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8 National standardized assessments in South Africa: Policy and power play

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Introduction

Education governance across the globe has come to rely increasingly on intense data collection and data-driven policy instruments. Sub-Saharan Africa has followed this trend. Introduced in the 1990s, funded by the World Bank and other international NGOs (Bashir, Lockheed, Ninan, & Tan, 2018), assessments aim to provide information on outcomes and inform policy decision-making. The World Conference on Education for All hosted in Thailand in March 1990, along with its ten-year follow-up, the Dakar Framework Action in 2000, reinforced the importance of accurate assessment of learning outcomes. South Africa was among other developing countries in the 1990s that sought to incorporate assessments in their policymaking, although the introduction and use of assessments have not gone unchallenged.

This chapter reflects on these challenges and situates these in the wider educational policy arena. We provide a synthesized timeline of some of South Africa's most important education policies and their outcomes, particularly where these included national assessments or had implications for assessments, such as when a national curriculum is introduced or reformed. The synthesis was informed by a document analysis of sources of the Education Programme at the Public Affairs Research Institute (PATI) in South Africa. The Programme includes a bank of policies and academic papers from the leading education experts in South Africa who wrote about the policymaking process during the early years of democracy in South Africa. These experts were involved in the policies discussed here, such as the initial curriculum review in 1994 and discussions of the outcomes-based curriculum. Documents were analysed for major policy changes where a timeline was constructed by triangulating the evidence from both policy documents and academic papers.

In setting out a timeline of changes, the chapter will initially demonstrate that most changes in curriculum and assessment policies in South Africa have been

short-lived and often abandoned before any sustainable improvement could materialize. And second, how this trajectory of constant reform and overhaul of policy can be explained by the lack of collaborative capacity in the system. We illustrate this in detail for the most recent introduction and collapse of the Annual National Assessments in primary education (ANA). We conclude that, as policy implementation literature would predict (see for instance Honig, 2006), assessments can only inform curriculum implementation, high-quality teaching and contribute to the improvement of learning outcomes when the main stakeholders in the system (for example, policymakers/politicians, teacher unions) have

- 1) a set of shared values and understanding of the purpose and use of standardized assessments;
- 2) have a collaborative relationship of high trust to negotiate differences and remedy potential technical faults; and
- 3) jointly develop the support for teachers and schools to use assessment outcomes for the benefit of teaching and learning.

Only when these conditions are met can national assessments effectively inform the work of teachers and school principals and inform system-wide improvement, particularly where there is high inequality and large performance gaps between schools across the country, such as in South Africa.

A timeline of change: Education policymaking in South Africa (after 1994)

After the abolition of the Apartheid regime in 1994 and the constitution of the Republic of South Africa in 1996, the schooling system was considered to be one of the key reform areas and one of the main building blocks towards achieving a well-functioning democracy. The South African Schools Act of 1996, for example, aimed to establish one new national system for schools to redress past injustices; a national curriculum and set of assessments for all schools was one of the key reforms to address the deep historical inequalities.¹ Curriculum policy in the new democratic state aimed to set out the subjects, the knowledge content and the methodology of teaching and learning, thereby ensuring an equal knowledge base and cultural canon shared by all learners. A national curriculum was expected to structure the expectations and demand of teachers and as such contribute to a more equal system for all learners.

Between 1994 and the present day, the national curriculum and related assessments have undergone several changes. Here we discuss the four major curriculum changes and two assessment reforms. Through these changes, we identify how trends in education policy in South Africa shaped the current Annual National Assessment (ANA) policy, its implementation and its collapse. The changes in curriculum and assessment policy we discuss are: the review of the Apartheid curriculum (1994), the national assessment surveys (1996), Curriculum 2005 and Outcomes-Based Education (1997), the National Curriculum Statement

(NCS, 2000; including the Revised National Curriculum Statement of 2002), and the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS, 2011). We first outline the changes in curriculum policy before we describe the introduction of, and changes in, national assessments.

Curriculum policy

Review of the Apartheid curriculum (1994)

One of the first reforms under the democratic government in 1994 was to review the Apartheid curriculum (1994) to rid it of racism and segregationist teaching practices such as Bantu Education, as well as unifying segregated education systems in a single and comprehensive basic education system. Thus, the then Ministry of Education embarked on a process to reform the school curriculum syllabus in order to align it with the aims of an inclusive education system in a democratic state. The problem with this review, however, was that the new government needed quick results and only allowed for a three-month transition period at the end of 1994, requiring it to inform a new curriculum to be ready for the start of the 1995 school year (Jansen, 1998). This was a 'swift review of more than 100 Apartheid syllabuses', the result of which was that 'most [Apartheid syllabuses] remained unchanged and not a single intervention was made to support or enable these minor changes to be realised in the classroom' (Jansen, 1998: 56). There are many reasons for this poor curriculum review, including political pressure from forces resistant to change, political expediency for an incoming democratic government, attempting to keep all stakeholders on board – both education policy conservatives from the Apartheid era and new education reformers (Chisholm & Fuller, 1996; Jansen, 1999).

The second notable issue in this curriculum review process is that teachers were ill-equipped to participate in the changes that were going to take place and that they also did not have time to attend the review process because they were teaching (Jansen, 1999). Furthermore, at the time the country's largest teacher union (SADTU: the South African Democratic Teachers' Union) commented that the education ministry had not created ways to ensure that the curriculum changes were communicated to educators who were expected to teach the reviewed curriculum (Jansen, 1999). Finally, minimal effort was invested in 'reforming teaching methods that might advance the adjusted curriculum, or to further participatory social relations inside classrooms' (Chisholm & Fuller, 1996: 706).

Curriculum 2005 and outcomes-based education (1997)

Following the 1994 review and limited impact in the classroom, a major reform, called C2005, was introduced in 1997 to create a more equal and homogenous education system. Curriculum 2005 (hereafter C2005) was an education policy that involved an extensive curriculum overhaul, which began in 1997 and was planned to be completely phased into South Africa's basic education system by 2005.

The curriculum overhaul of C2005 was based on global trends in outcomes-based education (Chisholm, 2005: 193) and it was a better attempt at reforming the South African school curriculum more substantively, particularly to ensure more equal outcomes across the system and remove the racist content identified in the earlier review. Outcomes-based education focused less on a content-heavy curriculum that would be dictated to educators, and more on what the curriculum wanted learners to achieve as an outcome of a learning area, regardless of how this was taught by educators. Thus, the focus of the curriculum was the outcome or learning objective, as opposed to hierarchically determined content (Mncube & Madikizela-Madiya in Harber ed., 2013). A focus on outcomes would also allow teachers to offer a more personalized learning trajectory, taking into account the vast disparities in achievement across the country.

However, outcomes-based education was a form of 'policy borrowing' (Spreen, 2004: 101), whereby policymakers embrace international trends during educational reform. Once the policy is borrowed and co-opted, and amidst domestic resistance to the policy, the origins of the education policy must be 'concealed' (Spreen in Steiner-Khamsi, 2004: 101) in order to be legitimized in the domestic context. Although C2005 was 'highly sophisticated', it was also 'based on first-world assumptions about well-resourced classrooms and highly qualified teachers' (Jansen, 1998: 56). Knowledge and skills they did not have, particularly those teachers who were trained under the Apartheid regime to teach a very impoverished curriculum (Jansen, 1998: 56). In addition to this, policy borrowing led to there being multiple interpretations of the meaning of outcomes-based education. This led to 'loosely constructed outcomes' (Spreen, 2004: 104), as opposed to a more definitive path for what South African education and curriculum should look like following Apartheid. Policy borrowing was also used as a way to remove the 'vocational aspects of OBE' which were important to education policy stakeholders such as organized labour unions (Spreen, 2004: 110). Once again, the practicalities of teaching a new curriculum were ignored, and policy-making was centralized to suit a legitimization agenda instead of a steady education policy agenda.

National Curriculum Statement (NCS, 2000)

Over time, various reviews (DoE, 1997; OECD, 2008) highlighted the problematic implementation of C2005, pointing to a lack of adequate resourcing, reportedly unmanageable timeframes for implementation and poor monitoring and review. An OECD report (2008) criticized C2005 for being too elaborate, involving new and unnecessarily complex terminology and depending for its implementation on poorly trained and already overworked educators. The intended strategies to transform teachers' instructional practices from a traditional teacher-centred to a more learner-centred approach, proved much more difficult than assumed and led the Education Department to 'simplify' and further regulate the curriculum, first by introducing the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) in 2000, revising these again in 2002 and then again by revising the NCS into even more detailed Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS).

As Motala et al. (2007: 22) explain, the NCS was a revised version of C2005 which was ‘written in plain language, gives more emphasis to basic skills, content knowledge and a logical progression from one grade to the next ... [and] combines a learner-centred curriculum requiring critical thought and emphasising democratic values embedded in the Constitution, with an appreciation of the importance of content and support for educators’ (Motala et al., 2007: 22). Furthermore, and in contrast to C2005, this curriculum aimed ‘to ensure that children acquire and apply knowledge and skills in ways that are meaningful to their own lives ... promotes knowledge in local contexts, while being sensitive to global imperatives’ (DBE, 2019: online).

The NCS reflected a policy revision of C2005 following teacher union and public consultations (Chisholm, 2005: 193), and also following the recommendations of the report of the Review Committee provided on 31 May 2000 to ‘streamline and strengthen Curriculum 2005’ (Policy Overview, 2006: 2). The Review Committee particularly recommended that ‘implementation needed to be strengthened by improving teacher orientation and training, learning support materials’ and more support from provincial education departments (Policy Overview, 2006: 5), whose role includes decentralized implementation of national education policies.

One of the key observations about the policy revisions that took place between C2005 and the revised NCS are the changes in the stakeholders within the education policy environment. In the curriculum review process that occurred in 1994, education policy was determined by a number of political and economic stakeholders, such as the tripartite alliance between the African National Congress (ANC), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). By the time C2005 was being considered by the Department for Basic Education, there were vocational, environmental, history and conservative Christian lobbies who all advocated for specific curriculum changes that aligned with their interests (Chisholm, 2005). These included the History/Archaeology Panel, the Pestalozzi Trust, Frontline Fellowship, the African Christian Party and the New National Party (Chisholm, 2005). Other stakeholders also included universities and NGOs trying to align the school curriculum with the broader post-school education system (Chisholm, 2005).

As mentioned earlier, one of the key stakeholder groups were the three teacher unions: SADTU, the National Association of Professional Teachers Organisations of South Africa (NAPTOSA), and the Suid Afrikaanse Onderwysers Unie (SAOU). The reactions of NAPTOSA and SAOU to the introduction of C2005 and outcomes-based education was ‘sympathetic’ (Chisholm, 2005: 202). SADTU, however, had ‘curricular objections [that] were mainly focused on an apparent divergence from the official outcomes-based education policy’ under C2005 (Chisholm, 2005: 202), which allowed greater autonomy for teachers to make curricular choices. This objection is said to be based on SADTU’s ‘strong sense of ownership’ (Chisholm, 2005: 202) of the outcomes-based education policy under C2005, because it was ‘heavily involved in [C2005’s] development and implementation’ (Chisholm, 2005: 202).

Another key change was the explicit attention to capacity of teachers and schools to implement curriculum changes. The lack of overall capacity in the

system to mobilize such support, however, meant that the NCS also failed to deliver on its promise of improving learning outcomes and reducing performance gaps across the country, leading to the introduction of the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) in 2011, which offered teachers with detailed scripts to enable them (and particularly those with limited knowledge and skills), to implement the curriculum and related assessments.

Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS, 2011)

‘Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements’ (or CAPS) were first introduced by the Department of Education in 2011 (Mncube & Madikizela-Madiya in Harber ed., 2013: 173). CAPS aimed to provide a ‘single, comprehensive, and concise policy document, which contains detailed guidelines for teaching all subject areas that are listed in the NCS’ (DBE, 2019: online). Therefore, each subject in the curriculum has one document that detailed the content for teaching in that subject area (Mncube & Madikizela-Madiya in Harber ed., 2013: 174). CAPS reversed the aims of C2005 outcomes-based education by ‘going back to terminology that was used in education in South Africa before outcome-based education was introduced’ (Mncube & Madikizela-Madiya in Harber ed., 2013: 174). The detailed instructions in CAPS aimed to reduce the time and administrative load on teachers; the clear guidance and expected consistency in instruction across schools was expected to result in higher learning outcomes across the country.

Assessment policy

The changes in assessment policy in primary education follow a somewhat different timeline where, only with the introduction of CAPS in 2011, a clear connection was established with the underlying curriculum. Over time, the goals of assessments also changed from preparing learners for exit exams in secondary education to becoming standalone assessments for student progression, school improvement and/or teacher learning and accountability.

Up until 1996, the only standardized testing that existed in the country was the National Senior Certificate (NSC). The NSC tested learners in their final grade of secondary education, grade 12. These matriculation exams, also known as ‘matrics’, were (and are still) used as indicators for learner performance, the entry of learners into higher and further education and the general condition of the South African basic education system. Due to the intense resource concentration and public obsession on grade 12 matric results there initially was little scope to determine the performance of primary schools, hold schools accountable for learning performance, or provide support to schools where it was needed most (Van Wyk, 2015).

The national assessment surveys (1996), administered in 2001–2007

In 1996, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) introduced standardized testing for learners in grades 3, 6 and 9 in 1996 as part of the ‘Systemic Evaluation Programme’ (Kanjee & Moloi, 2014). At that point, the rationale for assessment in

primary education was only to improve learner performance on the matric in grade 12 by more systematically monitoring the performance of learners in earlier grades in order to identify learning and teaching gaps sooner. These assessments were to be conducted annually with the main objective of benchmarking performance and tracking progress towards achieving the set targets and the goal of education transformation process (see section 48 of the Department of Education's 1998 *Assessment Policy for General Education and Training*; and the Systemic Evaluation Report, 2003). The programme was developed over a long period of time and only administered in 2001, 2004, and 2007 in one grade with a sample covering between 35,000 and 55,000 learners (DBE, 2011).

According to the 2003 Systemic Report by DBE, as early as 1998 the department identified a set of indicators of quality education deemed appropriate for measuring performance of the education system. It was this process that led to the development and subsequent piloting of the evaluation instruments in 2000 with the main Systemic Evaluation study at the Foundation Phase conducted in 2001/2. The then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, noted that the South African Qualification Framework sets the broader context for education transformation which identified the need to measure educational outcomes against predetermined standards (DBE System Evaluation Report, 2003). Considering that two of the primary Acts that govern the basic education namely; the National Education Policy Act (NEPA 27 of 1996) and SASA (Act 94 of 1996) were both amended between 1997 and 2011. These amendments included specific changes pertaining to the curriculum and assessments which would explain the incremental approach of assessments and their implementation. Van der Berg and Gustafsson (2017) provide an outline of the subsequent changes of NEPA and SASA; more specifically, it was in 2011, 2012 and 2016 that much alignment of national processes and procedures for learner assessments with the national curriculum was adjusted.

The data sampled through the Systemic Evaluation Programme identified some areas of weakness and informed subsequent policy changes, such as the Annual National Assessments (ANA), which were introduced in 2011. ANA is a large-scale adaptation of the sample-based Systemic Evaluation programme (Basic Education Portfolio Committee Presentation, 2011). The ANA trials were conducted in 2008 and 2009 with an emphasis on: (i) exposing teachers to better assessment practices; (ii) easy identification of poor-performing schools that require more assistance and those that could serve as examples of best practices; and (iii) learning in the area of standardized assessments (DBE ANA, 2011).

ANA (2011–2015)

One of the fundamental aspects of the last curriculum reforms, introduced in the previous section – CAPS, – was that it was positioned to introduce 'Annual National testing to be fully implemented by the end of 2011' (Mncube & Madikizela-Madiya in Harber ed., 2013: 174). These standardized national assessments test learner achievement in languages and mathematics in the intermediate phase (grades 4–6) and in literacy and numeracy for the foundation phase (grades 1–3). The ANA was introduced with a clear admission from the

DBE that education outcomes in schools in South Africa were low and that these outcomes needed to be improved by using standardized testing at crucial stages of the school career, to indicate where learners were struggling with specific subjects, such as maths and languages (Thulare, 2018). As Thulare states, ‘accepting the failures of primary schooling, the Minister of Education declared the assessment policy an important step not only in evaluating the latest move to standardise workbooks in grades 1–6 but also ensuring that the ministry reaches its [pass] targets ... in maths and languages at secondary school level as set by the National Development Plan’ (Thulare, 2018: 83). As such, the ANA sought to annually monitor the extent to which these outcomes would be achieved, with an emphasis to strengthen the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy of learners (DBE, 2011).

The ANA drew from experiences in several international assessment programmes in which South Africa participated. These included the regional Southern and East Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) programme and the global Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Trends in International Mathematics, and Science Studies (TIMSS) programmes. After participating in these cross-national assessments, the decision was to focus nationally (Thulare, 2018) and have a large-scale diagnostic tool that would provide a better understanding of the performance-related problems within schools.

The outcome of ANA was for the information gathered from this standardized assessment to serve as a diagnostic tool identifying areas of strength and weakness in teaching and learning by exposing teachers to better assessment practices, providing districts with information to target schools in need of assistance, encouraging schools to celebrate outstanding performance – those that could serve as examples of best practices and learning in the area of standardized assessments and empowering parents by providing them information about the education of their children (DBE ANA, 2011).

Moreover, the ANA sought to measure progress on learner achievements towards the set targets in *Action Plan to 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025* (DBE, 2014). These targets were part of the government’s long-term education commitments outlined in the *National Development Plan for 2030* that prioritizes the improvement of learner outcomes. One of the commitments is in improving the country’s average score in international comparative studies, more specifically the envisaged 105 increase (from 495 to 600) on SAQMEQ by 2022 and for TIMSS the expected increased performance score of 156 (264–420) by 2023. While for the national scores, the aims are for 90% of learners in grades 3, 6 and 9, respectively to achieve 50% or more in the annual national assessments in language in numeracy.

The 2011 ANA process involved both ‘universal ANA’ and ‘verification ANA’. The universal ANA was administered by teachers who tested all learners in Grades 2 to 7 in both languages and mathematics. By contrast, independent service providers administer the Verification-ANAs, but only to Grade 3 and 6 learners in a selected sample of schools in order to verify the credibility of the Universal ANA results. For 2011, the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) was the

independent provider² responsible for the verification process. Verification ANA involved applying rigorous procedures to a sample of around 1,800 schools offering Grades 3 or 6 in order to verify results emerging from universal ANA. It must be noted that in 2011, the department, through the HSRC, sampled 450 schools targeting Grade 9 and Grade 10 for the pilot of the ANA; Grade 9 tests were included since 2012 (DBE ANA, 2011; see RSE DBE, 2012b, for the findings). Expressly, in order to verify ANA, external controls in the test administration process were set up to test scripts from each school were re-marked after the initial marking by teachers (DBE ANA, 2011). In addition to testing learners, a learner background questionnaire, an educator questionnaire and a principal questionnaire were part of the 2013 Verification-ANA process (Wills, 2016). Despite the aims of the ANA to inform school and system-wide improvements, the assessments were discontinued after 2005 following widespread and increasing opposition. Below we first explain the systemic constraints that affected the ANA process, administration and validity before arguing that the confusion and contestation over the purpose of the ANAs and an increasing deficiency of trust between the unions and the department were important reasons for its suspension.

Flawed assessments: The ANA (2011–2015)

The ANA ended abruptly in 2015 after disagreements between the DBE and teacher unions about its implementation. Disagreements centred on how to best deal with the many flaws in the assessments where the DBE, in its 25 Year Review of Basic Education (2019), explained that they favoured gradual design improvements without suspending the programme. However, teacher unions argued for suspending the programme until the redesign had been completed as there were too many flaws in the design and their strong opposition resulted in the termination of ANA in 2015. The critiques of the short-lived ANA policy were summarized in the 2011 DBE ANA report and a subsequent report from the Public Servants Association of South Africa (PSA, 2016).

Weak assessment system

The DBE ANA report (2011) invigorated discussions and criticisms which had already started after the analysis of the first batch of the ANA data. One of these criticisms was the fact that the South African education system is too weak to implement standardized testing. Van der Berg et al. (2011) point to the vulnerability of the assessment system due to various forms of cheating and lenient marking, given that the ANA is administered and marked by local schools. Frempong et al. (2013) refer to this as ‘limited credibility’ (see also Van Wyk, 2015). A similar point is made by Van Wyk (2015), who describes how the DBE supplied the question papers and marking memoranda, but schools conducted the tests and managed the marking and internal moderation themselves. Therefore, the quality of the ANA data can be compromised if there is no proper oversight. Moreover, the

verification of ANA is based on a sample of schools and, as such, the results emerging from samples must always be interpreted with a margin of error, according to Spaul (2012).

Weaknesses also refers to the fact that the ANAs did not offer guidance on the level of understanding of learners, but instead focused on broad trends in the right/wrong answers (PSA, 2016). Although the ANA potentially offered reliable data as the tests are standardized, it was unclear what new lessons emerged from it that the department was not aware of given that many of the same schools and districts that struggle with the curriculum, would also struggle with doing well on the ANAs.

As such, broader areas for improvement in the administration and use of the ANA included the need to develop better logistics in the distribution of the ANA material to schools, more rigorous quality assurance measures in the verification of the ANA, more standardization with universal ANA, better data collection procedures and improvement in the design of the tests, the alignment of the tests with the curriculum, and giving parents better information on the education of their children (DBE, 2011). For teachers, the inability to translate or interpret the ANA assessment as a form of care for learners in lower grades also led to questioning the fairness and accessibility of the tests (Long et al., 2017).

Teacher testing, not standardized testing

A second criticism that arose from the ANA testing is that there was no programme of support to ensure teachers and the capacity to teach the tested content and that ANA actually tested teachers and their skills as opposed to finding the challenges in the curriculum and addressing them appropriately. Thus, the ANA came to be seen as a punitive measure against teachers rather than a standardized assessment of the curriculum at critical stages in the basic education system. This point was raised in the SADTU 2014 Perspective document, in which SADTU called out the unfairness of the ANA increasingly being used, as we detail below, to hold teachers accountable; a purpose for which the assessments were not designed originally. The union affirmed the relevance of a systemic evaluation but proposed that the ANA should be administered triennially instead of annually as this would allow more time to capacitate teachers. The union also identified that capacitating teachers required support and assessment training, adequate resources, the development and administration of more informative assessments of learners' content knowledge and multiple forms of understanding. SADTU also recommended the discontinuation of ANA at Grades 1 and 3, as the union argued that learners had insufficient opportunities to acquire the skills on which they were tested (SADTU, 2014). Van der Berg et al. (2011) make a similar case but instead of discontinuation of the ANA, they advocate moving the testing from the beginning to the end of the year. Further noting that it may be unclear whether learning deficits may already have existed in the earliest grades, or if it snowballs in these early grades. More reflections of the ANA cautioned against how the ANA was leading to widespread 'teaching to test' and a narrowing of the curriculum, caused by the increased workload of teachers in administering the test instead of using their time to teach a broad curriculum (Frempong et al., 2013).

Non-comparability of the assessments

Non-comparability is an issue raised by both unions, the Public Servants Association (PSA) and (academic and policy) researchers. This refers to the fact that there is neither a baseline from which to compare ANA results as they are released nor is there any ability to compare the ANA results over time. The PSA (2016), for example, points out that the testing structure changed almost every year since it was introduced). As a result, there is a lack of inter-temporal and inter-grade comparability and this limits the usefulness of learning gains as well as the standardization of scores; ANA was not designed to be compared over time (Taylor, 2013). Moreover, the PSA specifically highlighted that often areas with very low marks would get easier tests the following year, creating a misleading picture of the actual changes in the education system. This critique focused on the lack of reflexive interventions and adequate responses to the generated data for low-performing schools. SADTU, for instance, proposed using ANA for constructive feedback to teachers, learners and parents, i.e. marked scripts to be returned learners and teachers for further reflection, and less focus on the results, but more on what areas could be improved in both teaching and learning. SADTU further advocated for multiple intelligence testing that takes account of learners with learning disabilities. These were, however, not taken on board.

ANA: A contested policy arena

Firstly, discussions about the value and technical aspects of the ANA invigorated a power struggle over education and educational improvement, particularly between the DBE and the teacher unions. Teacher unions contested the introduction of ANA from the start, sharing their frustration with the department on the use and administration of the assessments on various occasions (Cereseto & Joseph, 2015).

Despite the unions' reluctance to the assessments, they participated in discussions to try and improve the implementation of the ANAs. For instance, SADTU (2011) initially proposed a model to disaggregate learning outcomes in a way that would take into account the factors which have a negative impact on the quality of learning and teaching in schools – taking into account factors such as lack of parental involvement, teachers' professional development, school leadership and management, socio-economic status and resources necessary in addressing challenges identifiable through the ANA data.

These concerns were, however, not sufficiently taken into account, according to the unions who, as a result, called into question the motivations of the department to issue the ANAs, critiquing the initiative aims to use these assessments to improve learning outcomes. For example, the 2014 SADTU Congress document critiqued how the poor performance on ANA test scores was used to assign blame on teachers and schools, further highlighting the (in)capacity of the School Management Team to analyse the results and plan for interventions and the lack of support from the department to equip them with the necessary skills and capacity.

The unions released a joint statement on 21 September 2015, titled *The Annual National Assessment (ANA) Adds No Value To The South African Learner*, to clarify their positions on the proposed discontinuation of the ANAs in 2015. The unions opposed the administering of the ANA in its then formation advocating the establishment of a task team consisting of unions and DBE officials that would develop a remodelled, systematic and diagnostic tool. The unions committed to participate in the process. What was received as a unilateral decision by DBE to continue with the 2015 ANA implementation scheduled for 1–4 December 2015, organized labour mobilized against it while encouraging year-end examination of learners to be supported. In what appeared to be a last-minute move, on 28 November 2015, just 48 hours before the scheduled ANA administration, the DBE announced the postponement of the ANA to February 2016 – there was no consensus on this date, especially from the unions. The ANA was eventually discontinued in 2015.

Glaser (2016) situates the reluctance towards national assessments in the broader opposition of the unions towards monitoring and evaluation of schools and teachers, originating from South Africa's Apartheid legacy and the surveillance of teachers under the system of Bantu Education at the time. Chetty et al.'s (1993) study on the Apartheid era evaluation systems, for example, shows how the nature and purpose of the evaluations were fiercely debated by teachers, illustrating the distrust and suspicion towards the unfair and bias appraisal systems at the service of state control. Pillay (2018) makes the case that teacher evaluations under the Apartheid regime education's inspectorate prioritized the management function through the evaluation for accountability and less on professional development. The emphasis was on the monitoring and surveillance of Black teachers, with no autonomy and limited programmes on teacher development. Assessments thus had a history of being used to penalize teachers and it is no wonder that the ANA was approached by the unions, mainly SADTU, in a similar manner, particularly when there is a lack of balance between standardized testing, which can pinpoint the weaknesses in the education system, and teaching skills, which need to be improved and assessed in an enabling educational environment.

Post-ANA: A new National Assessment Programme (NAP)

The story does not end here, however, as the ANA evolved into what is now known as the National Assessment Programme (NAP) – previously referred to as the National Integrated Assessment Framework (NIAF). The NIAF was introduced in 2018, and was scheduled to be implemented in 2019 over three-year cycles (DBE, 2017). The NAP aims to remedy some of the technical flaws in ANA by introducing three tiers into the assessment:

- (i) *The Systemic Assessment*, which will be sample-based, and administered in Grades 3, 6 and 9, once every three years – this will provide the Basic Education Sector, especially those involved in planning and evaluation, with valuable data on the health of the system and trends in learner performance;

- (ii) *The Diagnostic Assessment*, which will be administered by teachers in the classroom to identify learning gaps, and to plan remedial measures early in the learning process, so as to avoid learning deficits; and
- (iii) *The Summative Assessment*, which will be a national examination, administered in selected grades (with an emphasis on Grade 9) and subjects to provide parents and teachers with a national benchmark to measure the performance of their children. (Department of Basic Education, 2016)

These proposals mark a unique point in South Africa's policy history as this system of assessments was initially developed by a Task Team, comprised of representatives of the Department of Basic Education and the unions who remodelled ANA into this new system. They undertook a comprehensive review of the strengths and weaknesses of the ANAs, drawing on inputs from various education stakeholders. The review resulted in a concept document, and a proposal for a universal and systemic assessment system which has, thus far, been welcomed as a foundational step in the re-design process. A second Inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC) further informed a more collaborative approach by attending to the broader issues of dispute presented by the five unions, as mentioned earlier; thereby allowing for a process of reconciliation and trust-building which should support further implementation of the new assessment system.

The process was also unique in the collaboration between unions who tend to take very different positions in the debate. As the Public Servants Association (2016) stated

The unified stance on the ANAs is extremely rare, and indicative that differences run deeper. Unions have, in this case, supported evaluation, and pledged to work towards revising the system of ANAs, a rare of the show of support for monitoring and evaluation systems.

(PSA, 2016: 4)

Given the broad consultation and the attempt to address weaknesses of the ANA, NAP appears to have incorporated inputs from education stakeholders. Hopefully, the consensus on the usefulness of national assessments, and acknowledgement that the impact of assessments requires time, will allow the new NAP to offer a more positive contribution to the improvement of learning outcomes in South Africa.

Conclusion and discussion

This chapter presented a structured timeline of changes in curriculum and assessment policy in South Africa, demonstrating how these reforms have been short-lived and often abandoned before any sustainable improvement could materialize. Our policy reconstruction shows how a resistance to teacher accountability and change in general, particularly by the teacher unions, political expediency for quick improvements, and the lack of collaborative capacity in the system, led to a trajectory of constant reform and overhaul of policy. Instead of embarking on a

more substantive programme of support across the country when curriculum and assessment implementation failed, the response of the Department for Basic Education seems generally have been to introduce new policy. We illustrated this in detail for the most recent introduction and collapse of the Annual National Assessments in primary education (ANA).

The collapse of these Annual National Assessments highlights how policy is a negotiated process where place and people interact to make meaning of suggested curriculum standards, assessment targets and related support and consequences of the policies. These findings speak to the wider policy implementation literature, which highlights how policies in general are highly situated and context-specific. The beliefs, knowledge and orientations toward policy demands of those involved in the curriculum reviews and assessments in South Africa all shaped these reforms and particularly why they failed to sustain over time. Particularly relevant here is South Africa's Apartheid history which explains the mind-set of some of the teacher unions and teachers and how they interpret assessment and accountability as tools for oppression, rather than ways in which support for improvement could be organized. Given this context, the development of assessment and accountability can only inform improvement when accompanied by a policy implementation approach which is collaborative in nature, builds a set of shared values on the purpose of assessments and organizes support for teachers to use assessment outcomes to improve student outcomes.

Recent events in the establishment of a joint task force of unions and the department to develop the National Assessment Programme (NAP) offers a more collaborative alternative with, hopefully, a more productive role of assessments in improving learning outcomes. When implemented and used well, these national assessments can supplement information on inputs in the education system and its processes. They can provide evidence on the achievements of learners and constraints in schools and in the system to progress learning, all of which should provide the basis for proposals for remedial action. Outcomes of assessments, when used for evaluation and improvement purposes, can explore differences between schools and better allocate resources and address teachers' professional needs. They do so when, for example, identifying gaps in the knowledge of teachers about school subjects and allow for a more coordinated effort to build teacher capacity across the system (Postlethwaite & Kellaghan, 2008). Despite the proliferation of teacher development programmes, offered by the department, unions and other education-oriented institutions in post 1994-South Africa, ANA data consistently indicated poor teacher content knowledge, and this continues to be a challenge.

Teacher accountability and subsequent learning as such remains underdeveloped within the South African education system. The struggle over the ANA purpose and its usage of the information for remedial work clearly negated teacher accountability as well as their professional development. Indeed, in numerous country contexts, national learning assessments such as ANA are controversial policy instruments that generate multiple disputes regarding their purpose and meaning (Maroy & Pons, 2019; Verger, Fontdevila, & Parcerisa, 2019) Although the continuous changes of learner assessments and performance-based

accountability reforms seek to improve quality teaching and learning, the conditions for educational improvement to happen are not always met. Skedsmo and Huber (2019a) make the case that the meta-data from teacher observations has potential if the data collection considers (innovative) classroom teaching practices and teacher's knowledge base in the assessment of decision-making processes concerning professional accountability. These authors advocate for a school governance bottom-up approach through which the feedback from large-scale testing can be used more meaningfully (2019b).

Nonetheless, the recent concerted effort in South Africa to make the objectives of national assessments clearer along with the intended use of the generated data is hoped to set a more collaborative environment for the implementation of these assessments. Our analysis indicate that contestation over curriculum and assessment policy offer little ground to negotiate differences and remedy potential technical faults in assessments, or jointly develop the support for teachers and schools to use assessment outcomes for the benefit of teaching and learning. Only when these conditions are met can national assessments effectively inform the work of teachers and school principals and inform system-wide improvement, particularly where there is high inequality and large performance gaps between schools across the country, such as in South Africa.

Notes

- 1 https://ossafrika.com/esst/index.php?title=Summary_of_the_South_African_Schools_Act%2C_no_84_of_1996
- 2 Spaul (2015) lists the independent service providers as HSRC (2011) and Deloitte (2013). There was no verification process in 2012 because the tender for service providers went out too late while in the 2014 ANA Report 'verification' only appears once in the introduction under methods <https://www.umalusi.org.za/docs/presentations/2015/nspaul.pdf>

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