthermore, these studies emphasise teacher training in classroom management as a crucial element that may affect teacher assessment practices. Similarly, Brown (2002) highlights classroom assessment as one of the most crucial teacher professional development needs. Consequently, understanding teachers' ideas, views, perceptions and beliefs about assessment as well as the challenges associated with classroom assessment practices is absolutely essential in planning and implementing appropriate teacher professional development.

### Theoretical Framework

The study utilises the conceptual framework based on the model suggested by Hargreaves et al. (2002). The model highlights four perspec-

tives – technological, cultural, political and post-modern, with the intention of accounting for teachers' assessment practices. This model is proffered as an attempt to comprehend the factors that hinder teachers' assessment practices. It scrutinises the “how” and “why”, and not merely the commonness of use of classroom assessment tools, techniques and methods. The model is therefore based on the acknowledgement of the notion of assessment as being reflective of values and epistemological beliefs about teaching and learning. The model adopts a wide perspective in relation to teachers' assessment practices, focusing on both the micro and the macro contexts. It thus acknowledges a multifaceted analysis of the issues underpinning classroom assessment from a critical perspective and incorporating related social, political and philosophical factors (Hargreaves et al. 2002). Simultaneously, it includes issues at local level, such as the availability of resources and partnership between the various stakeholders in the school context. As highlighted in the literature and in relation to an argument emphasised by Davison (2007), using different forms of assessment is not merely a technical innovation but an intensely conceptual one. The Hargreaves (2002) model is geared towards examining innovations in education – hence it is appropriate for the purpose of examining such a shift in various frameworks.

### METHODOLOGY

The researchers chose a qualitative design to explore the diversified underlying challenges, understanding and experiences of the teacher in this study. In an effort to capture the different dynamics of teacher practice in relation to classroom assessment, qualitative methods were used because they enabled the researchers to uncover the teacher's classroom assessment practices and reveal the challenges the teacher encountered in classroom assessment. Qualitative research methods are a means to gain an understanding through the eyes of the participants, even though a number of studies have noted that qualitative research methods are too subjective, because they are based on personal opinions (Hargreaves 2000).

The researchers chose a case study design to explore and provide a detailed description of the teacher's understanding, experiences and

practices of classroom assessment, and the challenges she encountered. A case study design is appropriate in this regard because the features of a group of people are being explored with their characteristics in terms of their real-life situations, as well as their individual subjective experiences (Cohen et al. 2000).

This study was conducted in one purposively selected school in the Bojanala District of the North West Department of Education and involved one teacher from the school. The research investigated the challenges facing South African teachers' classroom assessment practices, with the emphasis on how these challenges influence effective teaching and learning and how a teacher deals with these challenges on a day-to-day basis. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted and observation was used to collect data. Relevant documents that the teacher used for assessment were also studied. Content analysis (Neuendorf 2002) was used to analyse the data, with communication and content (speech, written text, interviews and images) classified and categorised. Several measures were taken to ensure that the participant was trustworthy and truthful in order to ensure that the research findings were credible. These included purposive sampling of the study site and participant, the application of appropriate data-gathering strategies and research instruments and upholding the required ethical standards for conducting research with human beings. This research involved a teacher as a participant, and the researchers took the necessary precautions to ensure that the procedures used to collect data were ethical. Before commencing the fieldwork, the researchers obtained written permission from the Department of Education and from the school in which data were collected, and issues of informed consent, privacy and confidentiality were taken into account.

### Ethical Considerations

Prior to the start of the study, consent was obtained from the participant. The participant was informed about the general nature of the study as well as any potential harm or risk the study might cause. She was assured of confidentiality, and the fact that she was free to decline participation. The overall aim of the study was explained and it was decided in advance to use a pseudonym for the name of the participants. The purpose of confidentiality and ano-

nymity was also elaborated on. The participant felt at ease when she was reassured of anonymity.

## RESULTS

### *Biographical Data of Respondent: Teacher X*

Teacher X is a 42-year-old White female teacher at School A, an independent school situated in Brits, a small town in the North West Province, South Africa. Her home language is English, and she had migrated from England to South Africa when she was a child. Her highest qualification is a University Diploma in Education; a three-year primary school-oriented teaching qualification, which she obtained from a university A. She began teaching at this school in 1995. Teacher X was trained in a teacher-centred approach in which pen and paper are used to assess learners' work. She received her qualifications in the old dispensation where teacher training institutions were racially based. In the new dispensation, a learner-centred approach is emphasised. In her teacher training, much emphasis was placed on the basics of learning how to teach, with specialisation in teaching methods and teaching practice. In these training years, Teacher X did not receive any specific training on assessment. She gained assessment knowledge through her experience as a teacher and from in-service workshops from the North West Department of Education (NWDE). At the commencement of this research, Teacher X was in her 17th year of teaching at School A. She was the Head of Department (HoD) for English in the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4, 5, 6 and 7), and also responsible for teaching Home Language (English) in Grades 6 and 7. From the researchers' personal observation of Teacher X, they learnt that she was a hard worker, an open-minded person and a teacher who was committed to making a difference in her school. Her aim was to improve her classroom practice. After one of the researcher's classroom observations, she would often ask for the researcher's opinion of the lesson and how she could improve it. The researchers regarded this as a fundamental feature of her assessment practices and teaching identity.

### *The School Context*

School A is a relatively large independent school that formerly catered for White learners.

However, Black learners were admitted to this school after the country's first democratic elections in 1994. The school opened in 1976, and celebrated 30 years of "excellence" in 2006 (as stated in the school's newsletter), and this was considered a significant milestone in the life of the school. It first opened its doors to 393 learners and 15 teachers on 11 May 1976. Since then its staff complement has increased to 44, with the learner population standing at 1 280 (Grades R to 7). The language of learning and teaching (LOLT) is English and all learners have English as their home language. The staff are predominantly White (21 males and 20 females), with two Black female teachers and one Black male teacher. Since the opening of the school in 1976, many major infrastructural improvements have taken place, including the construction of a fully equipped science laboratory and a library stocked with books, media equipment and improved upon by the parent community. The parent community also built an after-school centre and a class for the 4-5 year olds. A tuckshop was also built, initially run by the staff and parents but now outsourced. With the assistance of the parents, the playing areas and sports fields were laid out and developed. The grounds were in a satisfactory condition owing to an efficient and dedicated ground staff, and the large garden and playgrounds were attractive and well maintained.

From their experience as researchers, the researchers were struck by the attractive appearance of the school, first impressions suggesting that it was well resourced. At the main gate there was a security system fitted with an intercom system. The spaciousness of the grounds was visible, appealing and inspiring. The large administration building housed a large reception area with attractive tables and chairs, fresh flowers on the table and attractively draped curtains. Three secretaries working in a large well-furnished and well-equipped office received visitors and students, and one of the secretaries immediately stood up to assist the researchers when they first entered. The administration area was strongly secured with burglar-repellent gates controlled by the secretaries. A visitor could not proceed to the classrooms without requesting access from the secretaries.

When the researchers first entered the school it was apparent that safety and security measures were in place and that there was discipline

at the school. There were no learners visible outside the classrooms. On a number of our visits to the school, the researchers observed that the teachers were in their classes. After speaking to the principal, the researchers learnt that the school was often used by students for research purposes and also by local universities for placing students for teaching practice. The researchers immediately realised that this was their first bit of insightful evidence about the broader context and institutional culture in which Teacher X was teaching.

### *Teacher X's Classroom Context*

Teacher X's classroom was situated in the third row of classrooms near the front gate. It was a large classroom with 20 chairs and ten tables for the learners, and one large table and chair for her. It was approximately five x six metres, with a green three-metre chalkboard occupying almost the entire front wall. On either side of the chalkboard were two steel cabinets that she used to store her learners' workbooks and copies of worksheets, files for the different grades that she taught and other curriculum documents. Her classroom was well ventilated, with almost the entire western wall comprising large opening windows. Teacher X usually did her classroom administration, such as speaking to the learners, motivating and encouraging them, roll call and register marking at her standard teacher's desk, which was slightly larger than the learners' tables, and which was located in front of the class. Around the walls were posters, pictures, wall charts and teaching and learning aids, arranged according to the different learning areas. At the back of the class was a long bookshelf, running from wall to wall and containing books.

She was responsible for four Home Language (English) classes for Grade 6 and 7, and was also the HoD for English in the Intermediate Phase. The teaching periods were on average about 35 minutes long and on most days she taught double-period sessions. In the school's five-day timetable cycle, Teacher X had ten "free" or administrative periods. She found it highly challenging and indicated that the ten free periods were not enough for her HoD work. She still had to supervise a reading session for 15 minutes every day, as per the curriculum requirements.

There were 35 learners in her current Grade 6 (B) class (17 girls and 18 boys), consisting of 12 whites, ten Africans, five Indians, two Chinese and six Coloureds. The researchers have included this demographic breakdown because Teacher X often referred to language barriers and differences in class in terms of the ethnic composition, essentially suggesting that some learners experienced difficulties responding in and understanding English. On the strength of this introduction to the teacher and her school context, the main findings of the research questions will now be discussed.

### *Research Findings*

As indicated earlier, data for the research question were primarily derived from semi-structured interview and lesson observation. On the strength of extensive scholarship that "understanding assessment practice" is not rigid, fixed or static, but keeps on evolving over time, the findings were informed by the semi-structured interview, stimulated recall session and casual conversation the researchers had throughout their stay at the school. In presenting the evidence, they will draw on their investigations into challenges that affected Teacher X's classroom assessment practices, how she coped with the challenges and how the challenges influenced effective teaching and learning in her classroom. These are presented as themes that emerged from the data.

### *Theme 1: Policy Interpretation*

A major challenge highlighted by Teacher X was policy interpretation. This was an important inquiry in the sense that the researchers worked on the assumption that the way in which a teacher relates to and practices assessment depends to a large extent on his or her understanding and interpretation of the policy on assessment. She expressed her understanding of assessment as follows:

*I would say assessment is a way of determining where children are in terms of what has been taught, first of all where they are now and then, also to see how much they grasped of what has been done. So it gives you as the teacher direction of where they are, what knowledge they have acquired, and that guides you as to*

*what you still need to do. In other words um ... you assess to see what they have gained and how far they have progressed along the way.*

Her understanding was in line with the definition of assessment as stipulated in the National Protocol on Assessment (NPA) for Grades R–12 (DoE 2011). This policy is part of a developmental process aimed at increasing the capacity of the South African education system, teachers, school management teams and the departmental officials. The policy aims to enhance its effective implementation by developing an authentic assessment system that is congruent with OBE in general and the National Curriculum in particular (DoE 2011).

The National Protocol on Assessment (NPA) Grades R–12 (DoE 2011) defines assessment as ... *a process of making decisions about a learner's performance. It involves gathering and organising of information (evidence of learning) in order to review what learners have achieved. It informs decision making in education, and helps teachers to establish whether learners are performing according to their full potential and making progress towards the required levels of performance (or standards) as outlined in the National Protocol for Assessment.*

Although the policy indicates how assessment needs to be fair, reliable and valid, recent literature (Vandeyar and Killen 2007) documents an inability or unwillingness on the part of many South African teachers to adapt their assessment practices to the changing demands of the country's school education. Teacher X was clear in her mind and in her articulation of her understanding of the assessment policy that the policy was a guideline, a frame of reference for assisting teachers in executing their tasks:

*The learning area specialist once came to our school to check on our assessment. She gave us a quiz, to check as to whether our assessments were valid, fair and reliable. She requested us to use an assessment task that we once did in class. I was very happy at the end of the exercise when she told us that my quiz as well as another teacher's quiz in my department was the best.*

One can infer from this that Teacher X was extremely optimistic and enthusiastic about the potential of the underlying assessment key principles, namely that assessment is concerned with issues of reliability and fairness. Assessment is

conducive to reliability in that learning outcomes are the basis upon which assessment is planned and administered. This is a constant feature, regardless of who is doing the assessment and who is being assessed. Teachers are required to use the specifications as a guide to planning, developing and administering assessment. Assessment tasks are regarded as fair and free from bias when they are equally good measures for learners of different linguistic, gender, culture and socio-economic groups in the school population. This also refers to learners with equivalent resources with which to perform the task, at home or at school, and having an equal opportunity to learn.

### ***Theme 2: Assessment is Time Consuming and Requires Much Paperwork***

Teacher X noted with great concern the amount of paperwork involved in assessment. As a HoD she was worried that most teachers were striving to complete the assessment instead of actually helping learners to achieve the learning outcomes and meet the assessment standards. She indicated that in the Home Language (English) learning area, a teacher is required to assess learners in all learning outcomes, namely listening, speaking, reading and viewing, writing, thinking and reasoning, and language structure and use, in addition to compiling assessment tasks that include more than one assessment standard. The Home Language assessment standards assume that learners are able to read, understand and speak the language taken at Home Language level. The assessment standards support the development of these competencies, especially with regard to various types of literacy, notably reading, writing and visual (also regarded as critical) literacies.

In relation to the aspect of time and paperwork in assessment, Teacher X highlighted the following:

*We tend to focus much on paperwork, than actually teaching learners. There is increased administrative workload in terms of departmental and policy directives on continuous assessment; the number and types of portfolio tasks; ways of recording performance; reporting to parents; and end-of year common tasks of assessment. The new assessment approach really increases my workload. I have to assess a number of learning areas at the same time and this*

*poses serious challenges. Just to cite an example, I am responsible for teaching more than one learning area in different classes within the same grade, and some in a different grade, and this is cumbersome. I always spend much time in the classroom on assessment-related activities.*

According to Teacher X, assessment consumed most of her teaching time because she believed in affording learners ample opportunities to achieve the learning outcomes. She believed it was an opportunity to get to know her learners even better at a personal level. Most of the time teachers concentrate on completing the work and recording, without paying extra attention to learners who are struggling to achieve. Teacher X was proud to mention that a learning area specialist for English who once visited her to give her support as HoD was most impressed with her work.

Teacher X's understanding of the rationale behind provision of expanded opportunities for learners is consistent with the policy, which highlights that learners should be afforded an opportunity to learn at a varied pace in order to achieve learning outcomes and assessment standards. Expanded opportunity is one of the principles of assessment. This principle requires teachers to find multiple ways of exposing learners to opportunities that will enable them to demonstrate their full potential. Learners are expected to succeed, but not necessarily at the same time and in the same way. The teacher needs to maximise opportunities for every learner by challenging them to achieve and improve as individuals, but not to compete against other learners (DoE 2007).

### ***Theme 3: Planning for Assessment and Using a Variety of Methods***

Teacher X understood that the method of assessment had to be adapted according to what was being done in class. She mentioned that she would first study the assessment standards and the learning outcomes and then design an activity. In so doing she was able to see which assessment methods she could use, whether it would be an informal discussion in which she simply listened to what the children were saying or a formal assessment where there were specific criteria to assess. When she assessed she wished to see what the children could or could

not do. If the content of assessment was to provide a straightforward answer, such as an adverbial clause or phrase, she did not provide criteria for assessment, but if it was a reading lesson, she would give the learners criteria to assess reading. It was the activity that determined what assessment methods would be used.

On planning for assessment, Teacher X said the following:

*Ok ... before I draw up any assessment task, I look at the assessment standards, these I get from the National Protocol on Assessment. It clearly stipulates what learners in my grade six class are expected to be able to do, and how they are to be assessed. So my assessment is kind of fixed even before I give them an activity.*

This is in accordance with the assessment policy, which states that assessment tasks have to be weighted to collectively engage with all the Learning Outcomes (LOs) and Assessment Standards (ASs) for the particular grade. However, Teacher X did not explain her understanding of the definition of an assessment task, how it was compiled or of what it consisted. The assessment policy at her school consisted of a clear assessment plan communicated at the beginning of the year in calendar format. All teachers were expected to practise assessment according to the prescribed policy. In the assessment plan, parents were informed well in advance about the dates of the assessment tasks and what their children needed to learn for that particular activity. Project work was also communicated to parents, who were informed about a particular project the learners would engage in. They were also informed about the types of materials learners needed to bring to school. The assessment timetable was beneficial in the sense that it informed learners in advance warning what was to be assessed.

Teacher X's practices were consistent with the policy that describes planning for assessment as an integral part of the planning for teaching and learning. The assessment programme was planned by the teacher to meet the needs of learners in the classroom and to facilitate teaching and learning. Each assessment programme thus contributed to the compilation of an assessment plan for the school. Even though Teacher X had indicated in the interview that she also used lesson plans for her lessons, she could not provide the researchers with a copy of such a plan. Instead, she showed them a teach-

ing plan [extracted from the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)] and indicated that she used it to prepare for her lessons. She said that writing a lesson plan would mean she had to copy everything from the teaching plan because the information was essentially the same, adding that she could not teach without the teaching plan. The researchers observed that all the lessons she taught were indeed derived from the teaching plan, in which she had described clearly the learning outcomes and skills, activities to achieve the assessment standards, assessment forms and resources. However, the assessment standards themselves were not outlined. According to the CAPS guidelines for Home Language (English) (DoE 2011), assessment standards in each learning area are important because they define the minimum requirement for achieving the learning outcome at a specific grade. Teachers teach towards learning outcomes and the activities to achieve a certain assessment standard or a group of clustered assessment standards can be varied. At the same time, they can assess in many different ways, depending on what they would like to find out. On the question of the difference between the current way of assessing and the one used in the previous curriculum, Teacher X stated the following:

*It is very different. In the past we just wrote tests and exams, we were not given any hint of what to study, and how we would be assessed. Again ... it was in the form of marks, like ten out of ten. Of course when you got ten out of ten we understood it to mean that you did extremely well.*

Some schools, like that of Teacher X, are relying more on what is known as summative assessment. Performance-based assessment, portfolios, student-designed assessments and so on, are regarded by many teachers as being more reflective of the new curricular goals and methods of instruction. Some teachers view alternative assessment as a better way to determine how well learners are learning (and how effective instruction is) than traditional forms of assessment such as multiple-choice tests. The challenge facing teacher X is to reflect on her current assessment practices to accommodate the diverse learners in post-apartheid South Africa.

As Teacher X posits, her assessment practices were markedly different from those used to

assess her at school and during her training. When she assessed reading she let the children read, whilst listening to their pronunciation and fluency, how they paid attention to reading signs and how they changed their tones. She used a rubric to assess reading, and gave them feedback with comments for improvement. As she put it, when reflecting on her schooling:”

*“In the past, teachers used to ask us to read and just award marks on whether you could read or not.”*

Assessment of reading is now formal, fair and less subjective. Reading is crucial because it prepares learners for writing. When she felt that learners had read enough she gave them a spelling test. She was strict with spelling, and when a learner missed one letter in a word, she marked it as wrong:

*I’ve heard other teachers saying in content subjects like Arts and Culture, Social Studies and Life Orientation ... as long as the child has got an idea of a word, even when they have missed a letter, they mark it as right. I do not like that at all. It gives learners an impression that correct spelling is acceptable in Languages and not in content subjects.*

Teacher X indicated in the interview that during her schooling years, learners were encouraged to spell correctly, irrespective of whether they were in a History, Mathematics or Language class. Her previous experiences thus influenced her present practices in classroom assessment. She encouraged her colleagues to pay attention to spelling across all learning areas because she believed it was the right thing to do.

#### ***Theme 4: Implementation of Classroom Assessment Practices***

Teacher X engaged learners in oral questions and discussions based on their prior knowledge at the beginning of every lesson to ascertain how much knowledge they already had. Her practice was consistent with the requirements of the National Protocol for Assessment (DoE 2011), which states that questioning is an integral part of teaching and learning because it is aimed at generating evidence on learners’ ability to listen, interpret, communicate ideas and sustain a conversation in the language of assessment. Oral questions were used to assess interpretation of ideas, expression of ideas, complete questions and short answer questions.

After each lesson, Teacher X gave the learners an assessment activity to see how much they had grasped, and also to identify if they had problems with the content. This gave the learners direction about where they had made mistakes and how they could improve. In this way she could easily diagnose their problems. Her understanding was linked to a diagnostic type of assessment, as described in the CAPS. This type of assessment is similar to formative assessment, which is developmental and used to inform teachers and learners about their progress. The aim here is to improve teaching and learning – its application leads to some form of intervention of remedial action or programme. Teacher X believed diagnostic assessment provided information on the strengths and weaknesses of learners or inappropriate teaching methodology. She also believed that assessment played a major role in teaching and learning:

*Assessment is my most important focus because it guides me and the children as well; it tells us where we are and where we aren't, where we are ok ... and where we have problems.*

This statement made it apparent that Teacher X believed in and practised continuous assessment. This understanding is aligned to the principles of the NPA which highlight the fact that assessment is ongoing, takes place over a period of time and supports growth and development (DoE 2011). Continuous assessment allows the teacher to assess learner performance formally and informally throughout the year, and also caters for formative assessment, regular interventions and support where needed. It uses a range of methods of assessment that cater for diverse learners' needs and styles of learning. In all her assessment tasks, Teacher X communicated the criteria to learners, using rubrics and giving them to learners well in advance, before an assessment task was handed out. This is of paramount importance because it guides learners on what to expect in an assessment task. In this way they are directed to where they should be and how to get there. She liked rubrics and checklists because they make marking easier. She also felt that they were fair because she could mark the task according to clear guidelines. This was unlike past practice, when teachers would look at a piece of work and mark it, say, six out of ten, or ten out of ten, without having a clear measure of what the numbers actually implied.

Her understanding of rubrics and checklists was strongly connected to the assessment

guidelines, according to which rubrics consist of criteria and levels of competency or performance, with clear descriptors for each level according to each criterion. A rubric is therefore a tool for assessing learners that describes a continuum of performance quality ranging from poor to excellent, and consists of a set of criteria that defines a task in its entirety and by which it is evaluated. Assessment criteria are derived from learning outcomes and assessment standards, and these are statements of what learners must know and can do. The CAPS advises teachers to generate rubric criteria from assessment standards because these form part of learners' instructions and gives them an idea of what is expected of them.

Teacher X organised quarterly phase meetings in her department to discuss assessment and other issues relating to the learning area. At these meetings, she endeavoured to remind her colleagues of what was required of them in assessment. The school operated on a system that everything concerning teaching, learning and assessment had to be endorsed by the HoD before it could be adopted. For example, the finalisation of the progression schedule for a particular grade has to be approved by the HoD. She mentioned the following about how she normally provides feedback:

*... this is a bit vague, if someone were to use this, would they understand? So we try to be clear and concise in assessment guidelines so that any teacher will be able to use the rubric and get more or less the same mark for learners.*

She believed the better the teachers' mastery of English, the better the rubrics would be. However, she was concerned that some teachers who were Afrikaans speaking still struggled, especially with language skills, for instance, when they could not find an appropriate English word. In one of the intermediate phase meetings, Teacher X gave the teachers a memorandum on assessment and on how to comment for reports. The school also had a School-based Assessment Team, whose role was to take care of all assessment issues in the school. In the phase meetings, teachers also shared ideas and good practices.

## DISCUSSION

Emanating from the findings of the study, Hargreaves's theoretical perspective compels Teacher X to implement the National Protocol



on Assessment. The National Department of Basic Education also expects all teachers to assess learners in accordance with the policy guidelines. The findings of this study confirm what several researchers have argued, namely that a variety of factors hinder teachers' classroom assessment practices (Rakometsi 2000; Kotze 2002; Chisholm 2005; Webb 2005). The most significant contributions of research in education suggest that these factors impact on effective teaching and learning. According to Webb (2005), a school's organisation, traditions, routine needs, length of class periods, learner enrolment and the system's expectations all influence educational effectiveness. These internal factors influence how and why Teacher X will automatically assess learners in her classroom on a daily basis. As outlined in the literature, there are possible ways of addressing these factors. Based on the evidence relating to the themes gleaned from the study, the researchers posit that to understand assessment challenges from Teacher X perspectives it is necessary to understand the beliefs with which they define their work. The beliefs Teacher X held influenced her perceptions and judgements which, in turn, affected her behaviour in the classroom. The interaction of beliefs and practices therefore had strong implications for teaching and learning. Furthermore, in the researchers' opinion, this type of interaction is critical for any in-service programme.

The literature review also highlights the key role that experiences and personal history play in shaping teachers' understanding and classroom assessment practices (Brown 2002; Kotze 2002; Webb 2005). Kotze (2002) conducted a study on assessment practices in the classroom. The findings of this study reported that it is imperative for teachers to adapt their assessment practices as alluded to by Teacher X. The foregoing argument implies that assessment as an agent for reform is affected by the specific pressures and demands of real life as well as by the existing changeable South African context. It is evident from the findings that Teacher X constructed her own understanding of assessment, based on her experiences. She had developed a wealth of knowledge and experience, gathered from a lifelong exposure to cluster meetings, training, workshops and the requirements of the curriculum.

The focus of this investigation, as mentioned in the conceptual framework, was to shed light on the factors that influence teachers' assessment practices. It is evident from Teacher X's responses that the participant is not exposed to various forms of assessment such as formative, informative, diagnostic, prognostic and other forms of assessment. According to studies conducted by Neeson (2000) and Davison (2004), Teacher X was still using the old way of assessing diverse learners, which does not comply with the assessment guidelines. In School A, there is strong emphasis on teacher-delivered content with few expectations that all learners will be engaged in broader classroom activities. Despite Teacher X stating in the interview the support for learner-centred classroom, the classroom appeared to be generally teacher centred.

The findings also reveal that assessment caters chiefly for the needs of individual learners – Teacher X referred to expanded opportunities and to the use of a variety of assessment strategies to assess learners. It is evident from the data presented that Teacher X understood assessment as blocking her own initiatives. She felt she had to assess according to policy prescriptions – for example, the policy prescribed how many assessment tasks had to be conducted and recorded. Teacher X practised and preferred traditional summative examination, arguing that this reflected the overall learner performance. We suggest that this is because as a student she had been exposed to this type of assessment, which implies that her background and personal experiences played a significant role in her assessment practices.

## CONCLUSION

A number of pertinent challenges emerged from Teacher X's narrative case. First, her understanding of assessment appeared to be firmly rooted in her interpretation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy. The policy was the only source that she consulted, and as such played a significant role in assisting her to deal with assessment-related challenges. Her ability to cope with assessment-related challenges was also embedded in the assessment knowledge and experience she had acquired during her teaching life, particularly in her role as HoD at the school. In dealing with assessment-related challenges, Teacher X opted for continuous assess-

ment rather than the examination-driven assessment, as required by the assessment policy. Teacher X appeared to use a variety of assessment techniques and afforded learners expanded opportunities to perform to the required assessment standards. She held that there needed to be a change in the way learners were assessed at her school and that the focus of this change would be on equipping learners with better analytical, thinking and interpretive skills. Teacher X believed that the purpose of assessment was to inform learners where they stood compared with their peers, as well as to identify their weaknesses and strengths. This creates the impression that in Teacher X's classroom, teaching and learning do not take place in a democratic environment in which constant consultation and consensus are the order of the day. The policy ultimately envisages a kind of learner who would have the ability to participate as a critical citizen in society.

From a critical perspective, this criteria-referenced outcomes framework seems to be a contradiction to transformative policy and practice. As far as Teacher X was concerned, assessment serves to provide information for reporting and forecasting purposes, to identify high and low achieving learners in the classroom and to direct the pace and pathway of their teaching. Teacher X interpreted assessment as increasing the workload of teachers because it required much paperwork and extra preparation time. Her lack of understanding of the Inclusive Education policy also negatively influenced her classroom assessment practices. She readily admitted that she still needed more training on assessment in general. To summarise: Teacher X's challenges resided in policy interpretation, time constraints, a great deal of paper work, planning and using various forms of assessment and ways of implementing assessment.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Informed by the outcomes of this inquiry, the researchers offer a few suggestions on the management of future implementation of policy efforts in the North West Department of Education in particular, and possibly South Africa in general: Teachers should be afforded more opportunities to receive professional development. Training of teachers should be a process that has to take place over an extended time. The in-

service professional development of teachers needs to be encouraged and spearheaded by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the Ministry of Education. Teacher X requires adequate support and appropriate resources to enhance the classroom assessment practices. This issue is pertinent and central not only to the improvement and promotion of teaching and learning, but also because of the profound implications it has for how Teacher X views educational transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. The DHET needs to have a particularly clear policy for both pre-service and in-service training of teachers regarding their professional development. This is vital because teachers need to keep abreast of change and learners are constantly evolving. In addition, pedagogical resources and even techniques can quickly become outdated. As new methods and campaigns of teaching are introduced, for example, Inclusive Education, teachers are also required to become involved in intensive training to enable them to practise new strategies. Of significance is the fact that teachers are normally expected to engage in a variety of assessment-related activities whilst simultaneously being engaged in teaching activities. For example, they need to know how to deal with the diverse needs of learners, use different assessment strategies, report to different stakeholders, plan for assessment and support each other at cluster meetings.

The professional development of teachers needs to connect teachers' existing knowledge to the current approach by reflecting on their perceptions, assessment practices and the relationship between their perceptions and practices. In their professional development, teachers should be treated as key stakeholders and not as passive consumers of pre-packed knowledge. Teachers have to be constantly focused – hence the need for them to have teaching plans, so that their classroom assessment activities are well coordinated. However, this does not mean that they have to be dogmatic in their use of these teaching plans, because they can still be flexible. Pre-service and in-service training programmes should be designed to ensure that new teachers have the conceptual knowledge, skills and understanding of assessment as a body of knowledge. Teachers in the system should be assisted to develop strong planning skills to enable them to arrange and align appropriate

assessment methods, tools and techniques in their plans.

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