

Enhancing teaching and learning in schools through assessment: challenges and possibilities



Lessons from the Western Cape and Gauteng provinces

As part of the literacy and numeracy project, the HSRC conducted a qualitative case study to investigate how the Gauteng and Western Cape Provincial Departments of Education (GDoE and WCDoE) prepare and support teachers to cope with the demands of the curriculum and assessment practices. We also looked at how the information collected is used to improve the quality of teaching and learning. **NOLUTHO DIKO** reports on the findings.

The study participants ranged from the level of deputy director-general to that of curriculum advisor. Data gathering methods included individual and focus group interviews, document collection and document reviews, and, to some extent, observations.

A reporting framework was devised, using the following headings: Policy, organising structure and systems; Strategic plans, resources, curriculum, instruments and tools; Capacity development and training; Reporting and dissemination; and Effective use of information.

There are different schools of thought regarding curriculum and assessment approach; one school of thought is that the two functions are inseparable, while the other approach is that these functions should be separate.

The Western Cape Department of Education (WCDoE) subscribes to the former. District officials in the curriculum sub-directorate, regardless of rank, are assessment savvy; they are trained assessors. When conducting school visits, the curriculum implementers are able to provide teachers with both curricular and assessment support at any given point.

Gauteng approaches the situation differently. There are both curriculum and assessment specialists, and these officials have to complement each other.

STRUCTURES

The structure and organisation of assessment systems largely determines how well they function. The Western Cape structures have increased their emphasis on the importance and visibility of assessment in the system, both in

terms of staffing and in the way the system has been structured.

The curriculum sub-directorate at the district level is headed by a curriculum specialist, and curriculum implementers are headed by assessment specialists. The two functions are intertwined and both are given prominence.

In Gauteng, the organogram is skewed toward curriculum. The provision of assessment support and guidance is the primary responsibility of assessment implementers, who are fewer and have their own reporting and training structures. If there is a shortage in supply, assessment is put on the back burner and curriculum services get preferential treatment.

USE OF INFORMATION

The participants emphasised that collecting information of formative value (data that can be used, evaluated and utilised by the system) is key to the improvement of teaching and learning. Both systems have research units but the research agendas point to the differences between the visions of the two systems.

The WCDoE research unit focuses on assessment: collecting, processing and analysing assessment data and feeding it back to the system for utilisation, while the GDoE is more curriculum based. The e-system features heavily in this regard even though Gauteng Online had problems at the time of the study. The WCDoE takes advantage of its up-and-running e-system, and the technology it uses to collect and disseminate information is integrated. Communicating with the schools is facilitated by extensive use of technology.

RESOURCES

Availability of resources for providing basic and essential services was uneven. GDoE officials reported that they felt the district needs to be allocated more money than it currently receives. Its budget only covers operational issues and the running of the office. Officials have limited access to cars, computers and telephones, and not all have access to e-mail. WCDoE interviewees felt they had sufficient basic facilities such as stationery, cars, telephones, computers and printers. Communication is encouraged, and officials receive a subsidy for cellphones. This is especially relevant as a considerable amount of communication is done electronically.

There are barriers that continue to negatively affect and that can even stall the benefits assessment can bring to the education system. The following measures are recommended:

The curriculum and assessment implementation processes need to be properly coordinated and aligned with the system's goals. In both provinces they are coordinated by the provincial and district offices, and there are times when the two systems do not speak to each other, even though there is an important national intervention specifically designed by the Department of Basic Education for teaching and learning improvement.

The communication between the system, the available resources and the assessment structures is not optimal, but can be improved and the systems can generate relevant and timely information if correctly implemented.

For the GDoE, there is a need for improved planning and an increase in financial and human resources is essential.

The WCDoE needs to improve coordination between the systems to reap maximum rewards from its current resources.

The differences in the implementation of assessment call for specific provincial intervention plans as well as a national integrated system that recognises the differences. For that reason, the study ought to be replicated in all the other provinces. ◀◀