

School-Based Quality Assurance of Assessment: An Analysis Of Teachers' Practices From Selected Secondary Schools Located In Tshwane North District

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ABSTRACT : *Generally, assessment in education is inherently inexact and fraught with inaccuracies in the measurement of learners' abilities. These problems are even aggravated by educator competence and general state of poor management prevailing in many schools. The purpose of this article is to investigate quality assurance of assessment in selected secondary schools located in Tshwane North District of Gauteng Province. Data was collected through qualitative focus group interviews. The findings reveal that, due to multiple factors embedded in complexity and relative knowledge of the quality assurance system, educators struggle to cope with policy demands and contextual realities.*

KEYWORDS: *quality education, quality assurance, business principles, new managerialism, curriculum, assessment, moderation, benchmark studies, monitoring and evaluation*

I. BACKGROUND

School based quality assurance exists as a catalyst of the dominant discourse pervading educational practices across the globe. This phenomenon has evolved and has taken trajectories which account for the current understanding. Since the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s (1989) publication of *Schools and quality: An international Report* there was a widespread discussion of the need to improve educational quality. OECD was concerned of the dominance of traditional management theories that are applied to educational institutions without regard for the uniqueness of the education context (Baldrige, Curtis, Ecker, & Riley, 1978). Baldrige et al (1978:9) argue that educationists need to "extremely careful about attempts to manage or improve...education with modern techniques borrowed from business."

Baldrige et al caution educationists that traditional management theories cannot be applied to educational institutions because unlike business which is driven by profit motive, education is fundamentally concerned with the development of cognitive abilities of human beings. Hence, Grace (1994) points out that the discourse of modern management is largely discordant to education. It is in this spirit that OECD (1989) cautioned educationists that

"education is not an assembly line process of mechanically increasing inputs and raising productivity."

Although this discourse was met with rejection and caution, its penetration of the education environment was prolific even though it is questioned about fundamental issues of societal aims and education purpose. The penetration business principles to education gained momentum since moderates like Osborne (1990:15) opened up doors for business management discourse when declaring that

"we should not fall into the belief that there is nothing to be learned from such experience."

Since Osborne's acceptance of business principles, a barrage of scholarship (West-Burnham, 1992; Lawton, 1994; Stuart, 1994; UNESCO, 2004; Ratcliff, 1997; Vedder, 1994; Mortimore & Stone, 1991; Crawford & Shutler, 1999; Garbutt, 1996; Chong & Crowther, 2006; Aldridge & Rowley, 1998; Toremén, Karakus & Yasan, 2009; de Grauwe, 2007) attempting to domesticate traditional business principles in education became common. Thus, business principles have come to dominate discourses on the management of education. The domestication of traditional management into the arena of education has not only influenced the governance of schools, it has also influenced classroom practices- with assessment being one of them. Giving up to pressure from business and aligning education practices to suit the cultures of business has far reaching consequences for education. Pressure has mounted on the education system and schools to perform. For example, the Minister of Basic Education has signed performance contract which translates into the minister cascading the pressure to schools (Department of Basic Education, 2011 and Department of Basic Education, 2010). Hence, there are plans to set targets for schools.

The influence spread further to affect the outcomes in education. The impact of business principles on educational outcomes is paramount as evidenced in frantic concern with scores. This frantic concern shifted attention of the public and even scholars from real aim of education. The traditional role of education as cognitive development of the child is ignored. Now the focus is on what percentage the child and the school has obtained. This new focus is simmered further by new managerialism. The theory of new managerialism encapsulates the new character of schools that is best described by the concept of marketisation (Maile, 2004). Schools have become markets competing for parental investment. Enrolment has become a shopping. The market theory compels teachers to be entrepreneurs who have to develop innovative ways of attracting clients who may buy at another shop if the services and products of their school do not satisfy them. The logic of market theory holds that one set of consumer preferences is as good as any other. In this way, a good school might be judged as one that offers learners the promise of good marks. This perception has huge implications for assessment at school level.

The purpose of this article is to investigate teachers' practices of assessment at school level. The investigation embraces a deeper analysis of current curriculum discourses on school based quality assurance. Curriculum based discourses reveal the problems that teachers face as they struggle to tame the ever-changing curriculum (Gultig, Hoadley & Jansen, 2002). Because assessment is embedded in the curriculum, some of the arguments on assessment will hinge on the curriculum. For instance, Kraak (1999) argues that the formulation of the curriculum emerged from competing discourses which were not defeated, but in some cases silenced and marginalized in the curriculum development process (Jansen, 1999). The analysis tracks the challenges experienced at school level by teachers. Put precisely, the problem is that teachers lack practical understanding of the complexity of outcomes-based assessment. In this way problems of the curriculum seem to be manifested in the assessment practices. The article will also situate the problems of assessment within the struggles of the system and project them to global debates as I have already demonstrated in the discussion above. In the next discussion I establish the feasibility of this research through the rationale.

II. RATIONALE

a. Why research on assessment

Current research (Karlsson, 2001) demonstrates that since 1994 the government was under tremendous pressure to level the playing fields for learners and to yield results that compare favorably with the apartheid era education. The main challenge of the transition period was to correct fundamental social inequalities and restore credibility of the certification system. Hence, in 1996 the Department of Education promulgated the *South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act, No. 58 of 1996*. SAQA Act was a step taken to respond to the robust criticism of the government's quality of qualifications. Karlsson (2001) points out that the quality of certificates obtained from public schools was questioned as many school-leavers, armed with a certificate, struggle to find employment in the labour market. In an attempt to close the gap the Department of Education (1998) introduced *Assessment Policy in the General Education and Training Phase, Grade R to 9 and ABET*. The purpose of this policy was to transform former assessment policy of the apartheid government. The department had hoped that this policy was going to address inadequacies of the high stakes summative assessment. However, a series of matric results continue to show that *Assessment Policy in the General Education and Training Phase, Grade R to 9 and ABET* had no impact. Senior examination results continue to be disappointing. Following the continued drop in percentage of passes in the matric examination assessment processes were tweaked, and adjusted to rescue the image of government certification system. Despite the adjustments, manipulation and adaptation the results continued with a trend of decline.

Before handing over to Minister Kader Asmal, Minister Sbusiso Bengu issued the *National Policy on Conduct of Senior Certificate Examination* in 1999. This regulation was introduced to ensure uniformity in the running of senior certificate examination in the provinces. The regulation did not improve the administration of examinations. The department began to set examinations at national level and allowing administration at provincial level. Realizing the problems of the quality of assessment continued unabated, the Department of Education (2001) promulgated the *General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act No 58 of 2001* which provided for the establishment of the General and Further Education and Training Quality Council. The General and Further Education and Training Quality Council was established to ensure that there was a framework for quality assurance and to monitor standards of learning achievement. The Council was named Umalusi. The 2008 amended act (*General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Amendment Act of 2008*) expanded the mandate of Umalusi to include:

1. assurance of the quality of assessment at the exit points;
2. performance of external moderation of assessment of all assessment bodies and education institutions; and
3. adjusting raw marks during standardization process.

The mandate given to Umalusi is not an easy. There are many potholes on the road to quality. First, it has to tackle structural legacies inherent in the assessment system, secondly put in place new culture of assessment that comparable to the best in the world. It is in this spirit that this research was conceptualized to investigate whether the road to quality assessment is in the right direction. This is important because research on this aspect will establish whether school based assessment practices are changing or have changed. Furthermore, the disillusionment with the currency of school leaving certificates raises a need for research on the complex and broad issues of the curriculum. Within curriculum discourse the debates are narrowed to school based quality assurance system. The introduction of the Department of Basic Education's (2012a) *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)* also points to a need for research on assessment practices in the schooling system. CAPS unified all previous assessment policies into a single comprehensive Curriculum Assessment Policy document for each subject. The shift to CAPS implies a shift into a new assessment dispensation. It is important to establish how teachers are making a shift to the new practice as envisaged by CAPS.

b. Why research quality assurance

The disillusionment with the quality of certificates necessitates an investigation on the quality assurance mechanisms of the South African education system. Since international benchmark studies (UNESCO's Monitoring Learning Achievement; South African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality(SACMEQ) I & II, Trends In International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) I & II, and Progress In Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) have revealed a major gap on the quality of outcomes of the schooling system. It should be noted that a concern with outcomes is equally important as is a concern with processes of assessment. Success breeds success. This research takes place with the assumption that a quality process will yield a quality outcome. If schools and institutions above them implement quality standards, the outcomes of assessment will be of quality.

Research on the processes of assessment has become even more critical particularly when taking into account local macro policy trajectory. An in-depth scrutiny of macro-policy environment demonstrates in the *Medium Term Strategic Framework* (The Presidency, 2009a) that government has prioritized the creation of a culture of achievement and improving learner outcomes. The *Medium Term Strategic Framework* set out targets to be achieved in 2014, with more emphasis on improving South Africa's position in cross-country tests. The framework also established a criteria for good performance. The government's commitment to outcomes and output measures is clearly set out in the document *Improving Government Performance: Our Approach* (The Presidency, 2009b). This policy document empowers ministers to provide principled leadership and make tough decisions that may be required to deliver on improved learner outcomes. The purpose of this policy document is to introduce outcomes performance system across the government departments. The intention is measure outcomes and outputs. It serves as a mechanism to guide the direction of policy implementation. In this way the government enjoins the departments to "do what matters most". The system is important in that it serves to assess individuals and collectives of people, to evaluate an institution's effectiveness.

The Presidency (2007) used the outcomes performance system to build on initial *Policy Framework for the Government-Wide Monitoring and Evaluation System*. This policy was first in the arena of outcomes performance system. It is an overarching policy framework for monitoring and evaluation in the South African government. It sketches out policy context for supporting frameworks such as the National Treasury's (2007) *Framework for Managing Programme Performance Information*. With this policy the government entrenched the outcomes performance system. Departments are compelled to determine whether they are meeting their aims and objectives, and establish which policies and processes are working. Thus, making use of available data and knowledge is crucial for improving government services. Following the commitment to outcomes performance system in the frameworks, the Department of Basic Education (2010a) developed an *Action Plan 2014. Towards the realization of schooling 2025* in which the Department of Basic Education outlines the actions it is going to take to implement the outcomes performance system. The *Action Plan* spells out many goals, among them, is the promotion of more rigorous system of monitoring. Subsequent to the *Action Plan*, the Minister of Basic Education signed the *Delivery Agreement for the Basic Education Sector* (Department of Basic Education, 2010b). By signing the agreement, the Minister committed herself to 12 outcomes which serves as a key focus of the

Department of Basic Education's work between 2010 and 2014. In order to operationalize the agreement, the Department of Basic Education (2011) came up with *Annual Performance Plan*. The fundamental foci of the Department of Basic Education's Annual Performance Plan are the learners, teachers, schools and the quality of learning. The Department of Basic Education committed itself to ensure that schools are fully functional. I have taken the reader through a maze of macro policy environment to demonstrate that the commitment to outcomes performance system is a project of the entire government system. Ministers are put under pressure for quality services. In education the pressure is cascaded to provinces, which also passes the pressure to districts which, in turn, throw it into schools. The devolution of responsibility for outcomes performance system has major implications for school-based quality assurance system. It means that operational instructions within the schools need to re-aligned to meet the targets of the outcomes performance system. Therefore, research on these aspects is important – as the National Treasury (2007) stipulates:

“Performance information is essential to focus the attention of the public and oversight bodies on whether public institutions are delivering value for money, by comparing their performance against their budgets and service delivery plans, and to alert managers to areas where corrective action is required.”

c. Research gap

The analysis of the current corpus of micro and macro policy environment shows a lacuna on school-based quality assurance. Actually, the Department of Basic Education (2012b) National curriculum Statement Grades R-12 which represents a policy statement for teaching and learning in public schools is silent on school-based quality assurance. The silence is also conspicuous in the Department of Basic Education (2012c) National Protocol for Assessment Grades R-12. The implication of this silence is that schools undertake quality assurance without proper guidelines. The absence of policy guidelines would also mean that there are variations in the way schools apply quality assurance. The variations in turn would affect the quality of the assessment at school level. While curriculum debates have been vibrant with many scholars criticizing the government on technical language of the curriculum, challenges of implementation, resourcing schools, training teachers on the curriculum, and reducing the mundane activities of the assessment, very little attention is paid to school-based assessment. This article aims to fill the gap that exists by adding critical knowledge on school based quality assurance.

III. CONCEPTUAL MAP OF SCHOOL BASED QUALITY ASSURANCE

3. 1. Conceptual definition and typologies

School based assessment is a process of measuring the candidate's attainment of knowledge and skills against defined criteria. In terms of the Department of Basic Education's (2012) *National Protocol for Assessment Grades R-12* the process of measuring the candidate forms part of the broader mandate of the implementation of the curriculum. The definition of school based assessment, embedded in the changing curriculum, also embraced the macro changes taking place in the curriculum. Curriculum ecology bestowed different nomenclatures to school based assessment. For instance, in policy corpus school based assessment assumes names such as internal assessment, school based tests or examination, continuous assessment or performance assessment. In recent years school based assessment has become entrenched in the teaching and learning process. In the current curriculum architecture, it is part and parcel of teaching and learning. The processes of teaching and learning are now intricately linked in the curriculum lexicon and in the discourses about quality education. The notion of quality education, as driven by concerns poor academic achievement that has come to characterize education, became infused in school based assessment. In the rationale I argued that the government's qualifications criticism regarding their quality. Karlsson (2001) points out that the quality of certificates obtained from public schools are questioned and doubted. This concern compels public institutions to infuse mechanisms for quality checks. Hence, the concept included, as a dependent variable, quality assurance. In the curriculum lexicon, which has infused quality quality mechanism, school based assessment is also referred to as moderation.

The Department of Education (2001) defines moderation as the quality assurance process which ensures that assessment meet the standards set out in the policy documents. As I have indicated above research on school based quality assurance is thin. This scenario affects the quality of definitions prevailing in literature. Therefore, there is over-reliance on government documents. It attempting to define the phenomenon I will borrow from other external sources (Australian Board of Senior Secondary Studies, 2003). The Australian Board of Senior Secondary Studies (2003) defines moderation as a set of processes designed to provide the education system wide comparability of grades and scores derived from school based assessment. Australian Board of Senior Secondary Studies utilizes moderation to form a basis for valid and reliable assessment in senior secondary studies. They also use for maintenance of the quality of assessment at secondary school level.

In promulgating standards for site based quality assurance the Department of Education (2001) consolidates the initiatives begun in the first democratic government. Quality assurance is used to quash the criticism and improve the credibility of the certification system. For this to be a reality current policies recognize that school based assessment, which may take the informal or formal form, need to be assured. The process of school based quality assurance is, as a policy requirement, prescribed to align practices in the classroom to apply fair, valid and reliable procedures for reasons not similar to the Australian ones.

The current policy provision is strong on external assessment by focusing quality assurance activities at exit point of assessment. The *General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act No 58 of 2001* is silent on internal quality assurance mechanisms that schools need to apply. Hence, schools encounter difficulties as there is no uniform interpretation and application of school based quality assurance of assessment. In trying to fill the gap, South African Qualifications Authority (2008) published, on behalf of Umalusi, a *Summary of Umalusi Functions Regarding Exams and Assessment* which outlines the criteria for moderation of question papers and described it as follows: standard of question paper; coverage of core syllabus; presentation of question paper; instructions to learners; language usage; and time allocation. It would seem that these principles would be appropriate to guide moderation at school level. In operationalizing its definition, the Australian Board of Senior Secondary Studies (2003) divided moderation into qualitative moderation and quantitative moderation. In terms of the Australian Board of Senior Secondary Studies, qualitative moderation would include approval of learning and assessment programmes by subject panel, teachers providing learning and assessment experiences of the learners, presentation of previous learner's performances.

Quantitative moderation is a statistical moderation of assessment (Queensland Studies Authority, 2010). The prerogative to decide on this type of moderation does not rest with teachers. Quantitative moderation involves verification, comparability and confirmation. Verification is a process by which the review panel advice schools about learner achievement relative to national codes used to describe learner's performance. With regards to comparability, the presiding officers look for evidence that the judgment of standards across the district in a province is comparable. Learner achievement across all national codes is considered to ensure consistent application standards. And confirmation refers to awarding of exit levels of achievement based on additional evidence of learner achievement. Normally it is done at district level or delegated to schools after submission to the district. The procedures are kept secret or are not accessible to the public.

3.2. Major debates

Debates on the concept school-based quality assurance evolved from discourses and processes embedded in dominant economic theories of modern management. The premise of the economic theories asserts that the core business of education is teaching and learning, and therefore, the success or failure of the business of education has to be measured. Measurement is one key yardstick utilized to assess the quality of education. In tracking how the concept evolved one needs to analyze the basic tenets of the premise. A closer look at the core business of the school –teaching and learning – reveals a grim picture of the state of our schools. The crisis in the core business of the school is outlined by Bloch (2009:58) who laments that:“Schooling in South Africa is a national disaster. The vast majority of our schools are not simply producing the outcomes that are their chief objective. What is more, international tests suggest that South African schools are among the world's worst performers in maths and literacy.”Bloch's assertion confirms Fleisch's (2008) thesis, which after thorough analysis of South Africa's poor performance in a series of international benchmark tests, concluded that South African education is in crisis. The crisis is not only about outputs, Taylor and Vinjevoold (1999) have argued that the main problem in our education system goes to bottom-line – teaching. After undertaking an intensive review of studies on teaching and learning in South African schools, Taylor and Vinjevoold (1999) concluded that teachers seem to lack the necessary skills to teach the subjects they are teaching. Teachers's inability to teach also impact on their assessment skills. It is highly unlikely that a teacher who cannot teach can assess correctly.

Many turnaround strategies tinkering and pondering on the South African education crisis have been implemented with little success rate. International benchmark studies have shown us that schools are failing. What is elusive is a model that works best to help learners learn and succeed. Those whose children's future depend on the success of the public schools demand a robust analysis of what works and what does not. Debates on what works and what does not are premised on accountability. In the context of the research outlined above, in South Africa we know the problem and the problem is that our teachers seem to lack the skills to teach. As part of accountability (Reeves, 2000), parents need to know whether they could trust that their children will learn when they are at school, and not be fooled by higher marks they receive during the course of the year which are not confirmed by exit point assessment. It does not help to overwhelm children with many assessment

tasks that come in the form tests, homework, projects, etc. Parents need a guarantee that teachers can teach. The education system cannot be trusted until teachers are tested for content knowledge to establish their competence.

In an era where the concern for quality in education is a great concern knowledge on school effectiveness has become more critical. We need to know whether we are coming out of the crisis. School effectiveness has become an urgent panacea. Research on school effectiveness need to inform us whether the huge amounts put on education are yielding returns. Scheerens and Bosker (1997) advice us that in the context of a crisis, research should focus on technical effectiveness and efficiency. This implies that data that is made available should point to which skills work for teachers. And when that is made available investments should be made accordingly. Research undertaken recently by Christie, Butler and Potterton (2007) and Maile (2005) are exemplary in demonstrating how schools in disadvantaged areas perform excellently despite the challenges and conditions they exist in. these research dispel the myth that poverty does have a bearing on the academic achievement of learners. So therefore, for a researcher to tell us that schools are not effective because of poverty it will be incredible and a demonstration of lack of knowledge of existing body of knowledge. In South Africa we know (because current research informs us) that schools are ineffective because they lack technical efficiency and effectiveness. Cutting edge research (Poliah, 2010) reveals that the quality of school based measurements is of low standard. Poliah argues that when teachers set tests and administer them, learners perform excellently, but when the test is set externally learners achieve low marks. This exposes the skills that the teachers possess regarding assessment. Poliah (2010: 262) avers that

“Learners get high marks due to the quality of papers at school. Teachers set papers that are not of the required standard and they pass though the hands of HoDs and are not properly moderated.”

Poliah (2010) laments the fact that assessment tasks are given as homeworks. Marks are very high and recorded. With assessment tasks being implemented at home, there is no control over the assistance given to the learner. Learner performance that include assessment tasks completed at home inflate the scores, and ultimately obfuscate the overall performance of the learner at the exit point. This research has demonstrated, so far in literature review and later in the findings, that there are no guidelines for school based quality assurance. In addition to this, the centralization of assessment implies that very few opportunities for expert development exist in the provinces. The introduction of National Senior Certificate, although lauded for uniformity and common examination, disempowers provinces. Umalusi (2012) recognized challenge of centralization when stating that

“it requires them to give up taken for granted ways of doing things and some elements of their practice which they see as central.”

Shifting examinations to the national department implies that expertise for assessment is centralized. This leaves schools with very little capacity to develop own skills, and nurture new skills for organizational self-renewal.

IV. RESEARCH STRATEGY

In the study I used qualitative approaches. This choice was informed by the problem under investigation. The study was set out to investigate teacher practices of quality assurance in selected secondary schools located in Tshwane North District. The problem was not about scale, but depth of the individual understanding of quality assurance. The unit of analysis was an individual teacher or department official in his/her own district/school. The design was a case study - Tshwane North District. The case study took multiple forms as teachers were drawn from five secondary school located within Tshwane North District. I used purposive sampling to select:

1. one district official to provide rich information on the management of the quality assurance system within the schools,
2. two heads of departments (HoDs) to give school management perspective on the quality assurance system of their schools, and
3. four teachers to add teacher perspectives on the practice of quality assurance in their schools.

The sampling strategy was used to integrate data analysis strategy of triangulation in the collection of data (Hycner, 1985). In this way the design and the sampling strategy were made to be responsive to the phenomenon under investigation. Each participant was interviewed separately so as to increase their freedom to articulate their experiences without fear of ‘authority figures’. Firstly, I interviewed teachers, secondly, followed

interviews with HoDs, and thirdly, I interviewed the district official. This was done with due consideration of Grundy's (1987) advice in which she stated that when dealing with curriculum matters constitutive elements of practice need to inform actions and instrumentation of the researchers. So the interviews took place in a real world of the participants, not an imagined one. The questions used for interviews were cross-referenced in subsequent interviews. In other words some questions that were used for teachers were also used for other participants to establish consistency of data. Data was analyzed using the following steps (Hycner, 1985): listening to the interview for a sense of the whole; delineating units of general meaning; eliminating redundancies; clustering units of relevant meaning; determining themes from clusters of meaning; returning to the participants with the summary and themes; and modifying and finalizing themes.

V. FINDINGS

Data presentation

Lack of national guidelines

It appears that there are not substantive guidelines for school based quality assurance. In schools visited teachers still use traditional practices of moderation where obtaining a signature of the head of department or a senior staff member remains the hallmark of quality assurance. With regards to this the District official said: "Our schools have no guidelines for school based quality assurance. You will find that the internal moderation is not robust. When it is time for examination or tests, teachers queue up for the HoD's million dollar signature that come with no comments on the standard of the work."

This practice prevails because the current policy framework is silent. Teachers have no guidance on matters of content coverage, and cognitive demand for example. The policy silence creates multiple practices and variations that do augur well for the quality assessment at school level. The district official said:

"We are aware that Umalusi has some guidelines that it uses for assessment set at exit level. However, for individual school practices it is still traditional methods of quality assurance that are used in schools. Even with the traditional methods, the HoDs will commonly comment on content coverage, but not on cognitive demand. We are still far away from standardization. We need leadership on this aspect. Otherwise our teachers' capacity to handle school based assessment will remain low."

It seems that teachers use only one methods of assessment. Teachers argue that they face overcrowded classrooms, therefore, other methods which require individual attention are difficult to implement as they require more time to mark. The main argument they raise is that they do not have enough time because they teach many grades and subjects. One teacher pointed out that:

"I give tests to my learners according to the schedule given to me. I cannot miss the schedule. That will have huge repercussions for me and my school. The district official will be behind my back."

The assessment culture of the schools appears to be submerged by the culture of reporting that pervade the management of the school system. Teachers are happy to provide a list of marks to the HoDs who then pass them to the district officials, who in turn are also happy to 'get the papers'. A big failure tends to arouse the attention of officials. Schools manage such scenarios urgently. It seems teachers are aware of the need to present good marks. Hence, another teacher said:

"The issue of whether my students have understood the work they are tested on is immaterial. What the department wants is marks, i.e. good marks. So the tests are aligned to this perspective."

District clusters

The efforts of the districts in managing assessment indicate pockets of local innovations. Clustering schools seem to be working for districts. In the study the district official seem to be happy in the way schools interact. The official points out that:

"In our district we have created a cluster of schools which we grouped according to their performance and level of understanding of issues under discussion. We use clusters to give feedback from the provincial or national structures to teachers in our district."

However, the district official acknowledges that the cluster is not a panacea for all assessment problems they have. The official argues that the current system is not perfect, and points out that there are some challenges and issues not yet addressed by the cluster. The official said:

”At district level we still do not have capacity to cover all subjects of the schools. The little capacity that is available is concentrated on Mathematics and Science as priority subjects. If I was responsible for staffing of the district I will add more district officials on subject that have higher failure rate such as History, English and Accounting. From there gradually cover all the subjects.”

On further assessment of the cluster, the district official said:

“ In the cluster meeting there is a problem of teachers regarding us experts. They will sit down and not engage in a exchange of views voluntarily. They always want to listen to us as experts. This is a problem for us. In reality that should be our expectation of them. I mean, as practitioners, they should be telling us what works and what does not. Then in that way theoretical propositions prepared for the department will be shaped by success stories from practice. Teachers are happy to get previous question papers, finish and klaar. ”

Teachers seem to have a different experience with regards to clusters. They complain of multiple issues. For instance, some teachers say:

“The clusters do not deal with all the subjects. They always call Science and Maths teachers. It is as if other subjects do not exist or do not have problems. I think they should give all of us support. We need that even in the languages. For example we hear that teachers are being trained in CAPS. We have not yet attended training on this. There is always a rush to meeting assessment targets than robust discussion of assessment challenges.”

Other teachers say:

“In the clusters they give generic feedback. At our school our problems are different. The feedback does not help us. Sometimes it is not beneficial to attend these meetings. They are a waist of time because they ask for items for discussion. When we ask the district official about our specific issues, the official does not have answers.”

Subject advisory services

Subject advisors encounter problems in giving support to teachers on different subjects. The problems include the lack of in-depth subject knowledge. When visiting schools, at times, they are rejected by teachers. In fact some teachers pointed out that:

“I think they appointed wrong people to be subject advisors. We expect that a subject advisor will have enough knowledge on the subject they are supposed to give support. Those who come to our school from the district are not helping us.”

Others say:

“Last year we did not attend to them we they came to our school. We told them we are better off than with them. We know we can consult some of the teachers from the neighboring schools if we have problems. In our cluster meetings they always tell us they have no powers, we must as they say because that is the instruction from the department. ”

Another teacher said:

“In our cluster meetings they always tell us that they know less. We ask them questions they say they are going to ask the department and they never come to give us feedback on the problems we raised. I think the department should appoint the right people. Otherwise, we will continue to suffer as teachers.”

In their own account the subject advisors (district official) they acknowledged the shortcomings pointed out by the teachers. Hence, the district official said:

“Some of us are appointed from schools. Our knowledge of the subjects is limited. We need further training that will increase our competency. Maybe those who lectured in colleges or universities are better. But the problem is that some other are redeployed from different subjects and are made subject advisors on the subjects they have no training or prior knowledge. Our main constraint is staffing as I have indicated earlier. We need more qualified staff for all the subjects.”

Policy inertia

It seems that teachers have lost track of what is expected of them as result of the many changes that have experienced in recent years. Their confusion is clearly discernible when asked about the new changes that were enforced by the shift to new policy. One teacher explains the problems she experiences with regards to education policies:

“I have thirty years teaching experience. In the last ten years that I have teaching I do not know what I am doing. Today they tell you must do this. The following day you will receive a circular telling you to drop what you have been doing. No teacher is taking the department seriously. I mean one will be wasting her valuable time in trying to master what they want us to do. We know that with new ministers appointed every five years there is something new to implement. Then we just for another minister.”

Another teacher expressed his frustration in this way:

“Since the introduction of OBE there are many forms to fill. We spend a lot of time doing administration. By the time we finish with the forms there is little time left for proper classroom work. That is why most of our tests are done for policy compliance. What they are interested in is marks on the paper.”

Teachers are prepared to change the way they practice assessment unless that is well communicated to them and they are given enough time for the change to sink into their culture of doing things. The teachers who participated in the interview said:

“We support the new changes. But for us on the edges of the suburban areas we are not well informed. We often hear about the changes from colleagues in the neighboring schools of those who teach in town.”

Another teacher said:

“I always keep a file on the information I receive about the changes. Information is important, especially for us who live far away from town. However, some of the policy documents I cannot comprehend. I need someone to explain the technical jargon used.”

With regards to changes in assessment teachers said:

“I know that now the department has introduced CAPS for each subject. CAPS is important because it stipulates the weighting of assessment tasks and the format of these tasks. However, what confuses me is whether we have dropped NCS or not. Again we hear that OBE is buried. What is the truth?”

Ignorance of local practices

Currently assessment practices ignore local practices. Even more omitted is the difference between rural and urban. Children have to write examination on issues that have no relations with their local context. The language used for tests and examinations is not their mother tongue. The comments of teachers reflect these assertions. For instance, one teacher said:

“I think in south Africa we have a huge problem. We test children on things that are not related to their environment. Children develop an understanding of textbook knowledge as existing somewhere, and their world as not relevant for studies. They know that knowledge from their life-world will not make them pass. Hence many children rote-learn things and regurgitate them on the answer scripts”

Another teacher said:

“To add to the problem children encounter when they answer questions, the children are forced to provide answers in the language they have not mastered. And I think problem goes deeper into us teachers. We also teach in the subjects in English. Some of the technical terms we cannot explain adequately because English is also a foreign language to us.”

On the question of the current policy not permitting the use of mother tongue instruction, the district official said:

“It is said that in a democracy we still struggle to get indigenous languages use to teach in the classroom. Look at the western Cape and Northern Cape, every year we know that these provinces will do better than us in Gauteng, because the majority of their learners write in Afrikaans which is their mother tongue.”

Teacher capacity and Lack of respect for teachers' assessment practices

Teachers who participated in the interviews pointed out that they need training on the new curriculum. They lament the fact that since the introduction of outcomes-based education, they have no adequate knowledge to cope with the new demands of teaching and assessing learners. For instance, one teacher said:

“I am confused, and frustrated. I have lost confidence in teaching. Just imagine going to class everyday knowing that I don't know. The problem is that the department does not train us. Even if they do they will take to workshops for two or three days and expect you to have mastered the curriculum. It is just that there are few job opportunities. If I can find another job I will leave teaching.”

Similarly, another teacher said:

“Since the introduction of OBE I have attended many workshops, but still I do not have a clue on what I am expected to do with regards to assessment. Because I have to show my HoD some marks on what my learners have written. In the tests my learners get higher marks, but I am not sure whether they can get the same marks if another set a test on the same content.”

Another teacher agreed that:

“Assessment is a problem to us. Many parents will complain that their children fail matric when they have always written tests of low standard because we do not know how to assess the learners. When receiving their children's reports every term or year the parents and the children think that the report is a true reflection of their performance. And that is not true. I think we need to be trained so that this can be avoided.”

5.2 Summary of the findings

1. There are no national guidelines for school based moderation
2. Tests dominate the assessment regime
3. Clusters are not well planned and do not include teachers' views
4. Subject advisors do not have adequate competence in providing support to teachers
5. Teachers have no confidence in their work
6. Structures exist at district level for discussions and meetings on assessment.
7. Teachers are confused and frustrated about policy instability
8. One size fits all is applied in the way assessment is managed by the district.
9. There are many meetings held with clear outcome
10. Teachers lack capacity to manage school based assessment
11. Teachers ask low level questions

VI. DISCUSSION

The problem of lack of national guidelines impacts negatively the culture of entrenching principles of good practice. What it means is that learners experience a standardized paper once they start to write external exams. It seems the robust processes applied at national and provincial level are missing at school. For instance, Umalusi (2010) reports that since the introduction of National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination, Umalusi implemented a rigorous process of moderation, monitoring, verification, post-exam analysis and standardization through subject specialists who act as moderators and evaluators. Umalusi has established special committees to deal with standardization. These initiatives have not yet filtered to schools. Schools will benefit a lot if such practices are replicated to their internal quality assurance system. Tests dominate the assessment regime. This is an influence of the pressure to produce good marks. Such culture hides the inherent weakness of the teaching and learning in schools. Schools produce good results in internal assessments. The issue of cognitive demand in the assessment instruments is critical if schools are to start building a culture of quality. This finding resonates with Poliah's (2010) discovery. In his doctoral study, Poliah (2010: 262) established that:

“Learners get high marks due to the quality of papers at school. Teachers set papers that are not of the required standard and they pass through the hands of the HoDs and are not properly moderated.”

School based quality assurance needs to determine whether the learners have achieved. Research (Killen, 2007) demonstrates that assessment should not be about the product only, teachers should also develop processes that would help in assuring quality. Hence, we are surprised that our learners perform badly in national and international benchmark tests. While innovations taking place at district level are welcome and appreciated, research demonstrates the dysfunctionality of the district (McKinney, 2010 & Prew, 2012). McKinney (2010) points out that districts are generally not perceived to be fulfilling their support mandate. Districts are failing in accountability and support.

McKinney argues that districts lack innovation. She points out that districts predominantly serve as conveyor belts for policy prescriptions. There is little or no evidence showing districts making a difference in classroom practice. On a positive note, Prew (2012) shows that districts if given support can function to fulfill their role. One positive development is the cluster system. However, activities of this innovation need to be streamlined and be organized systematically for omissions indicated in the research to be addressed. Challenges of subject advisory services are intricately linked to broader deficiencies of districts. National and international literature characterizes districts as decentralization structures riddled with tension between their dual roles of accountability and school support. McKinney (2010) points out that research evidence demonstrates that districts emphasize policy compliance in their endeavors to administrative mandates. They have limited imagination and creativity to accommodate local needs. Hence, Mphahlele (1999: 32) concluded that:

“Districts seem to be disempowered in the running of schools and supporting teaching and learning.”

Districts are new structures implemented after 1994. Their roles are not yet clarified. And this confuses the officials. The challenges are aggravated by lack of capacity. Districts are understaffed and lack the required skills and competence to deal with major challenges facing the schools. The problem of shortage of the right skills mirrors the national challenge of skills shortage. Govender (2003) posits that:

“Districts are still struggling to implement policy in a systematic and integrated manner and much still remains to be done in improving the quality of teaching and learning.”

District support remains a work in progress. More work is yet to be made to improve the quality of support that they are supposed to give to schools. In an audit that provides a comprehensive analysis of key education and training, the labour market and macroeconomic indicators, Kraak and Press (2008) clearly demonstrates the acute shortage of skills in critical areas of Mathematics, Science, Technology and Accountancy. Therefore, a shortage of staff at district level is national problem of skills shortage. In the first five years of the democratic government, there was a barrage of policies to speed up change. The compendium of education policies ranges from discussion documents, green papers, White papers, and to laws governing transition from apartheid to democracy. Despite the many laws little had changed on the ground fulfilling the adage, the more things change the more they stay the same. After observing the first few years of the transition critically, Jansen (2001: 13) pointed out that:

“It appeared that the political and educational edifices of apartheid were unshakable...it is difficult to pinpoint public event that best defined the irreversible moment in the movement towards the termination of apartheid.”

The transition period was characterized by the race for policy, and the scramble by the civil society to make contributions about policy positions. Kraak (1999) provides a comprehensive explanation of the race for policy by categorizing the race into three phases. The first phase was characterized by radical activism with a push for “People’s Education”; the second phase was the period of structural change; and the third phase was characterized by volatile period of outcomes-based education. In my observation what followed the third phase is a period of stabilization of the OBE epitomized by CAPS. In all these phases the teacher remained a confused as they grapple to make sense of changes imposed into the practice of teaching and learning. Cameron and Green (2004) caution policy makers that the speed at which changes have been introduced in the education system has destroyed the ‘psychological space’ which determines the success of policies in change management. The flood of policies not only brought instability in the education system, but has also rendered teachers confused and incompetent. MacLaughlin (2002) studied this phenomenon and concluded that effective implementation of change, particularly change in classroom practice occur in what she calls “mutual adaptation”, which essentially mean that teachers modify the new curriculum while continuing to practice existing ways of teaching and learning. The modification may ultimately lead to non-implementation. Teachers spend substantial amount of time developing materials for use in the classroom. Although teachers are supplied with ready-made lesson plans, they always develop teaching and learning materials from the scratch. They adapt information from the textbooks for learners to understand. Adaptation of the learning material is a good practice because what they receive from the department is generic material which may not have relevance to their environment.

Maile (2011) point out that the current curriculum is devoid of home content particularly for the lower class. Children in farm schools and tribal areas do not have the benefit of knowledge that is embraced by the curriculum. Maile (2011) attributes this omission to meritocracy. Hoadley and Jansen (2009) agrees with Maile by pointing out that the omission is a response to the need for specialized knowledge.

Hoadley and Jansen call the specialized knowledge powerful knowledge because of its compelling promise of better employment opportunities. This disconnect has serious implications for assessment. It means that assessment tasks have to be adapted to real-world simulations and be connected to their personal experiences (McMillan, 1997). For working class children this is extremely difficult their life-world has bearing on the curriculum. They always have to learn about things from other people's perspectives. For the majority of working class children schooling is difficult. With the current move to standardization (Umalusi, 2010), local knowledge will continue to be sidelined. Examinations are now run at national level. Provinces now have very little responsibility. This is happening despite international practices pointing to the contrary (Reeves, 1998). The importance of local practices was highlighted in Christie, Butler and Potterton (2007). In a Report to the Minister of Education entitled *Schools that work*, Christie, Butler and Potterton (2007) posit that most cases of failure in schools occur as a result of the disconnect between home and the school. The findings also confirm the assertions of the report.

The problem of teacher capacity is not new. While in other parts of the world it is not a big issue, in the developing world teacher capacity is acute. For instance, UNESCO's (2008) report entitled *Universal Primary Education in Africa: The Teacher Challenge*, demonstrates that in the developing world, particularly Africa, teacher capacity is major problem. Many African education systems operate on teachers whose professional training is questioned. Their professional training is questioned because they lack sufficient academic qualifications. The problem is exacerbated insufficient pre-service training opportunities. Hence, many untrained teachers and under qualified teachers occupy teaching posts in many schools. Teacher development is critical in closing the knowledge gap that pervades the teaching profession. Craig, Kraft and du Plessis (1998) concur with this assertion. In a comprehensive report, Craig, Kraft and du Plessis (1998) argue that for successful assessment teacher need to be developed. The global situation is reflected in South Africa. Indigenous literature (Pahad, 1999; Bellis, 1999; Potenza & Monyokolo, 1999; and Vally, 1999) demonstrates that although South Africa is a bit ahead of its African counterparts in the area of teacher training and development, many of the current crop of teachers struggle to teach in the classroom mainly because of lack of knowledge on the new pedagogic demand of the new curriculum (Vally, 1999). In fact, Pahad (1999) clearly shows that there is very little practical help for teachers. So the teacher's knowledge of assessment is very limited. Pahad (1999) concluded that teachers lack understanding of complex issues of assessment.

The new curriculum has eroded teachers' knowledge base. Training is critical to renew teachers' knowledge and enable them to make accurate judgments about learners' performance. The standard of assessment can only improve when teachers are developed. The teacher's lack of confidence, as shown by coping questions from previous question papers, is a tip of an iceberg.

VII. CONCLUSION

School based assessment is riddled with a myriad of problems ranging from lack of skills and knowledge about the curriculum. The challenges of curriculum implementation seem to deepen the problems in assessment. The changes in the curriculum erode whatever little knowledge teachers have, thus killing the confidence and morale. The main problem is that while teachers attempt to master the new changes, before they could confidently implement what the curriculum requires a new set of changes are effected. The intricate problems of curriculum changes imply that schools operate without the necessary knowledge. It does not help to have a good curriculum when those at the implementation level are not trained. There is a dire need to stabilize the curriculum. Such stability will go a long way in restoring the confidence of teachers. The problem of lack of knowledge also affects district officials. These officials are an important link between the schools and the department of education. It is important to empower them with the rights skills so that they help teachers. Without proper knowledge they will not have confidence to face teachers. Restoring confidence in the public education system requires that quality assurance systems operating at school level be consolidated. The current practices are not helping the department in its quest for gaining public confidence. Guidelines for school based assurance of assessment need to be put in place. The role of Umalusi is critical in this regard. Umalusi can help by devolving the current moderation principles. Centralizing its activities to the national level perpetuates mediocrity in the assessments taking place in schools.

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