

Educators' conceptions and practice of classroom assessment in post-apartheid South Africa

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The changes in post-apartheid South Africa have been accompanied by considerable changes in the education system. The most notable include desegregation of schools, development of a National Qualifications Framework, adoption of new language policies for education, and introduction of outcomes-based curricula. However entrenched assessment practices appear to be hampering the efforts to transform school education. An analysis of the assessment practices of three Grade 4 educators in multilingual classrooms revealed that the educators were unable or unwilling to adapt their assessment practices to the changing demands of South African school education.

Introduction

The political, social and economic changes in post-apartheid South Africa over the past 11 years have been accompanied by considerable changes in the education system. The most notable changes have been the desegregation of schools, the development of a National Qualifications Framework, the adoption of new language policies for education and the introduction of outcomes-based (OBE) curricula. Although the policy changes were driven by the government's drive to "redress past injustices in educational provision" (Department of Education (DoE), 1996:1) they have not necessarily resulted in major changes at classroom level — some educators still apply the same pedagogical practices they used a decade ago (Vandeyar & Killen, 2003). This problem relates particularly to assessment because, as Collis (1992:36) argues, "curriculum designed on the finest principles with the very best of intentions makes no change to what goes on in the classroom if assessment procedures remain the same". The same could be said of policy, i.e. new policies related to outcomes-based education, languages of instruction and assessment may be well-intentioned, but entrenched assessment practices seem to be hampering the government's efforts to transform school education.

The reluctance of many South African educators to change their assessment practices in response to new policies and curriculum guidelines may be due to their ingrained conceptions of assessment. Brown (2003:1) provides a strong argument that all pedagogical acts "are affected by the conceptions teachers have about the act of teaching, the process and purpose of assessment, and the nature of learning". Such conceptions act as filters through which educators view and interpret their own teaching environment (Marton, 1981) and act as barriers to change (Richards & Killen, 1993). Consequently, any efforts to change educators' pedagogical practices, whether by mandate or through professional development activities, may be doomed to failure, unless these conceptions are acknowledged, challenged and eventually changed.

Background

Building on the work of Gipps, Brown, McCallum and McCallister (1995) and Hill (2000), Brown (2003) suggests that teachers hold one of four major conceptions of assessment, i.e. assessment is: (a) useful because it can provide information for improving instruction and learning; (b) a necessary process for making learners accountable for their learning; (c) a process by which teachers and/or schools are made accountable; and (d) irrelevant to the work of teachers and the life of learners.

These different conceptions lead to different assessment practices. Educators who view assessment as a useful means of gathering data upon which to base decisions about learning and their own teaching, will attempt to make assessment an integral part of teaching. Among other things, they will emphasise formative rather than summative assessment, frequently use informal means of assessment, encourage learners to take academic risks and reward academic effort as well as good results. They will also tend to take responsibility for the learning that takes place in their classrooms. Educators who view assessment primarily as a mechanism for making learners accountable for their learning will favour formal, summative, high-stakes assessment, and they may tend to absolve themselves from responsibility for learner failure by blaming the learners' socio-economic conditions or lack of ability (Delandshere & Jones, 1999). Educators who view assessment as a necessary (but not necessarily important) part of educator and school accountability, will favour summative or quasi-formative assessment practices that emphasise the generation of marks that can be reported to external agencies. Educators who view assessment as largely irrelevant will probably avoid formative assessment and take a haphazard approach to summative assessment, thus creating the self-fulfilling prophecy that assessment is a waste of time. While there is strong evidence that educators may hold a predominant view of assessment (Stamp, 1987; Warren & Nisbet, 1999), there is also evidence (Brown, 2003) that educators can hold multiple, interacting conceptions of assessment. For example, an educator could believe that the prime purpose of assessment is to improve learning, but still see assessment as a valuable means of providing evidence for certain measures of school accountability.

Several researchers have argued that educators' conceptions of assessment are strongly interwoven with their views on the broader issues of learning and teaching (Brown, 2003; Delandshere & Jones, 1999). For example, if educators view learning as the personal construction of meaning, it is logical for them to view assessment as

an informal, long-term monitoring process that provides an indication of student competence on various types of authentic activities and is used to guide instruction" (Rueda & Garcia 1994:4).

Likewise, educators, who operate within a clearly defined and explicit set of pedagogical principles that reflect a conception that learning should be concerned with developing deep understanding, would be expected to hold the conception that assessment is a means of improving learning and teaching.

On the other hand educators, whose pedagogical approaches encourage what Biggs (1987) calls surface learning, are likely to see assessment as irrelevant or simply necessary for accountability purposes.

One of the strongest influences on an educator's conception of assessment is the understanding of the subject s/he teaches (Calderhead, 1996). This is a perennial problem in South Africa, *viz.* because of inequities in the apartheid education system; in 1989 approximately 50% of teachers in coloured and black schools were poorly trained and underqualified (Hofmeyer & Buckland, 1992). Although the situation has improved somewhat over the past decade, it is still a significant factor in determining the quality of teaching and learning in many schools (Sukhraj, Mkhize & Govender, 2004). The legacy of poor pre-service and in-service training programmes that were "often inadequate" in "concept, duration and quality" (Department of Education, 2001:22) were major limiting factors in regard to curriculum change in South Africa between 1996 and 2000.

Educators' conceptions of assessment are unlikely to be immune from the influences of the system within which they work. When the system emphasises content, conformity, and high-stakes summative assessment, as it did in South Africa during the apartheid era (Jansen, 1999), it is not surprising for teachers to believe that assessment is primarily about learner and school accountability. Once such conceptions are established, it is difficult to change them.

In the post-apartheid South African context, two particular issues shape the conceptions that educators have of learning, teaching and assessment. The most direct and obvious influence is outcomes-based education (OBE) as the framework for curriculum design and pedagogical practice. The curriculum guidelines and departmental policies that have flowed from this approach to reorganise the education system after 1996 have emphasised learner achievement of specific outcomes, as well as the reporting of learner achievement with reference to these outcomes. There is a strong emphasis on what the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) calls "continuous assessment", which is designed to "support the growth and development of learners" (Department of Education 2002b:97-98). Although there is a clear emphasis on accountability in the RNCS, there is also a strong message that assessment should be an integral part of teaching and learning so as to "provide indications of learner achievement in the most effective and efficient manner and ensure that learners integrate and apply knowledge and skills" (Department of Education 2002a:18).

The second strong influence is a consequence of the government's attempt to eliminate the inequalities of the apartheid school system by opening previously segregated schools to learners from all racial, cultural and social groups. The immediate impact of this change is that some schools (principally the formerly mono-cultural white and Indian schools) now have far greater linguistic and cultural diversity in their learner population. Howie (2002) and Vandeyar and Killen (2003) report on some of the problems that have resulted

from this change, particularly regarding educators who are slow to adapt their teaching methods to the changing learner population. Multicultural, multilingual classrooms provide both challenges and opportunities for educators. The prime challenge in assessment is to find approaches that will be fair to all learners and that will provide reliable evidence from which valid inferences can be made about the learning of each learner. In this environment, an accountability approach to assessment can easily blind educators to the needs of individual learners. On the other hand, a conception of assessment as a means of enhancing teaching and learning can help to sensitise educators to the special needs of learners whose first language is not the language of instruction.

In this study we explored the extent to which the conceptions of assessment held by a small sample of primary school educators could be revealed through the observation of their assessment practices. We sought to answer two questions: (1) Can educators' conceptions of assessment be identified from their assessment practices? and (2) Do educators' assessment practices reveal single or multiple conceptions of assessment? The most important reason for seeking answers to these questions was to guide the development of a reliable, but minimally intrusive, method of identifying educators' conceptions of assessment as a basis for helping educators to adapt their assessment practices to the new challenges that they faced. Educators' conceptions of assessment were postulated from the observation and analysis of their assessment practices and then confirmed through discussions with the educators. The discussions allowed educators to link their approaches to assessment to their life histories and to raise their concerns about the policies they were expected to implement, and the learners they were required to teach.

Research strategy

This research was composed of three ethnographic case studies of Grade 4 educators in multilingual classrooms in South Africa. The data collection consisted of a mix of sustained classroom observations, in-depth interviews and an analysis of key documents (including learner transcripts, educators' workbooks, marking schemes and diagnostic tools). This strategy enabled us to compile consistent and detailed case research reports on the educators' assessment practices and to explore the underlying beliefs and assumptions behind the practices.

Observation was the main data-gathering technique and observations were conducted during 2004. One researcher observed each educator on 10 occasions over a two-week period. The observed teaching focused on word problems in mathematics and culminated in a written assessment task designed by each educator. The observations of each educator's assessment practices were followed by a semi-structured interview during which the educator was asked to explain her beliefs and the experiences that had shaped her approach to assessment. Observed lessons were videotaped and interviews were recorded. Learner transcripts, educator workbooks, marking

schemes and diagnostic tools were analysed to provide additional insights into each educator's assessment practices.

The case studies

The research was conducted during mathematics lessons in Grade 4 classes in three urban primary schools in a large South African city. For convenience the schools will be referred to as Broadwater, Silverstream, and Riverwood. The schools were selected to represent a large group of similar urban public schools where rapid desegregation had been implemented during the nine years prior to this study. It is important not to overstate the growth of racial integration in South African education. While some white schools have become 'black' due to white flight, black schools have (understandably) not changed in terms of their racial distribution of learners and educators. A large number of mainly middle class, white and Indian English medium urban public schools and low class Afrikaans-medium urban public schools have changed as a result of the growth in numbers of black learners in such schools. The overall picture in South Africa is that children of colour have moved in large numbers towards the English-speaking sector of the former white and Indian school systems (Soudien, 2004). A summary of the school profiles is presented in Table 1.

The three educators who participated in the study will be referred to as Sharon (Broadwater), Marieta (Silverstream) and Reena (Riverwood). Each of these educators had taught for longer than 10 years when the study commenced, so they had undertaken their pre-service teacher education during the apartheid era and, until recently, had taught in segregated, essentially mono-cultural schools. They had, for the major part of their teaching careers, worked in a system that used a content-based curriculum and that emphasised formal, written examinations as the major means of assessing learning. Outcomes-based education, and its particular approach to assessment, had not been part of their teacher education or their teaching environment many years prior to this research. When OBE was introduced in South Africa, the clear message from the Department of Education was that educators (such as those involved in this study) would be required to make "a paradigm shift from a teacher and content-driven curriculum to an outcomes-based and learner-centred curriculum" (Geyser, 2000:22).

Discussion of the results

On the surface it appeared that the first educator, Sharon, had attempted to change her assessment practices in response to her changing teaching context. The format of her assessment task, the list of assessment criteria she used, and the classroom climate, were all broadly consistent with the requirements of outcomes-based assessment. She opted for continuous assessment rather than examination-driven assessment, as required by the policy of the Department of Education. The assessment task was conducted in a relaxed environment that encouraged learners to see it as a follow-up activity to work

Table 1 Summary of school profiles

	Name of school		
	Broadwater	Silverstream	Riverwood
Type of school	Ex-Model C, ¹ well-resourced school	Afrikaans public school	Indian public school
Situation	Middle to upper class, predominantly white suburb	Low to middle class white suburb	Middle class Indian suburb
Medium of instruction	English	Afrikaans, English from 2001	English
Established	Early 1900s	Early 1900s	1987
Pre-1994 catered exclusively to:	White English-speaking learners	White Afrikaans-speaking learners	Indian learners, the majority spoke English
Post-1994 learner population	800 (60% white, 33% black, 4% Indian, 3% coloured)	535 (52% African, 43% Indian, 3% white, 2% coloured)	840 (85% black, 14% Indian, 1% coloured)
Educators	33 (all white)	19 (17 white, 1 Indian, 1 coloured). 17 white were all Afrikaans-speaking. English was 2nd language	24 (23 Indian, 1 white)
Learners in Grade 4 class	28 (20 white, 7 African, 1 Indian)	39 (24 African, 13 Indian, 1 white, 1 coloured)	35 (26 African, 9 Indian)
Grade 4 educator	White Afrikaans/English-speaking female	White Afrikaans-speaking female	Indian English-speaking female
Mode of transportation	Privately owned cars	Taxis	'Bussing-in' ² phenomenon

covered during the learning tasks. The assessment task was clearly focused on relevant mathematical concepts embedded in word problems. The problems were graded so that lower ability learners could attempt some of them

and higher ability learners would be challenged.

The initial evidence suggested that Sharon's conception of assessment might have fitted in with the "enhancement of learning" view. Closer analysis of the implementation of the assessment task she had developed and used revealed the limited way in which she had adopted this conception of assessment. Sharon gave the learners clear, outcomes-based criteria according to which she would judge the quality of their work. However, this was done towards the end of the test, rather than prior to the start of the test.

Sharon appeared reluctant to give learners freedom to express their individuality, innovativeness or initiative. For example, when one learner wanted to use an alternative method for solving the word problems Sharon responded: *"We haven't learnt that yet, we do the method that we worked with, okay?"* Such a response suggests very strongly that Sharon did not view the assessment task as a learning process. Rather, she was adopting the "learner accountability" conception of assessment. By forcing the learner to take a "standard" approach to problems she indicated her limited understanding of the principles of outcomes-based education and her narrow conception of assessment.

Sharon's stated purpose with the assessment task was to determine how well the learners understood word problems, but her assessment practices were not congruent with this purpose. She informed her learners that she wanted to see how much they knew: *"Today we are not helping each other, I want to see what you can do"*. Yet she then proceeded to analyse each problem in detail, allowing class input, and practically solving each problem for the learners verbally. She provided too much assistance to the learners for this assessment task to be a true reflection of their understanding. This could suggest that she was keen for the learners to "do well", possibly because of her "accountability" conception of assessment, or because of the presence of the researcher.

In discussion with the researcher, Sharon expressed uncertainty about outcomes-based assessment. She claimed that she was *"not too happy with OBE, but we won't go into that, because we are all still flapping in the wind"*. She acknowledged that she did not really know what was expected of her by the departmental policies and that she was unsure of how she should be assessing the learners. Her assessment practices were based largely on what she had learned from experience, and that experience had been dominated by a strong focus on accountability. Although she saw a need to change and was trying to do so, she acknowledged that her limited understanding of outcomes-based assessment and the relevant departmental policies made change difficult.

The assessment practices of the second educator, Marieta, indicated that she was reluctant to accept the principles of outcomes-based assessment. She was not keen to break the shackles of her 34-year traditional teaching methods. She found comfort in her perception that examinations were the only true means of assessing learner performance. There was little evidence to suggest that Marieta had attempted to embrace any other form of assessment.

Her narrow conception of assessment was consistent with the assessment policy of her school, which promoted examinations as the only means of accountable assessment.

Questions that Marieta developed and used were based on mathematical number sequence, roman numerals, two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects and word problems. No assessment criteria were given to the learners. Marieta set up inflexible, stringent and disciplinarian conditions for the execution of the assessment task, with statements such as: "*Children, there's enough time, go on, start immediately. No talking*". She introduced the assessment task to the learners during the first five minutes of the period and then required them to engage with the set task in complete silence for the next 35 minutes while she walked around the classroom like an invigilator. A minute before the bell rang signalling the end of the period, she announced: "*Pens down. I want all of you to put your pens down*", and then collected all the learners' scripts.

The observation of Marieta's assessment practice indicated that she was struggling to come to grips with the basic tenets of outcomes-based assessment. There were no clearly defined assessment criteria, the specific outcomes being tested were not brought to the learners' attention, they were not obvious and no attempt was made to identify different levels of learner performance by, for example, using questions of varying difficulty.

In discussions with the researcher, Marieta appeared to feel intimidated to a large degree by the new educational paradigm and believed that the "*old way*" of teaching was much better. She admitted her reluctance to accept change. She constantly reiterated the fact that she did not expect the learners to do well because of their poor English language skills, yet she did nothing to accommodate this barrier in her assessment practices. She clearly conceived assessment as a means of making learners accountable for their own learning, and seemed not to appreciate the potential of well-structured assessment tasks to help learners learn effectively.

The observed assessment practices of the third educator, Reena, suggested that she had an extremely poor understanding of the operational principles of outcomes-based assessment. Her assessment task was based on word problems, but she coupled this with a group assessment task. It seemed that she wanted to assess the learners' understanding of word problems, but the assessment criteria issued to the learners were based on group dynamics and confused many learners.

Reena's assessment practices were clearly driven by the need to produce marks for the end of term feedback to parents. Her accountability conception of assessment was so strong that it over-rode any consideration of the learning value of the assessment task or the need to consider any of the fundamental principles of assessment (such as reliability and validity). Reena appeared to confuse the learners by insisting on group discussion and peer assistance and then assessing the learners' individual efforts.

Reena gave learners the impression that the questionnaire about group dynamics was more important than successfully completing their assessment

tasks. This distracted many learners and took up valuable time that could have been devoted to the mathematics task. Ultimately, learners' reports on their group activities did not contribute in any way to their final assessment as the teacher considered only the formal test. It is quite legitimate to assess learners' capacity to work collaboratively, but Reena appeared not to know how to do this effectively.

In contrast to Marieta, who enforced discipline in her classroom, Reena showed no concern for order or the effects that lack of organisation and disruptions might have had on learners' ability to demonstrate their learning. She arrived five minutes late for class and did not attempt to set the scene or prepare her learners for the assessment event. Instead, she immediately proceeded to read through the assessment criteria regarding group dynamics. She did not distinguish clearly between the formal mathematics test and the group dynamic assessment task. As a result, most learners appeared to be confused and became noisy. Discipline was minimal. Reena continuously interrupted and raised her voice in an attempt to be heard over the din, but her interventions were usually attempts to clarify items on the test, rather than to restore order in the classroom.

This assessment task was the only one Reena conducted during the first term and the results were used as feedback to parents on the achievements and potential of their children. Despite the serious implications of the assessment task for each learner, Reena remained completely unperturbed by the inappropriateness of her actions. She grouped the learners even though the assessment task could have been attempted individually. She later explained that this would allow learners who could read and write English to help those who could not. Reena had set the scene for endemic copying, since learners were forced to consult one another before attempting each problem, and learners who could not read and understand the problems had no option but to copy. Her instructions were so confusing that many learners sought guidance from their group leaders.

In discussions with the researcher Reena was extremely confident that she was acting correctly and claimed that she knew much about outcomes-based assessment. Her accountability conception clearly dominated her thinking about assessment. She knew that she had to produce end-of-term marks for learners, but she showed little concern for the reliability of the marks or the validity of the inferences she might draw from them. She had apparently never considered the possibility that well-designed assessment tasks could contribute to learning and that poorly designed tasks might inhibit learning.

None of the educators observed and interviewed made any effort to test the learners' mathematical understanding in an appropriate cultural context. Questions were posed from a predominantly Afrikaans and eurocentric cultural perspective and contained names such as "*Boland bank*", "*grandpa*" and "*Jeff*", rather than more culturally relevant terms, and the situations that many of word problems described were alien to some learners. This approach was consistent with educators' perceptions that assessment is a means of making learners accountable for their learning, and the belief that assessment

should generate marks that can be reported to parents.

The changes in assessment in the South African schooling context seems to mirror the findings of Torrance (1995:6) that

... if changes in assessment are implemented with little or no explanation they will be interpreted from a 'testing' rather than a 'teaching' perspective and many of the intended curricular and pedagogical benefits of such change will not be realised.

The three educators did not approve of the view that assessment should support learning. Most importantly, they appeared unconcerned that their assessment practices ran counter to the basic principles that, to be of any value, assessment must be conducted equitably and must generate reliable evidence to be used as the basis for drawing valid inferences about learning in schools (Killen, 2003).

Rather than building on the cultural and linguistic capital of the learners in their classes, it seemed that the educators attempted to use the assessment tasks to reinforce the differences between the learners or to force culturally different learners to blend into the hegemonic school culture. It was not possible to determine whether their assessment practices were driven by ignorance or prejudice, but it was reasonably certain that they did not have a deep understanding of assessment principles.

The educators' approaches to assessment were clearly influenced by their backgrounds, and their capacity to accommodate the cultural and linguistic diversity in their classrooms was severely limited by their own language abilities. All three educators were fluent in and could teach through the medium of English and Afrikaans, although Reena's command of Afrikaans was limited. None of the educators could speak any of the languages of the learners whose mother tongue was neither English nor Afrikaans. Hence, some learners in the classrooms of Reena and Marieta who spoke virtually no English or Afrikaans experienced great difficulty in understanding their teacher. The communication barriers that existed in their classrooms were enormous.

It was evident that the educators' conceptions of assessment drove their practice. It appeared that their limited conceptions of assessment (possibly due to their limited knowledge of assessment theory) resulted in the use of practices that rendered their data-gathering unreliable and their inferences about learner achievement invalid.

Conclusions

This study was designed to determine the extent to which relatively short observations of educators' assessment practices could provide a window into their conceptions of assessment. To that extent, it was successful as the educators' observed assessment practices appeared to be highly consistent with the conceptions of assessment that they revealed during follow-up discussion. The observations provided authentic data that could not readily be obtained through questionnaires or interviews. For example, it is unlikely that Reena would have admitted (in writing) that she would create among learners the impression that their group-work skills would be assessed and then com-

pletely disregard this when recording and reporting their achievements. Therefore, the first research question was answered in the affirmative, i.e. the observations of the educators' assessment practices provided a clear picture of their conceptions of assessment. The answer to the second research question was negative, *viz.* the educators in this study tended to hold single, rather than multiple, conceptions of assessment. Both findings are important because they provided some indication of how South African educators might be assisted to deal with the assessment challenges they now face.

An analysis of the assessment practices of these educators revealed several common factors: (a) educators' struggles with outcomes-based assessment; (b) educators' unwillingness to accommodate linguistically and culturally diverse learners; and (c) educators' strong, but not necessarily helpful, conceptions of assessment. Although the sample in this exploratory study was small, the findings have broad implications. The three educators who kindly volunteered to allow their assessment practices to be observed believed that they were doing a reasonable job of assessing their learners. The findings reported here, however, suggested that this was not the case. This is not intended as a criticism of these educators, it is reported in order to highlight what is believed to be a much wider problem, i.e. many educators in South African schools are unable or unwilling to adapt their assessment practices (or their teaching practices) according to the changing demands of the workplace. Indeed, some seem unaware that they need to change. The conceptions they hold about teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment appear to result from policies and practices that are no longer relevant.

The assumption that educators' conceptions will change simply because policies and school contexts have changed is naïve, yet this seems to be the Department of Education expectation: "... teachers will show a broad understanding of ... the concepts of outcomes-based education and its implications for teaching and learning" (Department of Education, 1997:2). The problem is not unique to the South African context, but appears to be global. Evidence from the UK assessment-led curriculum development and the USA measurement driven instruction initiatives suggests that changes in assessment impact most positively on curriculum and teaching methods when the intention that they should do so is made explicit, and when educators have an active role in the developmental process (Torrance, 1995). Similarly, other studies (Radnor, 1996; Proudford 1998), which investigated the process of implementation of externally imposed educational change, view implementation as an active process during which individuals interpret, reinterpret, reform and reconstruct policy ideas when actively putting them into practice. Studies in the UK found that

teachers' capacity and willingness to engage with changes in assessment is particularly influenced by very deep-rooted and long-standing notions of what the purpose of assessment is, and thus they have particular assumptions about what is expected of them when they become involved in it (Torrance, 1995:55).

The assessment practices of the educators in this study revealed a problem

that, from anecdotal evidence and some limited research (Stoffels 2001:30), may be widespread in South Africa. The problem is that many educators either lack the knowledge and skills to change their teaching practices or perceive that they have not been provided with the external assistance they need to make changes (Sukhraj, Mkhize & Govender, 2004:1).

Educators cannot use assessment strategies that they do not understand or for which they lack skills, and the effective use of any strategy will be limited by the educators' ability to think about and control what they are doing. As Torrance (1995:155) points out,

crude changes in curriculum content and teaching methods can be instigated, but the quality of these changes will depend on teacher perceptions of their purpose and understandings of their broader curricular intentions.

Whether or not the educators in this study had the knowledge and skills to change their assessment practices, it seems clear that they either did not have or were not applying the meta-cognitive skills that would have alerted them to the shortcomings of their current assessment practices.

The educators' work situations were clearly difficult for them. The linguistic and cultural diversity of the learners and the poor reading ability of many learners were issues that the educators appeared unprepared and unqualified to address. They clearly felt frustrated by a situation over which they believed they had little control, i.e. outcomes-based education and the changing nature of the learner population had been forced upon them. Their coping mechanisms were based largely on a determination to hold onto the past, in a firm belief that the teaching practices (including assessment practices) that had served them well before 1994 were still appropriate.

Identifying educators' conceptions of assessment is merely the first step in helping them to reflect on those conceptions and reconcile them with the demands on educators by curriculum changes, departmental and school policies, changing demographics of the learner population in many schools and changing views of what constitutes "best practice". As Hill (2002:123) points out, educators need to be confident about assessment so that they can "make informed decisions about their classroom practice". This confidence is unlikely to be evident if educators hold multiple, conflicting conceptions of assessment, or if they lack the knowledge and skills to translate their conceptions into appropriate practice. The study reported here suggested that South African teachers may need considerable assistance to face these challenges.

The findings of this research should not be interpreted too narrowly. They should not simply be taken as an indication that some South African teachers are not conceptualising assessment in ways that are consistent with current government and Department of Education policies. After all, the policies may be poorly conceived. Nor should the results be seen as simply more evidence of the poor quality of teaching in some South African schools. Such interpretations are unproductive. The authors would rather invite the interpretation that the results indicated that the educators in the study continued to conceptualise assessment in ways that were consistent with South Africa's "old"

educational paradigm, and wish to raise the question of why this might be the case. The educators in this study seemed unable or unwilling to entertain any conceptualisation of assessment outside their past experience. As a result, they were unable to follow the advice of Astin (1991) to be concerned about "measuring that which is valued rather than simply valuing what can be measured". Most disturbingly, they seemed unaware of the adverse consequences that their assessment practices had for learners. For these reasons, this preliminary research should be seen as just the first step of a long journey towards the goal of helping South African teachers to articulate and reflect on their conceptions of assessment. Only then will they be able to make informed decisions about their assessment practices and critically evaluate the policies that they are required to implement.

Notes

1. Model C school — a government attempt to cut state costs by shifting some of the financing and control of white schools to parents .
2. "Bussing- in" — a phenomenon that has occurred post 1994, where large numbers of African learners are transported by bus from neighbouring black suburbs to middle class Indian English medium schools.

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