

Editorial

This special edition of journal articles centers on assessment in education in the context of South Africa (SA) after 1994. The purpose of these articles is to provide readers with an understanding of selected educational discussions by academics on assessment in SA post-apartheid.

Post 1994, has been described as a time where education policy reform was 'prolific' given the 'aim of creating a single national core syllabus' (Sherman et al. 2011: 515). The type of education selected to cohere with this purpose was outcomes based. The introduction of continuous assessment across all provinces by 2001 allowed for a multitude of assessment prospects throughout the school year which would be linked to teaching and learning. The Revised National Curriculum Statement and the more recent Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) all have resonance with the Department of Education's current stance: 'assessment for learning' which promotes both formative and summative methods of assessment. Thus, whilst the focus of this special edition is assessment, its marriage to both teaching and learning is unequivocal. Fernandes et al. (2012) alludes to this union by drawing attention to a change from a 'testing culture' to 'an assessment culture' (Birenbaum and Dochy 1997) which integrates teaching, learning and assessment. Thus, teaching and learning concurrently permeates the articles on assessment herein. The editorial weaves a discussion on the links between the three concepts of assessment, teaching and learning and the complexity of assessment in SA by drawing on recent debates that have spiraled into media highlights and the corresponding academic responses.

Broadfoot and Black (2004:19) argued that 'we have become an assessment society,' as there has been a growing interest in assessment internationally (Anderson 2005) and 'much (*has been*)..written about assessment in higher education' (Leach 2012: 137). In particular, Gibbs and Simpson (2004:03) reported that 'whenever Higher education hits the headlines it is nearly always about assessment' citing examples of standards, plagiarism, errors in the papers, as some examples. This adage of an 'assessment

society' is also true for contemporary South Africa with media and academic debates abounding on assessment at the levels of primary, secondary and higher education. Whilst Falchikov (2005) identifies 4 paradigms of assessment (assessment as measurement, as procedure, as enquiry and as quality control), each paradigm has received varied attention. The 2011 Annual National Assessments (ANA) undertaken amongst grade 3 and 6 learners in SA schools made the limelight, particularly when the results were released in June 2011. It revealed poor performance in Maths and Science, key subjects in obtaining skilled jobs and enhancing South Africa's pursuit of improving economic growth and development. A report by the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) revealed that "the poor performance of many teachers is a major reason for the dismal results achieved by large sections of the schooling system" (News24.com 2011). But Dempster (2011:37), commenting on the ANA report disclosed some interesting perspectives on the design and calibration of the tests. Her contention was that "the distribution of scores" indicate that "the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and achievement milestones are either wrong or have been incorrectly interpreted by the test designers" and a discrepancy between "the levels of difficulty (20% of questions should have been 'easy') and ..the children's capabilities." She also noted that the language of the test was problematic, which is in either English/Afrikaans whilst close to 80% of SA learners are taught in their mother tongue. English as a medium of instruction is only introduced to the learners in grade 4, suggesting that learners' command of English is relatively limited in grade 6 (Dempster 2011: 37). Hence, the above critique indicates the complex nature of assessment and the need to use a variety of lenses (for example. language, design and score distribution) to analyse assessment.

Whilst he was in SA, Schofield (2011) also noted that assessment is "one of the most persistent challenges in higher education." He led a seminar presentation titled "Taking the 'Ass' out of Assessment: Getting rid of the Donkey work" wherein he articulated a view in alignment with Gibbs and Simpson (2004:03) that

“assessment should be designed to support worthwhile learning first”. He (Schofield 2011) stated that “if assessment doesn’t lead to enhanced learning, then it is indeed little more than donkey-work for both students and teachers.” A recent focus in South Africa was on the ‘high stakes’ grade 12 examination results (of the class of 2011) in January 2012 which precipitated a media frenzy and again highlighted society’s perspective of assessment as measurement, is instructive. It was evident that the schooling system in SA is still plagued by a preoccupation with testing despite the DoE’s policy documents in favour of ‘assessment for learning.’ It has long been reported that ‘assessment is the most significant motivator for learning’ (Hargreaves 1997, cited in Fernandes et al. 2012) but in SA it has been argued that the extent of preparation at times, has been phenomenal. This is apparent in Jansen’s (2011) stance when he comments that in preparation for the Grade 12 national examinations, teachers in several high schools outline the examination requirements and that “this obsession takes on feverish proportions as children move from Grade 10 to grade 12. To understand this obsession with tests you have to understand what propels the school system in this direction.” Jansen (2011) alludes to the image of the school which is affected by examination results and how this places strain on teachers and learners. He states, “Principals obsess with looking good in the eyes of their peers, parents and province. I endlessly hear principals claiming things like a 93,3% pass rate in Grade 12. So what? Did the children learn anything? Now that would be something worth boasting about.” Hence, the above discussion is a strong argument for assessment to be revisited from a teaching and learning perspective.

A majority of the articles in this publication are derived from staff who are located in schools/faculties of education (in higher education institutions across South Africa) engaged in research focusing on assessment.

SUMMARIES OF THE ARTICLES

The article progression in this special edition commences with the school context and then moves to higher education: undergraduate and thereafter post graduate.

The first article is by Peter Beets who embarks on a content analysis of educational assessment policies in schools, unpacking the

trends and principles. In particular, he focuses on the ‘centralising’ and ‘decentralizing’ forces that influence the implementation of the curriculum. He argues that current assessment policy in South Africa signals a move towards managerial accountability and efficiency.

Keeping with the school context, Jabu Ngwenya and Suriamurthe Maistry explore Accounting teachers’ experiences of formative assessment in a rural secondary school. They reveal problematic understandings and interpretations by teachers of the concept ‘formative assessment’. Their article also reports on the role of classroom discipline in teacher pedagogy, the selection of assessment strategies and the nature of feedback given to learners. Interestingly, they highlight the value of care in assessment which appears to be a common thread running through many of the papers in this special edition.

Shivani Maharajh’s paper draws from a study that examines how teachers learn about assessment. She explores, with the use of a case study approach, how learning about assessment promotes teacher learning and how this learning subsequently diffuses into assessment practices in the classroom. Her findings indicate that resistance by teachers to new national assessment policy initiatives provided the impetus for teachers in attaining ‘learning about assessment’.

The next two papers focus on assessment standards in high school exit level examinations.

Suriamurthe Maistry reports on the latest trends in the high school exit level examinations (grade 12) and the struggles experienced by examining bodies in a bid to achieve satisfactory standards of assessment in examinations, influenced by the country’s political imperatives. Drawing on an analysis of economics examinations from 2008-2010, Maistry reveals variations in standards, frailty and doubt in assessment.

Edith Dempster’s article also centers on the high school exit level examinations (grade 12) but in the subject of Biology. She engages in a continental comparison of examination papers written in 2004 in four African countries: South Africa, Kenya, Zambia and Ghana and the 2010 Biology paper in South Africa. Using a revised version of Bloom’s taxonomy to analyse the cognitive demands of each question, she reveals levels of variance across the countries. Her article concludes by citing examples of good prac-

tice in Biology examinations stemming from the four stated countries.

The papers that follow Dempster's article are located in a higher education context. Rachael Singh hones in on the preparation of student teachers following the recent inclusion of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) within the Geography curriculum at school. She examines the impact of GIS software in the training and assessment of Geography education student teachers at a rural university. She chronicles the process of training student teachers with scant technological savy and their resultant assessment. A quantitative analysis of the data set leads her to argue against piece-meal implementation of GIS training and for a GIS module which incorporates adequate assessment strategies and teaching skills.

The next paper by Combrink and Hatch focuses on the change from summative assessment to the use of continuous assessment. They locate their exploratory study amongst second year macro economics students who constitute a large class size. Their findings reveal the value of continuous assessment in improving the teaching and learning environment for large classes in HEI's.

I, (Sadhana Manik), also embark on an exploratory study but one which examines the views of second year Geography education students with regards to their summative assessments and their corresponding academic results. I elicit from students what they consider to be the influences on their academic results. My paper signals students' lack of self-regulation and a 'student malaise' which appears to be creeping into higher education with students needing a 'scope' in preparation for assessments.

Mariette Koen uses a qualitative approach to examine final year undergraduate life skills students' experiences of assessment and learning. She draws on Linnenbrink and Pintrich's motivational, behavioural and cognitive model of learning (2003) to guide her investigation into student engagement, learning and assessment in one classroom. She concludes by suggesting that the construction of knowledge in authentic, real-life environments must be imbued into Life Skills assessments.

Suresh Singh's article examines the changing nature of assessment in teacher education given how education policy changes over the last 20 years have impacted on teacher education and assessment. He distills some implica-

tions that the policy changes will have for assessment practices in higher education institutions.

The final paper by Labby Ramrathan draws on his self reflections of teaching and assessment in a post graduate master's module. He asserts that assessment as it is presently conceptualized, is lacking. He suggests that it has several features but that it should be ultimately driven by a pedagogy of care.

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