8 Assessment, qualifications and the National Qualifications Framework in South African schooling

Johan Muller

Introduction and overview

Assessment and qualifications as a compound instrument regulating learner movement through the education system is one of the most important policy levers in any education system. Together, assessment and qualifications determine the level of inclusivity or exclusivity of the system, and the degree of 'fit' with the labour market (Young, 2002). Assessment is also the most important system for signalling systemic efficiency and accountability. Unsurprisingly, it is frequently bitterly contested. There are two principal axes of contestation in assessment and qualifications thinking. The first is between those who distinguish between different modes of knowledge, learning and qualification, and those who don't. For ease of reference I will call the former dualists and the latter monists. The second is between those for whom assessment in the classroom for pedagogic purposes is primary (decentralisers), and those for whom assessment as a signalling system for systemic performance is primary (centralisers). The first has mainly an individualising purpose, the latter an aggregating purpose. When the pendulum swings too far in either direction on either axis, the system becomes deformed and produces aberrations. The politics of assessment policy can be examined by asking whether it is the dualists or the monists, the centralisers or decentralisers who control the policy agenda (see also Chisholm 2001 for related policy cycles in curriculum policy).

This chapter will explore the vicissitudes of assessment and qualifications policy in South Africa. It will not attempt to tell a comprehensive history of the shifts in policy: appendix 9.1 provides a list of some of the key legislative and policy documents. Rather it will attempt to convey educational movement and change by examining shifts in the terrain of debate and contestation generative of the change. By way of introduction, these can usefully be considered in terms of three broad phases:

Phase 1: 1980s to 1994; relative policy stasis

Assessment during the apartheid era was solely norm-referenced, summative and aggregative in all but a tiny minority of white and private schools where the individualising thrust of a progressive pedagogy had found a receptive clientele amongst the children of the old and emergent new middle class. While it might be thought that the system was driven by systemic means ('apartheid' is routinely regarded as having been 'top down'), in fact the only systemic assessment instrument during this time was the matriculation examination. This was a phase of relatively low tension. This was less an achievement of policy design than it was a consequence of benign neglect. It is fair to say that, up until political transition, the various Departments responsible for education under apartheid had a divided curricular format, were matriculation-oriented and hence centralised, and had a low-key underspecified position on school-based assessment. Not unnaturally, this entire ensemble became associated with the evils of apartheid and thus regarded as intrinsically and irredeemably flawed.

Phase 2: 1994 to 2000; policy reform and increased tension

One of the principal aims, perhaps the principal aim of the policy reform in the years immediately after transition, was to unite the divided strands of the education and training curriculum and certification system into an *integrated* system. The development of this aim can be traced from the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) working group on Human Resources Development (HRD) in 1992 (NEPI 1992), through debates in the re-constituted National Training Board (NTB), to early policy formulation in the ANC Policy Framework Document and the Reconstruction and Development (RDP) base document (see Jansen 1999). The goal was partly muted in the 1995 White Paper, for reasons to be discussed later on. It emerged strongly again with the passing of the *South African Qualifications Authority* (SAQA) *Act*, No. 58 of 1995, and the establishment of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

The 'integration agenda', as Christie (1997: 117) calls it, had an understandable desire to unify the separate qualification opportunities offered by formal and non-formal provision that were widely seen as the cause of unequal work opportunity in the workplace. Following what was taken to be international best practice in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, the aim was to

eliminate artificial divisions between mental and manual labour by means of a centralised qualifications grid, the NQF. The aim became to 'link the full spectrum of qualifications in an integrated framework' by a deliberate attempt to 'blur the distinction' between 'discipline based' and 'practice based' learning and qualifications (DoE/DoL 2003: 6,7). This distinction was premised on a single reductive 'conceptual vocabulary for all modes of learning' (DoL/DoE 2003: 13), as the joint departmental Consultation Document forthrightly put it. Here was a strongly monist position espousing a centralising qualifications-driven reform, with the vocationally-oriented learner at the centre of the policy stage. One might say that the philosophy driving the NQF was one of 'administrative learner centeredness' or administrative progressivism (see Muller 2002; Pak 2002: Tyack 1974). What was manifest from the outset was 'an implicit tension' (Muller 2002: 6) between the centralising monists of the NQF, and the decentralisers and dualists of every stripe, which served very soon to 'polarise viewpoints and exasperate relations' all round (Muller 2002: 7).

In debates around school curriculum policy at the time, a decentralising philosophy of progressive pedagogy had emerged from its refuge in the private and Model C schools, a philosophy that might be called 'pedagogical learner centeredness' or pedagogical progressivism to distinguish it from administrative progressivism. With its roots in Deweyanism imported into South Africa in the 1930s by the New Education Fellowship (see Malherbe 1937), and bolstered by the progressivism of the English Plowden Report in the 1960s (Sharp & Green 1975), pedagogical progressivism survived apartheid in the faculties of education of the liberal universities and in the private and later Model C schools, to be given a new lease on life as the canonized alternative to apartheid education in People's Education (Kraak 1998) and finally Curriculum 2005 (C2005) (Chisholm, Volmink, Ndhlovu, Potenza, Mohamed, Muller, Lubisi, Vinjevold, Ngozi, Malan, Mphahlele 2000).[1] The view underlying pedagogical progressivism was one of a decentralised and individualised libertarianism, where all forms of systemic assessment are seen as summative, unfairly comparative and hence discriminatory. Consequently, ideas of continuous assessment (CASS), borrowed largely from the UK, entered policy discourse as early as 1995 (Jansen 1999: 7), and the matriculation examination as a systemic centralising tool came under fire as unfair and exclusionary (see Jonathan Jansen and Penny Vinjevold in *The Teacher*, February 1999 for a representative example of the issues in dispute). During

this phase, 'systemic' was thus conjoined with 'discriminatory' in post-transition policy discourse.

In this phase then, assessment and qualifications are given dramatic policy attention by a new set of policies with different roots and philosophical heritages, hence bringing with them tensions that were quite invisible in this early phase of 'symbolic policy' (Jansen 2002). The NQF was systemically-driven, with a centralised qualifications framework and a monist 'one size fits all' epistemology; C2005 (see Harley & Wedekind this volume) was teacher- and learner-driven, with highly particularised and individualised assessment procedures, as enshrined first in the CASS policy and later in the learner assessment proposals in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) (DoE 2002) and the Common Tasks of Assessment (CTAs). With two such divergent assessment policy orientations impelling them, centralising for the former and individualising for the latter, the NQF and C2005 were bound to come into tension, which the DoE dealt with by simply ignoring the NQF and refraining from registering any qualifications on it, as it was bound to do in terms of the SAQA Act of 1995 (see NAPTOSA 2003).[2]

Phase 3: 2000 to 2002; the advent of 'systemic reform' and 'quality assurance'

In common with the systemic reform movement in the United States (see Fuhrman, 1993) and spurred on by international testing comparisons, notably the Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Monitoring Learner Assessment (MLA) Study, assessment outcomes as an instrument of managerial accountability and as an indicator of systemic efficiency began by the late 1990s to enter the policy discourse in South Africa. The bell-wether of government thinking in this regard was the 1997 Medium Term Expenditure Framework from the Department of Finance (DoF). Nevertheless, enthusiasm for the new assessment was very slow to take hold in schooling circles, though donors and the international community were quick to latch onto the new notion. Indeed, the new enthusiasm for assessment was sometimes recklessly driven by the donor community, and the take-up of assessment-driven evaluations was rapid by the end of the decade: compare the evaluations commissioned in the mid 1990s with those at the end of it and in the new millennium which were increasingly assessment/outcomes-based

(see Taylor, Muller & Vinjevold 2003). In this phase, the potential of systemic assessment as an instrument for determining the extent of inequitable learning opportunities began to be asserted (see the Seekings 2001 Report commissioned by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, (SCOPA)), and made its way albeit cautiously into DoE policy (Grades 3, 6 and 9 Systemic Evaluation) (see Mseleku 2002; Taylor 2002). In addition, a number of large scale studies were undertaken that show the accountability and diagnostic potential of systemic assessment – Mahlahle, the District Development and Support Project (DDSP), the Quality Learning Project, and the Western Cape comprehensive Grade 3 study, amongst others (Taylor, Muller & Vinjevold, 2003). In the Conclusion to this paper, I reflect on the negligible policy take-up of this informational potential.

A discourse of systemic reform could be discerned in schooling policy documents of the DoE early in the new millennium, but it was a very particular kind of appropriation, one that would not be readily recognisable to American proponents of 'systemic reform', for instance. Embedded in this appropriation can be seen the project of conjoining systemic reform (so far in the weak sense of sample-based rather than comprehensive performance assessment only) with individualising process evaluation, an attempt in other words to reconcile centralisation and accountability on the one hand, with self-evaluation and support on the other. The main instruments for this are:

- Whole school evaluation;
- Systemic evaluation; and
- Quality management systems, including examinations. (Taylor et al. 2003)

The DoE was set to develop an 'integrated quality management system' in 2003 (DoE 2003b), a further sign of some resolve to proceed towards systemic assessment proper, but without any apparent recognition of the dualist/monist oppositional tensions that, (as the inter-departmental Consultation Document on the NQF has recognised (DoE/DoL 2003; see below), have to be addressed before progress can be effected. It is likely that the DoE will have to grapple too with the centralising/decentralising tension, in other words, with the divergent policy ends of systemic reform proper and the particularising trajectories of process evaluation, CASS, portfolios, and the performance-based CTAs.

If the DoE's omnibus construal of systemic reform rhetorically minimises the conflicting senses of assessment that constitute it, a dramatic version of the

tension between the dualists and the monists, between discipline-based and practice-based learning and assessment in the NQF was, in this phase, coming to a head. It was clearly apparent in the 'broad malaise of discontent with the NQF and SAQA' (Departmental officials as quoted in DoE/DoL (2002: 3). The NQF had been established in 1995 to unify and integrate qualifications in South Africa, as we saw above, but its parent body SAQA had, by the turn of the century, become mired in in-fighting and stalled progress. A reviewing 'Study Team' was appointed in 2001 to pinpoint the problem. Of the 'two priorities of NQF implementation that must claim the most serious attention', concluded the Study Team in their Report (DoL/DoE 2002: 132), the first and arguably most important was 'the development of a plan for assessment reform'. To see why, we have to delve beyond the circumlocutions of the Report.

There are two rather different meanings borne by the term 'integration' in SAQA-speak. For the administrative progressives in the NQF (broadly, the representatives of labour), integration meant the *administrative* integration of the DoE and DoL, the flattening of qualificational distinctions between education and training, both symbolising to the proponents the bridging of mental and manual, head and hand. This qualifications-driven effort at social engineering embodied a centralising agenda in the interests of the aspirational working and lower middle classes.

This agenda and the interests its protagonists serve was dealt a first blow when the two Ministries were kept separate in 1994, and 'integration' gave way to 'an integrated approach' in the 1995 education White Paper. It was dealt a second blow in the inter-departmental Consultation Document (DoE/DoL, 2003) which proposes three Quality Councils to regulate three distinct learning pathways and their distinct qualification requirements, one for higher education (HI ED QC); one for general and general vocational schooling (GENFET QC); and one for work-based and non-formal training (TOP QC). The first two report solely to the Minister of Education, the third solely to the Minister of Labour. No wonder then that scholars loyal to the first sense of integration have been left with a pervasive sense of policy betrayal (or euphemistically 'slippage', see for example Kraak 2002). 'Integration' in the strong sense promoted by the administrative progressives has not prevailed. The analysis above and the Consultation Document suggest that this is because of the implementational confusion caused by their unexamined monist assumptions (DoE/DoL 2003).

'Integration' in a second sense favoured by the pedagogical progressives in the DoL denotes *curricular* integration, that is, the replacement of discipline-driven progression by thematic (sometimes called 'problem') based learning. The result for disadvantaged learners of maths and science has been the opposite of that intended (see Taylor, Muller & Vinjevold 2003). This sense of integration, incidentally antithetical to curricula designed for the trades[3], would make the primary aim of the NQF – qualification and occupational mobility – well nigh impossible for the working class. It not only makes systemic reform in its orthodox sense impossible, but is in fact designed to do so. This is presumably what the Study Team meant when they said: 'Much of the present complexity and uncertainty stems from the government and SAQA's commitment to an integrated approach to education and training' (DoL/DoE 2002). To state the matter simply, the administrative progressives in the DoL and the pedagogic progressives in the DoE meant quite different things by integration. If the first sense has thus waned over the period under review, the second sense has not.

When it came to school-based assessment, the pedagogical progressives practiced a determined denigration of grading for which the Study Team chided them (DoL/DoE 2002: 80, 81); and inclined to a set of measures for qualitative or 'integrated assessment' that are proving to be unwieldy and burdensome, likewise deprecated by the Study Team. The most radical form of this assessment so far proposed by the DoE, comes in the form of the *Guidelines for Continuous Assessment for Grades 10–12; Curriculum 2005 Assessment Guidelines Senior Phase;* and the CTAs due to be written by all Grade 9 learners as a capstone to the General Education and Training (GET) band.

In the rest of this chapter I will focus in greater detail on developments in qualifications and certification, on the one hand, and assessment and systemic reform on the other, as well as speculating on the effects these policy instruments will have on the agenda of systemic reform and quality assurance.

Qualifications and certification

The Senior Certificate

Up until the end of 1995, the old ethnic departments of education administered the Senior Certificate Examination. 1996 was the first year that all students in

the same province wrote the same provincial exam, 'a major step forward' in Hartshorne's (1999, 115) view. The administrative problems in shifting to a national system should not be under-estimated. In 1996 there was widespread leakage and sale of the examination papers, cases of cheating, and administrative failures in publishing the results, all symptoms of high stakes testing in a system with inadequate checks and balances. Over the next six years measures were put in place to reduce the administrative breaches, and in December 2002 the newly-formed Umalusi publicly recorded that the process of the national senior certificate examinations could be considered satisfactory.

Up until the advent of Umalusi, standards maintenance for the senior certificate, or 'quality assurance' (QA), a term first used in official policy discourse in 2001, was the province of the Joint Matriculation Board (JMB). The JMB was instituted by the *Act on Universities*, No. 61 of 1955, at the same time as the establishment of the Committee of University Principals (CUP). The purpose of the JMB was to lay down requirements for exemption from the matriculation examination, and to monitor their implementation. The official intention was that the body would function as an assurer of quality for the schooling system as a whole, presumably on the grounds that universities are the universal custodians of knowledge for society. Critics of apartheid education were convinced that the JMB acted as a quality assurer for 'white' schools only, a criticism the then Department of Education and Training (DET) was wont to deny, as in this statement in 1981:

> The same standards apply in Black schools as in the schools of other education departments with regard to syllabuses and examinations. The same core syllabuses are used and the Joint Matriculation Board requires the same standards from black pupils for university entrance as from any other pupil in South Africa. (quoted Christie 1987: 145)

While this was undoubtedly technically true, it was widely and popularly regarded as substantively false.

Therein lay the rub, however. In addition to being the universal custodian of knowledge, universities also had a sectoral interest in university entrance quality, and it was this interest that the JMB served, to mounting criticism not only from employers and human resource managers, but increasingly also from the unions. In other words, the JMB was effectively a higher education

sectoral QA body which, in the absence of any other QA body for the schooling system and in the absence of any other systemic assessment mechanism, effectively became the horse that simultaneously pulled both the assessment and QA cart of the schooling system. The result was a closely monitored matriculation exemption standard, and very little else. The resultant credibility gap between matriculation and the non-exemption Senior Certificate was probably at least one reason for the establishment in 1986 of the South African Certification Council. Another was undoubtedly the need to exercise some measure of control over the rest of the certificatory landscape, both formal and informal, as well.

The South African Certification Council, initially Board (Safcert), was set up 'to ensure that certificates issued by the Board at an exit point from the system represent the same standard of education and examining' (Van Schalkwyk 1988). Its main purposes were to:

- Provide for control over the norms and standards of subject matter and examinations;
- Issue certificates at exit points from school, technical college and non-formal education; and
- Provide for the conducting of common examinations.

This expanded brief of Safcert effectively 'downgraded' the JMB to a sub-committee of the CUP, advising on university admission requirements to the CUP. The CUP was enabled to advise Safcert, but it was Safcert, not the JMB, that then endorsed the senior certificates. This was a significant development, because for the first time there was now a national body which judged school certification, and thus quality assured qualifications, on a basis broader than just whether they prepared learners for university or not. Safcert thus became a certification-driven, effectively schooling-driven QA body. This role was always going to be limited by the general lack of assessment policy in South Africa, and the qualifications most meagrely served were the vocational and non-formal ones. The default driver of a norm-referenced Senior Certificate school exit qualification thus continued into the 1990s and into the new dispensation without major revision or, indeed, much major thought at all, again with the singular exception of the pedagogical progressives in the liberal universities, and in the private and ex-Model C schools, for whom a progressive diagnostic assessment practice went to the very heart of a transformational pedagogic strategy.

After the establishment of the SAQA and NQF with its various bands in education and training, Safcert began to orient its vision and functions from externally validating examinations and issuing certificates to a more comprehensive quality assurance role. This 'transformatory trajectory' was aimed at fulfilling new roles of quality assurance for the GET and Further Education and Training (FET) on the NQF.

However, before Safcert could assume these new responsibilities, legislation had to be passed to enable the establishment of a General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance body (GENFET QA). *The General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act*, No. 58 of 2001, provided the legislative framework for the establishment of Umalusi. In June 2002, Umalusi, formally the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training, a fully-fledged education and training quality assurer, took up the quality assurance and certification responsibilities of Safcert together with much wider responsibilities. Umalusi would not only award qualifications, certificates or credits towards NQF qualifications in the GET and FET bands, but also approve provider accreditation, qualifications and programmes.

Table 8.1 Senior Certificate Examination results, 1994 to 2002

	Candidates	Total passes	%	University exemptions	%	Total failures	%
1994	495 408	287 343	58	88 497	18	208 065	42
1995	531 453	283 742	53	78 821	15	247 711	47
1996	518 032	278 958	54	79 768	15	239 074	46
1997	555 267	261 400	47	69 007	12	293 867	53
1998	552 384	272 488	49	69 856	13	279 954	51
1999	511 159	249 831	49	63 725	12	261 328	51
2000	489 941	283 294	58	68 626	14	206 004	42
2001	449 371	277 206	62	67 707	15	172 126	38
2002	471 309	324 752	69	75 048	16	146 557	31

Source: Schindler (2002), except figures for 2002, which are unconfirmed; see Taylor, Muller & Vinjevold, 2003.

As the figures in Table 8.1 graphically show (to date the only comprehensive time-series chart of systemic performance in South African schooling available), Umalusi has inherited a mammoth task of QA for a system that

worsened steadily for six years until 1999, only to affect a remarkable and statistically near-impossible recovery. To what could the recovery be attributed? Sceptics have advanced various possibilities: conversion of registration from higher grade to standard grade; the 'cooling out' of marginal performers in Grade 11; mark adjustments upwards for second-language speakers; the implementation of CASS (see Fleisch 2003: 16). All of these have some plausibility to a greater or lesser extent, although the CASS marks were moderated to within five per cent of the examination mark, and will thus not have had a major effect (Taylor 2002: 15). By the same token, however, little substantial had changed in the system itself to which the recovery could be attributed.

In any event, Safcert as a QA system for schooling without an assessment policy limped along into the 1990s and beyond. Umalusi, as a provider assessor as well as qualification or learner assessor, has inherited this unequal task, and has had to establish its mission and operating criteria largely in a vacuum, without systemic benchmarks with which to set reasonable or educationally justified targets. The body has thus understandably not got off to a flying start, largely because, as the analysis above suggests, it was not able to differentiate between different kinds of qualification (that is, it was unable to resolve the dualist/monist tension). The inter-departmental Consultative Document (DoE/DoL 2003: 26) has recommended that Umalusi become the 'main organisational base' for the GENFET QC. Together with the recommendation that the 'operational centre of gravity would shift from SAQA to the QCs' (DoL/DoE 2003), this reconfiguration may allow quality assurance for schooling a better chance in future.

Assessment

In the apartheid era, assessment policy for learners other than those in the exit Grade 12 was not specified. In practice, for the vast majority of learners, assessment was norm-referenced, summative and aggregative by default. C2005 policy documents and the *Assessment Policy for General Education and Training* (DoE 1998) make much of the need to shift from this 'authoritarian' approach to assessment to one which is formative, standards-based and continuous. In the period since 1998 the DoE has taken steps to prescribe exactly what the continuous assessment should consist of in each learning area in the Senior Phase of the GET (Grades 7 to 9) and in each subject examined for the Senior Certificate. Although the documents for both are called guidelines the

continuous assessment requirements set out in these documents are 'compulsory' and all full-time learners must have CASS marks 'otherwise their results will be declared incomplete'. Not only is the number of assessment tasks prescribed but also the weighting of the various form of assessment to be used. For example, in the Natural Sciences learning area for Grades 7 to 9 the following forms of assessment are prescribed:

- Investigations and projects (40 per cent) – 2 full investigations, 1 short investigation and 1 research project per year;
- Assignments (15 per cent) – minimum of 3 per month;
- Test and examinations (15 per cent) – 5 per year;
- Presentations and performance (15 per cent) – 3 per year; and
- Translation tasks (15 per cent) – 3 per year.

I have commented that external or systemic assessment has been poorly served in the schooling system at grades below Grade 12. Since 1998 there has been an explosion of external assessment activity at various grades of the system. The majority of this activity has been initiated, funded and implemented outside of the DoE. This section of the chapter will examine both government and private external assessment initiatives in the period 1998 to 2002.

Government-initiated external assessment activities

The Assessment Policy for General Education and Training (DoE, 1998) makes provision for systemic evaluation to be conducted at the Grades 3, 6 and 9 levels 'on a nationally representative sample of learners and learning sites in order to evaluate all aspects of the school system and learning programmes' (DoE 2002: 2). The four objectives of the systemic evaluation are to:

- Determine the context in which learning and teaching takes place;
- Obtain information on learner achievement;
- Identify factors that affect learner achievement; and
- Make conclusions about appropriate education interventions. (DoE 2002: 3)

The aim was thus both to aggregate and diagnose systemic gaps and shortcomings.

Planning for Grade 3 systemic assessment began in 1998. Although this was a national DoE initiative, the Grade 3 systemic assessment was conducted 'in partnership with the provincial education departments and a consortium of service providers managed by the Centre for Education Policy Development,

Evaluation and Management (CEPD)' (DoE 2002: 6). A pilot study was conducted in 2000 and the main study in September 2001. After a few false starts, the report, its draft dated July 2002, finally appeared in midyear 2003 (DoE, 2003a). The analysis which follows is based on the draft report. A sample of 5 per cent of all Grade 3 learners was to participate in the study. In the event 51 307 of 1 079 252 or 4.8 per cent of all Grade 3 learners participated in the study.

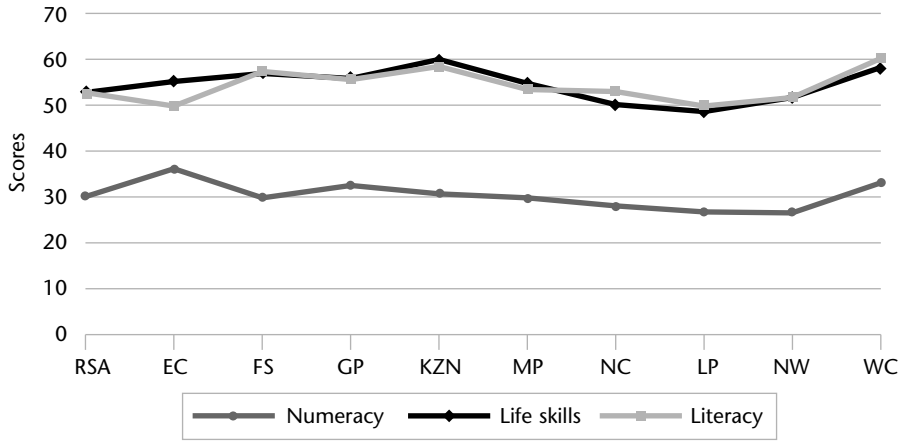
Table 8.2 Number of Grade 3 learners that participated in the Grade 3 systemic assessment mainstream study, 2001

Province	Total No. learners in Grade 3	Number of learners who participated	Percentage of total
Eastern Cape	213 915	9 456	4.4
Free State	57 699	2 889	5.0
Gauteng	126 321	6 220	4.9
KwaZulu-Natal	245 038	11 115	4.5
Mpumalanga	84 725	4 048	4.8
Northern Cape	16 397	913	5.6
Limpopo	164 577	8 062	4.9
North-West	88 979	4 524	5.1
Western Cape	81 601	4 080	5.0
Total	1 079 252	51 307	4.8

The results of the learner assessment component by learning programme and by province are set out in Figure 8.1 on the next page.

While the results suggest poor performance, the report provides little information on the nature of the poor performance, hence not fulfilling a main aim of the exercise. In learner assessment studies this is usually achieved first by making explicit the curriculum on which the test is based, so that attainment can be compared with what should have been attained. The Grade 3 systemic assessment offers no indication of the curriculum on which the assessment instruments were based. The test development process is dispensed with in two paragraphs in the report and indicates that the assessment instruments 'were based on frameworks drafted by members of the consortium together with the DoE and provincial Foundation Phase specialists for the three Learning Programmes covered by this study, Literacy, Numeracy and

Figure 8.1 Mean scores for Numeracy, Literacy and Life skills by province in Grade 3 systemic assessment, 2001



Life skills' (DoE 2003a: 7). According to the report, assessment tasks for the instruments were developed by Foundation Phase specialists but the primary responsibility for the Life skills task was taken by the department since members of the consortium did not have the capacity to undertake this task. The pilot study for Grade 6 systemic assessment took place in 2002 and the full study is planned for the end of 2003.

Part of this tardiness in fulfilling government policy is undoubtedly due to the contentiousness of testing. Pedagogical progressives have long argued that the pressures created by testing for accountability are counter-productive to learning: for example, teaching to the test; distortion through particular curriculum emphasis; and diminution of intrinsic motivation to learn. Proponents argue that the negative effects can be minimised, and that high-stakes testing usually leads to enhanced performance, especially where curriculum, assessment, and professional development are appropriately aligned, Schoenfeld 2002). That of course depends on the tests being reliable and valid. This debate though has hardly started in South Africa, and progressive distaste of testing still marks governmental initiatives in this regard.

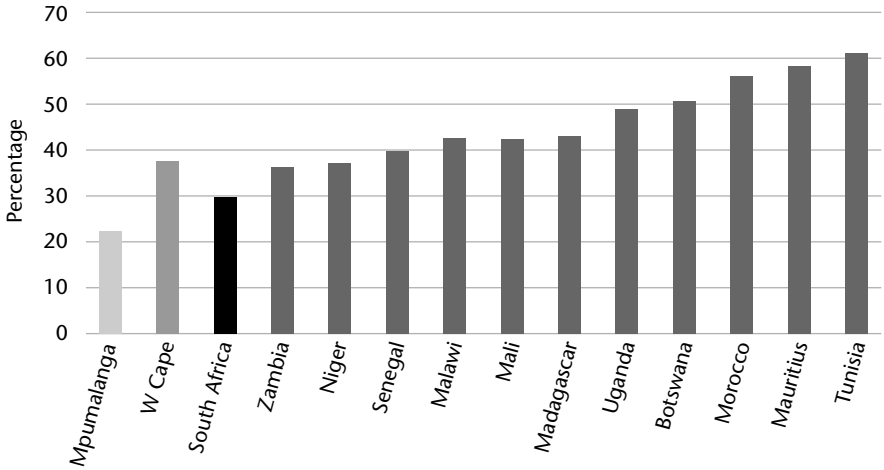
A second external assessment initiative of government in the period was the CTAs at Grade 9 level. According to the assessment policy (DoE, 1998), 25 per cent of the Grade 9 promotion mark should consist of external assessment. In February 2002 the DoE proposed that this external assessment would take the form of CTAs, a form of performance assessment favoured by pedagogical progressives and very difficult to use for comparative and systemic purposes (Garden 1999: 237). These would be administered in all eight learning areas in the last school term of 2002. The CTAs were developed at national level in consultation with provincial departments of education. Problems predictably arose in the development of the instruments as the under-specification of C2005 provided no common content on which to base the tasks (see Chisholm et al. 2000). The test development teams went to enormous lengths to ensure that all learners had equal access to the content of the tasks and this resulted in the tasks being over-elaborate and extremely long – over 100 pages in one instance, and hence user-unfriendly. Problems were also experienced with translation, distribution and training of teachers in the CTAs. An investigation by one of the teacher unions in October 2002 indicated that there were many schools that had not received the CTAs, that there was little likelihood that they would be received in some provinces, and that the tasks were riddled with errors.

As a result, in late October 2002, two weeks before the CTAs were scheduled to be written, the Minister of Education announced that the CTAs would not be compulsory for 2002. It is unclear how many schools across the country wrote the CTAs but in any event, it is hard to see the upshot as anything but an abortive attempt at external assessment by the state. At the time of writing, the shape of the General Education and Training Certificate (GETC) examination, the exit examination for the compulsory phase of public schooling, has not been made known. There are indications that there will be no external assessment for the GETC at all. Were this to be the case, systemic assessment and public accountability would once again be poorly served.

A third external assessment involvement of government was the MLA Study. This study was commissioned by the national DoE, which participated for the first time in 1995 in the Joint International Unesco-Unicef Monitoring Learning Achievement Project (Chinapah et al. 2000). South Africa also participated in the 2000 study but the final report has, at the time of writing, not yet been released. In 1995 more than 10 000 Grade 4 learners participated in

the South African study, and they scored an average of 30 per cent for Numeracy, coming last of the 12 African countries. A large proportion of learners scored below 25 per cent, while only about 2 per cent obtained scores in the 75 to 100 per cent range. In Life skills, South African learners came second last, and in Literacy, they came eighth.

Figure 8.2 South Africa's performance on Grade 4 MLA Numeracy test, 1995



Reviewing government progress towards external systemic assessment since political transition, we would be justified in concluding, protestations about commitment to 'systemic reform' notwithstanding (Mseleku 2002), that:

- Government moves towards external assessment have been marked by footdragging and unaccountable delays.
- The systemic data that we do have to date depicts a system that is inefficient and in extremely poor health.

It is not clear whether the dilatoriness is due to political fears that this dismal picture should become widely known, either by the DoF or the public, or both; or whether it is simply the continuing antipathy of the pedagogical progressives to systemic testing that is retarding progress towards systemic accountability. Either way, the planners in the DoE and DoF are left without crucial information about exactly who is learning and who is not, or what they

are learning and what not. The planners are consequently left without the data they need to plan for rational targeted intervention. The review of financing, resourcing and costs that appeared in mid-2003 (DoE 2003b) makes a firm case for strengthening the accountability of government and schools to communities and parents: 'A public empowered with more comprehensive information about the schooling system would almost certainly exert positive pressure on institutions and leaders to account for educational performance' (DoE 2003b: 103: see also NAPTOSA 2003: 8). According to this review, the DoE will provide its first comprehensive report in 2005. In the meanwhile, it is small wonder that the private sector has begun to fill the informational vacuum left by government.

Private sector external assessment initiatives

In the period 1998 to 2002 a number of evaluation studies have included learner assessment (see Taylor, Muller and Vinjevold 2003, for a review). These studies are mostly commissioned and funded by donors wishing to understand the impact of funded interventions. In these studies, tests were administered to all schools or samples of schools involved in an intervention or project. For example, the JET Mahlahle Grade 3 tests have been administered in nine different studies to Grades 3, 4 and 5 learners in over 800 schools in five provinces. In the majority of cases the learners were from disadvantaged schools, that is, former DET schools or, to a much lesser extent former, House of Representatives (HoR) schools in the Western Cape and Northern Cape.

Eric Schollar and Associates have administered mathematics and reading and writing tests in the many evaluation studies they have conducted in South Africa in the period 1998 to 2002. These evaluation studies include the Imbewu evaluation, the Business Trust 1000 School study, and various evaluations of the READ project, the Mpumalanga Primary Science Initiative and many others (see Schollar 2001a and b). One set of tests has been administered to 5 000 Grades 3, 4 and 5 learners in nine provinces and another set to 5 000 Grade 6 and 7 learners in nine provinces (Schollar 2001a and b).

Both government and the private sector external assessment initiatives in the period 1998–2002 have been bedevilled by the under-specification of the curriculum content in C2005. The Specific Outcomes (SOs) and Expected Levels

of Performance (ELPs) of this curriculum do not provide the level of specificity required for the development of systemic assessment instruments. In response to this under-specification, assessors developed alternative curriculum frameworks within which to locate their assessment instruments.

The most ambitious of these constructions were the JET Mahlahle Grade 3 and Grade 6 tests in which international benchmarks were superimposed on the South Africa curriculum outcomes (see JET 1999; 2000). In the case of the numeracy instruments, Dutch numeracy outcomes were used and in the case of the reading test, the International Association for Educational Achievement (IEA) framework for nine-year-olds was used. National and provincial DoE officials and teachers familiar with the context of a wide variety of schools commented on the alignment of these frameworks with the South African curriculum and therefore their suitability for the South African situation. The process of establishing the correct 'fit' was time-consuming and laborious. The RNCS (DoE, 2002) will greatly expedite the construction of tests, as in the case of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) system-wide testing at Grade 3 level conducted in October/November 2002.

All the studies conducted in South Africa in the last five years suggest that learner achievement scores are far below what is expected at all levels of the schooling system both in relation to other countries including other developing countries and to the expectations of the new South African curriculum.

The Grade 8 Mathematics and Science Study, TIMSS-R, was administered in 38 countries across the world in 1998. South African learners performed well below their counterparts.

The South African mean scores of 275 for maths and 243 for science are well below the international means (487 and 488 from 38 countries) and below the mean scores of all participating countries including two African countries, Morocco and Tunisia (Martin, M; Mullis, I; Gonzales, E; Gregory, K; Smith, T; Chrostowski, S; Garden R & O' Connor, K 2000; Mullis, I; Martin, M; Gonzales, E; Gregory, K; Smith, T; Chrostowski, S; Garden, R & O' Connor, K 2000 and Howie, 2001). Other studies show that South African learners not only perform below learners from other countries but also in relation to the expectations of the South African curriculum (Kanjee, A; Patterson, A; Prinsloo, C; Kivulu, K & Pheiffer, C 2001).

These private assessment initiatives begin to indicate the importance of systemic assessment data for taking informed educational decisions. But for all the invaluable detailed information that this privately-generated systemic data provides, what is most striking is how little of it has so far been used by the government, national or provincial. The main impact on assessment policy so far has been indirect, and though it seems to have helped shift the policy discourse somewhat, there is very little evidence of a real sea change in departmental attitudes to performance data. Above all, whether this information will be used to make targeted resource allocatory decisions remains an open question.

Conclusion

The main conclusion to be drawn from this overview of qualifications and assessment in South Africa is that qualifications and assessment policy was, and remains, the Cinderella of all the policies of public schooling. This does not mean that no changes at all are detectable. On the contrary, we can see a discernable move since 1994 away from an under-developed systemic policy (Grade 12 external assessment only) towards a marked progressive preference for formative, process and integrative kinds of assessment with little real progress towards comprehensive systemic assessment. The visible consequences of this are rising public concern about the lack of clarity regarding the GETC to be written in 2003, and efforts from the private sector to fill some of the gaps. None of this has, so far, had any direct impact on government.

As far as the monist/dualist axis of contestation is concerned, the inter-departmental Consultative Report on the NQF (DoE/DoL 2003) has established the importance of learning path and qualifications differentiation. This redresses the unrelieved emphasis on integration in the NQF with a more balanced stress on 'integration and *progression*' as two equally important principles for a national qualifications framework (DoE/DoL 2003: 22, my emphasis). One might conclude from this that learning path and qualifications dualism will begin to prevail and that this will shift some of the pressure felt by the discipline-based pedagogues in the schools and universities back onto the progressives.

As far as the centralised/decentralised axis of contestation is concerned, one might conclude that the balance between systemic and formative assessment

is presently weighted against systemic assessment centralism. Whether this is due to progressive preference only, or also reflects a serious technical capacity problem in the department is hard to say. In either case, without the data provided by systemic assessment, the learning gaps in the system can't be known, so it is not possible to make the informed decisions to allocate the kinds of targeted grants that Fiske and Ladd in their chapter in this volume propose in the form of additional grants. Until we get the data from the promised 'integrated performance monitoring system' in 2005 (DoE/DoL 2003: 104), which, with the exception of Grades 9 and 12, will be sample-based and not comprehensive data, the only data available to implement such evidence-based measures would be that made available by the large sample-based international assessments like MLA, TIMSS[4] and by private external assessments. This certainly gives the provinces a better map of their current learning geography than they had before, and it will be interesting to see whether provinces begin to use this information in order to decide where to target their interventions. Nonetheless, until there are comprehensive performance outcomes data for the early grades, effective accountability to the public and the community that the Finance Review speaks so approvingly of will be unattainable.

While the balance of power in the DoE continues to favour the pedagogical progressives, one might speculate that the DoE will probably be able to continue to resist public pressures for assessment reform, although whether they will be able to resist political pressure from the DoF for greater demonstrable efficiency remains to be seen. The recent Finance Review is forthright in this regard, as we saw above (DoE 2003). It is likely that, with the present direction in place, there will be increased class differentiation of outcomes and hence an exacerbation of disadvantage, progressive rhetoric notwithstanding, although this disadvantage will be kept more invisible than it should be by the continued lack of performance data that only comprehensive systemic assessment can provide.

Appendix 9.1 Some key documents relating to qualifications and assessment

Legislation:

- *South African Qualifications Authority* (SAQA) *Act*, (Act No. 58 of 1995)
- *National Education Policy Act* (Act No. 27 of 1996)
- *Skills Development Act* (Act No. 97 of 1998)
- *General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance* (GENFETQA) *Act* (Act No. 58 of 2001)

National DOE policy documents:

- *Revised National Curriculum Statement: Grades R–9.* Pretoria 2002
- *Introducing Outcomes-based Education in Grades 10–12.* Pretoria 2003
- *Qualifications and Assessment Policy Framework: Grades 10–12*
- *Qualifications and Assessment Policy Framework: Grades R–9*
- *National Policy on the Conduct of Examination: ABET*
- *Draft Policy on the General Education and Training Certificate : ABET* (Not available yet)
- *Assessment Policy in the General Education and Training Band: Grades R–9 and ABET*
- *Policy Document on ABET*

SAQA policy documents:

- *FETC Policy*
- *General Education and Training Certificate*
- *Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the South African NQF*
- *Criteria and Guidelines for Assessment of NQF Registered Unit Standards and Qualifications*

Other SAQA documents:

- *The National Qualifications Framework and Quality Assurance*
- *The National Qualifications Framework: An Overview*
- *Criteria for the Generation and Evaluation of Qualifications and Standards within the National Qualifications Framework*
- *Criteria and Guidelines for Short Courses and Skills Programmes*
- *Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning:* Discussion Document for Public Comment.

Umalusi documents:

- *Umalusi: Organisation of Qualifications in the Further Education and Training Band: Current Thinking*

- *Umalusi: Framework for Institutional Accreditation: Draft Document for Discussion.* April 2003.

Notes

1. This is a highly compressed account. For a more considered account see Harley & Wedekind, 2003; and this volume.
2. The dualist/monist tension was most clearly apparent in the response of the universities to the NQF (see the report prepared for the Council of Higher Education by Ensor & Ogude, 2001; Ensor, 2003). This analysis has been adopted by the recent inter-departmental Consultation Document (DoE/DoL, 2003).
3. In Bernstein's (2000) terms: the pedagogical progressives with C2005 favoured a radical form of competence pedagogy; the pedagogical administratives with the NQF favoured a market-driven form of performance pedagogy. The assessment and qualification forms appropriate to each are simply incommensurable.
4. DoE/DoL 2003: 101 mentions a Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) sample survey of Grade 6 learners conducted in 2000, a study not known to the author.

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