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Ibhuku Lokufundisa Ulimi - Tšenale ya tša Go ruta Polelo
- Buka ya Thuto ya Puo - Jenale ya Thuto ya Dipuo - Ijenali
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ANA as part of a comprehensive reading literacy school assessment system

Abstract

Making decisions about teaching and learning is as core a component to teaching as providing the teaching itself. Effective use of assessment data to plan, judge, and modify teaching is a fundamental competency for good teaching. According to the Department of Basic Education (2013b), the purpose of the ANA is to determine learner performance with regard to the skills and knowledge that they have acquired as a result of teaching and learning experiences in school. In addition, it provides important evidence to inform planning and development at national, provincial, district and school level. The purpose of this article is to report on the results of an exploratory action research study that indicate that the Annual National Assessment is overstepping its boundaries in terms of supporting the development of a systematic, dynamic and effective reading literacy assessment system to address the early literacy skills of foundation phase learners. ANA was not designed or standardised to be a screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring assessment.

Keywords: Annual National Assessments, data-based decision making, progress monitoring assessment, basic early literacy skills

## 1.	Introduction

The importance of endeavouring to ensure that all children achieve adequate reading outcomes by the end of third grade cannot be overstated. Awareness is growing nationwide of the dividends of early reading success and the dire consequences of early reading failure (cf. Pretorius, 2014). According to the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2010a), 60% of Grade 3 children must have mastered the minimum language competencies by 2014, and 75% of Grade 3 children by 2019. The Annual National Assessments were introduced in 2011 in order to track learner performance each year in Literacy and Numeracy as the Department works towards the goal of improving learner performance in line with commitments made by government (DBE, 2010c: 5). According to Motshekga (2013), the ANA can be regarded as a diagnostic tool that detects areas that need urgent remedy.

The Annual National Assessments have focused national attention, effort, and resources on reading outcomes. The dark side of these assessments is that, at best, they provide summative information identifying children at risk only after they have not met the goals or targets set by the DBE.

If by third grade or fourth grade, learners are performing well below their peers, it is too late to modify beginning reading instruction to promote the acquisition of initial reading skills (Torgesen, 1998). The National Research Council (1998) in the United States of America has indicated that assessment systems that can identify reading difficulties early and prevent later reading failure need to be in place from the outset.

Research indicates that the earlier learners at risk for reading failure are identified, the greater the chances of decreasing the effects of the failure and getting them back on track (Hintze, Ryan, & Stoner, 2003; Strickland, 2002). In addition, the earlier interventions can be implemented, the greater the chance that low reading trajectories can be modified to result in positive reading achievement (Good, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 2001; Shaywitz, 2003). The challenge continues to be in the area of how to ensure sustained achievement of these objectives.

The aim of this article is to report on a study that set out to determine what constitutes the reading literacy assessment practices of stakeholders at district, school and classroom levels, and specifically to highlight the role of ANA as part of a school assessment system.

## 2.	Literacy assessments as part of a comprehensive school assessment system

We have undergone a shift in thinking about schools as places where passing or failing is emphasised. Today, schools are places where the expectation is for all learners

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to succeed (Sieborger, 1998). With this shift, the role of assessment has changed from merely separating successful and unsuccessful learners, to adopting a set of educational practices that support the learning of all learners (Stiggins, 2002). Timely, reliable assessments indicate which learners are falling behind in critical reading skills so teachers can help them make greater progress in learning to read. Reliable and valid assessments also help to monitor the effectiveness of teaching for all learners; without regularly assessing learners' progress in learning to read, teachers cannot know which learners need more help and which are likely to make good progress without extra help. Because scientific studies have repeatedly demonstrated the value of regularly assessing reading progress (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1999; Torgesen, 2004), a comprehensive assessment system is a critical element of an effective school-level plan for preventing reading difficulties.

An assessment system is "a group of policies, structures, practices, and tools for generating and using information on learner learning" (Clarke, 2011:4). Each school should have a comprehensive assessment system aligned to instruction that identifies the assessment measures the school will use to guide teaching decisions. Because of the nature of learning in the foundation phase and the interplay between internal and external factors, the literature suggests that it is important to use a variety of assessment measures, in different learning contexts, over time. An assessment system relies on measures of reading that are reliable and valid for the purpose they are being used (Torgesen & Miller, 2009).

An assessment system alone cannot ensure that all learners learn what they need to know to succeed. Teachers need curriculum and instructional tools to teach effectively, as well as the ability to use assessment information skilfully. Yet, without strong assessments, any effort to raise outcomes for learners will likely fail (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010; Herman, Osmundson, & Dietel, 2010). Learners, parents, teachers, community members, and department officials all need valid and reliable information to strengthen teaching and learning.

A comprehensive and coherent assessment system provide users at multiple levels of the system (district, school, classroom) with appropriate and detailed data to meet their decision-making needs. A comprehensive, coherent and continuous system provides continuous streams of data about learners learning throughout the year, thus providing district and school decision-makers with periodic information for monitoring learner learning, establishing a rich and productive foundation for understanding learner achievement (Herman, Osmundson, & Dietel, 2010).

Making decisions about teaching and learning is as core a component to teaching as providing the teaching itself. Effective use of assessment data to plan, judge, and modify teaching is a fundamental competency for good teaching (Hosp & Ardoin, 2008). A logical or practical rationale for linking assessment and teaching is that teachers need to make

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screening[1], diagnostic[2], progress[3], and outcome[4] decisions, and those decisions need to be accurate; if they are not, valuable teaching time could be lost in presenting teaching strategies that do not address the learners' needs. When it comes to planning teaching practices for learners, the best way to maximize the appropriacy of teachers' decisions is to base them on data (Shepard, Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Rust, 2005). Research indicates that when teachers use assessment data to make their teaching decisions, learner performance increases (Black & William, 1998). The learners of teachers who collect systematic progress monitoring data, and use it to make decisions, score on average a full standard deviation higher than their peers whose teachers do not collect and use these data (Stecker & Fuchs, 2000). In addition, teachers using systematic progress-monitoring data make changes in their teaching more frequently for their learners who are experiencing difficulties (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hamlett, & Strecker, 1991). This type of formative evaluation is really the driving force for linking assessment and teaching because it represents decision making for learning – that is, decisions used to plan teaching (Torgesen & Miller, 2009). However, it is not the act of collecting information that effects greater learning. Teachers need to actively use the information to critically evaluate their teaching in order to determine how it could be changed to better meet the learners' needs (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hamlett, & Strecker, 1991). The DBE (2010b: 12) specifically states that "Decisions and plans on what, when and how to teach must be informed by the evidence that comes out of the assessments, both school-based and ANA assessments".

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1   Screening assessment is the first step in determining learners' readiness for on-grade level instruction. It is a brief initial step in identifying children who may need extra or alternative forms of instruction to make adequate progress in reading and/or in need of further diagnosis. Screening assessment helps classify learners as at risk or not at risk for reading failure.

2   Diagnostic assessments help teachers plan teaching and determine possible intervention strategies related to the special needs of the learner.

3   Progress monitoring is a scientifically based practice that teachers can use to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching on individual learners or the entire class to ensure learners are making adequate progress throughout the year.

4   Outcomes assessments are considered to be summative assessments. The data can also be used to assess achievement of teaching goals. The data is obtained through formal assessments, which are usually administered at the conclusion of a theme or unit or at the end of the terms or school year.

Assessment data should be used to make instructional decisions for individual learners and to inform a schools entire system of reading instruction (Snow et al., 1998; Snow & Strucker, 2000). First, data should be used to make decisions about an individual learner. For example, screening data may identify a learner at risk for reading difficulty and lead to an immediate plan for extra support within the classroom. Progress monitoring data are generally used to indicate whether a learner is making adequate progress toward a goal, and if any instructional changes are necessary. Second, learner assessment data can assist the school in making decisions about its system of reading instruction, as well as the quality of the teaching and materials used, and the need for professional development.

Interventions at the individual level are relatively simple. When only a few learners are experiencing difficulty and demonstrating insufficient progress, the teachers can focus on ways to improve reading instruction to meet the specific needs of individual learners. However, when many learners are neither meeting the established goals nor making adequate progress, it becomes critical for the school and its teachers to consider the overall teaching programme and the support needed for teachers when developing a plan to increase reading performance (Fuchs, 2002). An analysis of data, patterns and trends may reveal that many teachers are having difficulty with the teaching of a specific skill. If so, the school leadership (i.e., School Management Team and Head of Foundation Phase) can tailor professional development and in-classroom support to address this need. It is possible that only certain teachers are having difficulty, and targeted assistance may be necessary to support such teachers.

When many learners are struggling, whether in selected classrooms or throughout the school, it is important for the school to view this as a system-level issue and make decisions that will improve teaching for large numbers of learners (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Attempting to address underlying system-level problems (for example, insufficient training on a new programme), only on an individual learner level, is ineffective and may overwhelm school resources (Kincheloe, 2010). By carefully analysing data to determine whether underlying system level issues are occurring and then addressing those alongside individual issues, schools will be able to simultaneously improve teaching while reducing the likelihood that more learners may have reading difficulty. Schools can increase the possibility that more learners will become strong readers if they address system level needs timeously. When the system is not overwhelmed by a large number of many below-grade-level learners, those individual learners still identified as at-risk can receive the targeted interventions they need (Reeves, 2008).

In an era of high-stakes educational outcomes, the message is clear: If we are going to promise all children that they will be competent and proficient readers by the third grade, we need a prevention-oriented, school-wide assessment and support system that is designed to pre-empt early reading difficulty. This can ensure gradual and systematic progress towards adequate reading achievement.

3 Empirical investigation

3.1 Research paradigm

This study was conceptualised within the interpretive paradigm. Maree (2009) points out that interpretivism aims at giving a perspective on a specific situation through the analysis of the situation and gaining insight into the manner in which certain people, or a group of people, attach meaning to the situation. In this study, the aim was to collaborate with circuit managers and subject specialists (district level), school management teams (school level), and teachers (classroom level), in order to obtain an in depth understanding of assessment practices at the different levels.

3.2 Research approach

A qualitative approach was chosen in order to explore education officials' experience in the area of assessment practices at district, school and classroom levels primarily through the use of semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis. In this paradigm "behaviour as it occurs naturally" (McMillan & Shumacher, 2010: 321-322) forms the focus of study. The importance of the "situational context" needed to understand the observed behaviour is further emphasised. The questions raised are concerned with "understanding the social phenomenon from the participants' perspective". We sought to "provide 'rich' descriptions that cannot be achieved by reducing pages of narration to numbers" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010: 322).

3.3 Research design

This study utilised a participatory action research design. Perhaps the most important feature of action research is that it shifts its locus of control in varying degrees from professional or academic researchers to those who have been traditionally called the subjects of research (Kerr & Anderson, 2005). Among qualitative researchers there is consensus that action research is inquiry that is done *by* or *with* insiders of an organisation or community, but never *to* or *on* them (Kerr & Anderson, 2005). Action research is best done in collaboration with others who have a stake in the problem under investigation.

3.4 Sampling

Non-probability sampling is used in qualitative research, where researchers purposively seek out participants that are deemed to be the best sources of information required. Purposive sampling is based on the judgment of researchers, who select subjects who are most characteristic of the population or most likely to be exposed to or have had experience of the phenomenon in question; in this case, the Department of Education officials in the Cloudy[5] District in the North West Province responsible for monitoring

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5   Cloudy District and Happy Valley are pseudonyms, and have been used for ethical purposes.

and overseeing teaching, learning, and assessment in the foundation phase, the Happy Valley School Management Team, as well as its foundation phase teachers responsible for implementing assessment in their classrooms.

3.5   Data collection methods

In this study the following methods were used:

• 　　　Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Head of Department of the Foundation phase, who is also a grade 1 teacher, and with the Coordinator of the General Education and Training Band within the Cloudy District in order to gain information and insight into setting of benchmarks, the assessment documentation used, the recording of assessment results, and decision making related to assessment results, etc.

• 　　　Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews in this study were conducted with the Happy Valley School Management Team, the foundation phase teachers at Happy Valley, and the subject advisors/specialists for languages/literacy (i.e., Home Language and First Additional Language) in the Cloudy District in order to gain information about the setting of progress monitoring targets, how progress is monitored, the types of assessments used, how assessment is recorded and communicated to parents, and whether assessment dataare used to make instructional decisions and provide support to learners.

• 　　　Document analysis

The following documents were collected for analysis in this study:

• 　　　District Level

  • 　　　The National Assessment Protocol;

  • 　　　Action Plan to 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025; and

  • 　　　Records of assessment analysis procedures.

• 　　　School Level

  • 　　　The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS): English Home Language for Grade R to Grade 3 (Foundation Phase);

  • 　　　Records of teachers' assessment planning;

  • 　　　Records of teachers' assessment recording;

  • 　　　Records of assessment tasks; and

•   Records of learner report cards.

3.6   Data analysis

The qualitative content analysis of the research data was carried out using the process recommended by Henning et al. (2004: 104-109) and Roberts et al. (2006: 43). The analysis involved the following procedures:

•   Recording of data by means of note taking and audio recording of responses.

•   Responses from the interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim.

•   The entire transcribed text and field notes were first read to obtain an overall impression of the content and context.

•   Codes were assigned to specific units or segments of related meaning identified within the field notes and transcripts (Neuman, 1997; Henning et al., 2004). The coding process consisted of the three coding steps as described by Neuman (1997), namely: open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

     °   *Open coding* involved the identification and naming of segments of meaning from the field notes and transcripts in relation to the research topic. The focus here was on wording, phrasing, context, consistency, frequency, extensiveness and specificity of comments. The segments of meaning from the field notes and transcripts were clearly marked (highlighted) and labelled in a descriptive manner.

     °   *Axial coding* was done by reviewing and examining the initial codes that were identified during the previous procedure. Categories and patterns were identified during this step and organised in terms of causality, context and coherence.

     °   *Selective coding* as final coding procedure involved the selective scanning of all the codes that were identified for comparison, contrast and linkage to the research topic as well as for a central theme or "key linkage" that might occur.

•   The codes were evaluated for relevance to the research purpose.

•   Related codes were then listed in categories according to the research purpose and theoretical framework from the literature study.

•   The analysis process was further informed by inquisitive questions to identify thematic relationships from the various categories.

- The qualitative analysis process was concluded with a description of thematic relationships and patterns of relevance to the research.

3.7 The role of the researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher stands central to the data collected (Wood, 2012). The positionality perspective taken in this study is that of outsiders in collaboration with insiders. The issue of what each stakeholder wishes to attain from the research needs to be negotiated carefully if reciprocity is to be achieved. We approached the study from a "We know. They know" perspective and not a "We know. They don't know" perspective (Kerr & Anderson, 2005). Our positionality can, therefore, be described as one of cooperation – local people (departmental officials, teachers) working together with outsiders (research team) to determine priorities; the responsibility, however, remains with the outsiders for directing the process. The relationship status is that of doing research with insiders.

3.8 Reliability and validity

Wood (2012) points out that four aspects need to be looked into when investigating the reliability and validity of a qualitative study, namely trustworthiness, transferability, reliability and confirmability. The research can be considered to be trustworthy, since it involves an in-depth discussion with the participants. Data concerning specific situations can be investigated with rich descriptions. The audio recordings of the semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews further support the trustworthiness, because referral can always be made to them.

The information that was collected is transferable, seeing that the action research can reveal the assessment planning procedures used by teachers, and whether data-based decision making is used to inform instructional practice. A dense description was given of all aspects of the data collection so that the research could be repeated under similar circumstances, if necessary.

Wood (2012) deems it important that the research be confirmable. The extent to which the research can be supported by other persons contributes to establishing whether the research is reliable. In the case of this study, the confirmation of findings is supported by the recordings of the semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and the documents that were collected for analysis purposes.

3.9 Ethical aspects

Basic ethical principles were adhered to in this study; the researchers informed the participants of the purpose, nature, data collection methods, and extent of the research prior to commencement. Further, the researchers explained to them their typical roles. In line with this, the researchers obtained their informed consent in writing. In this study

the researchers ensured that the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants would be maintained through the removal of any identifying characteristics before widespread dissemination of information. The researchers made it clear that the participants' names would not be used for any other purposes, nor would information be shared that revealed their identity in any way. Despite all the above mentioned precautions, it was made clear to the participants that the research was only for academic purposes and their participation in it was absolutely voluntary. No one was forced to participate. Ethical clearance was obtained from University X's ethical committee.

4.   Results

The results of the study are summarised and presented based on the questions posed to stakeholders at district, school, and classroom levels:

4.1   District level

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the Coordinator of the General Education and Training band within the Cloudy District. The aim of the interview was to obtain information, from a management perspective, about the assessment approach and practices within the district. In this section, the questions posed and responses provided are included:

What documents do the district use to guide their assessment approach?

Well, we primarily use the National Assessment Protocol, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. Foundation Phase Grades R to 3, the Annual National Assessment Guidelines, Action Plan to 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025 and the National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R -12.

How is the information in these documents used?

We read the relevant policy documents in order to identify what is expected of us at district level. We also receive shortened more specific guidelines related to these policy documents from either the South African Department of Basic Education or from the provincial office. For example, we have now received the Annual National Assessment Guidelines 2013 which we are sending to the schools to ensure that they cover the aspects that will be asked in the ANA tests in September.

How are benchmarks set for the district?

I don't know if they can be called benchmarks, rather goals or targets. The Windy City area office sets targets based on the entire district, provincial, and national guidelines. National guidelines basically determine what the province and the districts do in terms of goal setting. The goal is that by 2014 at least 60% of learners should achieve acceptable levels of competency (i.e., 50% and above) in

Language and Mathematics.

Schools are allowed to set their own targets; there are no benchmarks for early literacy skills, but a general target that at least 60% of the learners should achieve more than 50% for literacy.

How are assessment results submitted by schools recorded?

Assessment results are typed on an Excel spread sheet by an assistant within the Windy City area office. This is then saved on Subject Advisors' computers and distributed to the Coordinator of the GET band and the Circuit Manager.

The data is analysed by using a coding procedure to group the learner data. This data is then presented in bar graph format.

- *Code 1: 1-34% (Not achieved)*

- *Code 2: 35% to 49% (Partially achieved)*

- *Code 3: 50% to 69% (Achieved)*

- *Code 4: 70% to 100% (Outstanding)*

This is similar to the cumulative record card in the National Protocol for Assessment.

The results of Grades 3, 6, and 9 for each school are then submitted to the X Provincial Department of Education for decision making purposes, and for further submission to the South African Department of Basic Education.

What decisions are made based on the submitted assessment results?

We typically use the assessment results to identify schools needing support in specific subject areas.

Does the district provide the schools and/or teachers with feedback related to the assessment results they have to submit?

Schools receive feedback related to their specific ANA results. They receive feedback from the subject advisors who help them identify areas needing attention, such as phonics. They also receive feedback on their assessment files – has everything been included, have the tasks and activities been moderated, are learner scripts marked regularly; you know things like that.

The schools also receive feedback on the X provincial assessment common papers written in November. It is basically the results they are given.

A focus group interview was held with the home language and first additional language subject advisors (i.e., English, Afrikaans and Setswana). The aim of the focus group interview with the subject advisors was to obtain any additional information in terms of what they do more specifically when working with the schools and teachers on the topic of assessment. In this section, the questions posed to the subject advisors as well as their responses are included:

What assessment documentation should be provided by schools to the district?

Schools should submit a quarterly analysis of learner performance from Grade 1 to Grade 3. The Grade 3 results are also submitted to the X Province. They now also have to provide us with their Pre-ANA analyses for Grade 3's, as well as ANA learner report analyses.

What does the district expect from schools in terms of learner progress monitoring?

Progress is monitored by the submission of yearly subject improvement plans. In these improvement plans the schools give us an indication of what their targets for literacy will be for the next year and what they will do to ensure this.

The ANA results are an important aspect that guides performance in terms of progress. The ANA results are analysed question by question and problem areas are identified. Schools must then address these issues. They must indicate to us whether they have covered the content as specified in the Annual National Assessment Guidelines document.

What do you use the submitted assessment results/analyses, from schools, for?

We put the information into graph format in order to get an idea of the learner performance per grade, per subject. We then identify schools that need help with specific aspects and then we visit the teachers to help them with things like 'how to set tests', 'what type of tasks to use', and 'how to allocate marks'.

What support do you provide to schools in terms of assessment?

We help the dysfunctional schools set an assessment programme. We provide them with assessment tasks of an appropriate standard. We help with assessment rubrics. We also give them feedback on their ANA results and help them to identify the areas their learners are having problems with.

4.2   School level

A **focus group interview** was held with the school management team. The aim of the focus group was to determine how a school manages and implements assessment practices, specifically within the foundation phase. In this section, the questions posed to the school management team members as well as their responses are included:

On what evidence does the school base its assessment targets?

We look at the previous year's results and then formulate targets. We are also guided by the district. We usually aim to have at least 95%, if not higher, of the learners achieve competence in literacy.

How will the collected evidence (i.e., assessment data) be used to improve learner performance?

We might change the teachers around for the next year or look at ordering different or more books. We also sometimes use different and more activities.

Does the school make use of assessment data to recommend instructional changes to specific grades/classes?

No, not really. We usually leave that to the teachers. We try to encourage them to use the ANA results to identify the problem areas and then zoom in on those. We have to stick to the CAPS document, so the only thing we really change is the number or type of activities. For the foundation phase we currently use the Platinum series which we find gives the teachers good guidance and it is aligned with CAPS.

What kind of support is given to teachers in the underperforming grades/classes?

The Head of Department will usually talk to the teachers and try to identify problem areas; she might help with planning or give extra or different types of tasks and activities to try. The planning is usually done if teachers still don't get CAPS and how to use the document for their planning; some have difficulty linking activities to the tasks and so on.

How do you plan assessment?

We ask teachers to set up an assessment programme for each term – you know, the subject and the date on which it will be written. At the beginning of each term the assessment programme is given to the learners and their parents.

4.3   Classroom level

A **semi-structured interview** was held with the Head of Department of the Foundation Phase in order to get information on assessment practices as they relate to the entire foundation phase.

What type of support is in place for foundation phase learners not making progress on the core foundational skills?

> *There is no formal support structure in place to assist the learners. We try to help the learners on an individual basis or we try to remediate in class as we go. Everything depends on what we can do in the limits of a school day. We usually give them additional work to do, or different types of activities to fit with their developmental level.*

How do you plan assessment?

> *We use the CAPS document as a guide. The number of tasks to be completed by each grade is specified in the CAPS document. Each formal assessment activity we then divide into smaller tasks, and we plan our teaching and assessment on a weekly basis. We also rely heavily on the Platinum series that we use and how it structures the assessment requirements – you know it is linked to CAPS.*

Do teachers in the foundation phase make instructional adjustments based on the collected assessment data? If so, what and how are adjustments made?

> *I think it only really happens in Grade R. Due to the informal nature of the Grade R programme, the teacher tries to accommodate learners experiencing difficulties with specific skills. For example, individual attention or different types of activities. However, teaching time is severely restricted.*

How do you set benchmarks or targets for literacy achievement in the foundation phase?

> *Well, I try to tell the teachers that we should try for a 100% pass rate, and also 100% on the ANAs or at least close to that. We are also guided by what the area office wants. Currently, we have to ensure that at least 60% of the learners achieve 50% and above. Our targets as I mentioned are much higher – we aim for at least 98%.*

A **focus group interview** was held with all teachers responsible for teaching in the foundation phase, Grade R to Grade 3. The aim of the focus group interview was to get information on assessment practices and responsibilities in the classroom and how it relates to learners specifically.

What types of assessment do you use in your foundation phase classrooms?

The majority of our tasks are work-sheet based. We also use informal observation and recording. In other words, we make notes next to a child's name if we notice something.

How do you record learners' assessment results?

The results are documented on a class list per class, a column for every task. It is recorded firstly by marks (percentages) and then later converted to the 7-point scale.

What do you use the assessment results for?

To provide an analysis to the district of learner performance per grade per school – this is the quarterly analyses. We also need the results for report and promotion purposes. We also identify learners who may need additional support.

Do you make instructional adjustments based on the collected assessment data? If so, what and how are adjustments made?

We don't have time. If we get a gap we try to help learners on an individual basis by giving them additional worksheets or sitting with them to help. We just don't know what we can do more – time is the problem and the full curriculum, and the Pre-ANAs and then the ANAs. We are just 'ANA-ing' at the moment.

Due to the diverse nature of the learners and their different needs it becomes a very difficult task to really adjust our instruction. We don't have the 'woman power' to do so.

How do you monitor learners' progress on the core literacy skills?

By utilising their summative and formative assessment marks which have been recorded on a self-developed score sheet. We also use informal assessments like walking around and watching the learners while they are busy with an activity.

What is your opinion on assessment in the foundation phase?

Well, we face a number of challenges. Firstly, practicing ANA exemplars, pre-ANA assessments, and then ANA assessments – and then of course analysing the pre-ANA results. This takes away a lot of our teaching time. If we don't do it they come and check. In addition, to all this ANA testing we do our own informal assessments and the formal assessment tasks as specified in the CAPS document. ANA seems to be driving the education system. We are told to do our best so that we don't disappoint the district officials and the province. We need to get good results!

5.   Discussion of results

Analyses of the data lead us to the identification of the following themes:

5.1   Challenges

An analysis of the data indicates that improving learning outcomes stands out as the greatest challenge currently facing South African education. Output 2 which focuses on undertaking regular assessments to track progress is important and is required for the monitoring of several of the output goals and indicators as specified in the *Action Plan to 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025.* Output 2 specifically focuses on the Annual National Assessment programme implemented in 2011. The Department of Basic Education is, therefore, placing a great deal of emphasis on the Annual National Assessment programme. Targets have been set for the country as well as for the provinces. The pressure on provinces, districts, schools and teachers to improve reading literacy is tremendous. Teachers receive ANA exemplars, pre-ANA and ANA to administer to the learners, and they are also now required to focus on the ANA Framework for Improvement.

Despite the enthusiasm for these assessments at the district level and the considerable resources that are being expended on them, the fact remains that they cover too long a period of teaching and provide too little detail for effective use in on-going instructional planning. At best, they function more as snapshots of learner progress. We are of the opinion that they can best be described as early warning summative tools rather than as tools that can be formative to teaching and learning.

ANA are high stakes assessments that should be used to monitor the language/literacy progress of learners at national and provincial level. Although it is explicitly stated that schools should use the ANA in conjunction with the school assessment programme, ANA seems to be dominating the assessment environment at all levels. This seems to be a classic case of backwash, where preparation for ANA seems to be dominating all teaching and learning activities for a period of time (Hughes, 2003). It does not make sense that teachers should, based on the ANA results, write learner reports in which they identify each learner's strengths and needs. In most cases ANA contains one question on, for example, identifying initial sounds (e.g., Grade 1). Does this mean that if the learner did not answer that question correctly that he/she cannot identify initial sounds?

There also seems to be very limited instructional decision-making that takes place utilising ANA and school-based assessment results, specifically for the purpose of changing teaching practices and supporting groups of learners as well as individual learners.

Subject advisors state that they need to support schools and teachers with interventions, but they are unsure about what types of interventions should be used. In their expressed need for interventions the district officials did not seem to make the link between

assessment and the types of intervention that would be needed. We also gained the impression that a "one size fits all" intervention would suffice for all schools and learners. This impression is fuelled by the announcement in the 2013 Diagnostic Report and the 2014 Framework for Improvement (DBE, 2013) that all learners in the foundation phase need assistance with reading levels and reading skills. This is a very general statement that does not help teachers at all. What reading skill does the learner have a problem with? In order to assist a learner who has phonemic awareness problems, and these can be very specific, the intervention must differ from that provided to a learner experiencing oral reading fluency problems.

Our reflection on this theme highlights the fact that we think ANA should be part of a dynamic, comprehensive assessment and intervention system which informs instructional decision making and supports differentiated learner support. However, it should not be dominating assessment practices to the extent that it currently is, particularly at classroom level where the needs of groups of learners as well as individual learners should be addressed on a far more comprehensive basis. ANA cannot fulfil a screening, diagnostic, progress monitoring and outcome assessment function.

5.2 Planning assessment

Our reflection indicates that at district level assessment planning revolves around ANA exemplars, pre-ANA, and ANA. The primary purpose of the planning seems to be administrative: who will put exemplar papers on CDs, distribute these to the schools, photocopy ANA papers, draw up mark sheets, monitor schools, collect ANA papers, and train teachers on the interpretation of the memorandum. At classroom level assessment planning seems to rely exclusively on the CAPS document. Within the CAPS document the teaching content is linked to what is required in the informal and formal assessment activities. However, there is no indication that the assessment planning also incorporates an element of instructional decision making (i.e., instructional change) or possible learner support.

5.3 Setting goals, indicators or targets

An analysis of the results indicates that the primary goal relevant to this study is to increase the number of learners in Grade 3 who by the end of the school year have mastered the minimum language and numeracy competencies for Grade 3. The specific indicator used is the percentage of Grade 3 learners performing at the required literacy level according to the country's Annual National Assessment. The national target has been set at 60% for 2014 and 75% for 2019. The X Province provincial target has been set at 56% for 2014.

Our reflection on the targets is that there is no indication that any individual targets are set for learners on the core foundational literacy skills. There is no way of determining whether there is growth in the learners' core foundational skills. We are of the opinion that benchmark goals (i.e., a research-based target score representing the lowest level

of performance on a measure that predicts reaching the next goal) would be useful as a predictor (Which learners are likely to need more support?), and as a goal (What are meaningful goals for intervention and teaching that will change the future performance for learners?).

5.4 Recording and reporting of assessment

The data indicate that assessment results are recorded in various formats, mostly guided by Department of Basic Education documents. Records should be used to monitor learning and to plan ahead. Recording of learner performance in the classroom takes place against the assessment task, and reporting is aligned with the marks obtained in a term, semester or year. In the foundation phase, recording and reporting are done by means of national codes and descriptions.

The main purpose of reporting is to provide learners with regular feedback, inform parents/guardians on the progress of the individual learner, and give information to schools and districts or regional offices on the current level of performance of learners.

Progression (Grades R-8) of learners to the next grade should be based on recorded evidence in formal assessment tasks. Teachers are required to record learner performance in all formal assessment tasks. With regard to school-based assessment, teachers are required to include a mark awarded for each assessment task and a consolidated mark.

Our reflection on this theme indicates a concern that the recording and reporting of national codes and their descriptions do not pinpoint or emphasise a learner's strengths or needs in terms of the core foundational literacy skills. A code of 7 may indicate that all is well, but this may in fact not be the case. A code gives an overall assessment of language/literacy competence, but does not give an indication of the core skills requiring support and/or differentiated levels of intervention.

This corresponds with a statement made in the *National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12:*

> *Promotion from grade to grade through this phase within the appropriate age cohort should be the accepted norm, unless the learner displays a lack of competence to cope with the following grade's work. A learner, who is not ready to perform at the next level, should be assessed to determine the level of support required.*

In order to make such a decision, it would be helpful if teachers had more accurate, reliable and valid assessment results at their disposal which were focused on core foundational literacy skills that are indicators of later reading achievement.

5.5   Interpretation and use of assessment results (i.e., decision making)

From the data it is clear that ANA dominates conversations related to assessment, especially in the foundation phase. This is to be expected as ANA has been identified as an important strategy to improve the quality of learning outcomes in the education system. The results of ANA should be seen as complimenting and further supporting the assessment programmes used by schools to continuously assess the progress of learners. ANA results are also supposed to play an important part in the school academic improvement plans (APIP). Among other things the results of ANA should:

> *Assist provincial departments, including district offices, to make informed decisions about which schools require urgent attention in terms of providing necessary resources to improve learner performance in these subjects;*

> *Provide teachers with essential data about the Literacy/Language capabilities of*

> *learners in each grade and thereby help them make informed decisions when planning teaching programmes;*

> *Inform individual teachers about how close or far they are to or from realising the target goals they seek to attain through their teaching, and to inspire them to realign their teaching strategies towards accomplishing such goals (DBE, 2012:4).*

Our reflection is that both at district and school level there is no clear indication that the information generated from assessments provides key evidence of continuous improvement in teaching and learning. Assessment results should be used to inform all decisions, plans and programmes for improvement. Decisions and plans on what, when and how to teach must be informed by the evidence that derives from both school-based and ANA assessments.

5.6   Support to stakeholders

The data indicate that the government documents play a crucial role in guiding the actions of the stakeholders. They very seldom deviate from the guidelines or requirements as stipulated in the documents. For example, at district level circuit managers and subject specialists are required to target underperforming schools (e.g., ANA results) for special support and intervention. Currently, the support is targeted towards helping the schools and teachers identify skill areas needing attention, helping them plan their assessment, helping them develop assessment activities and providing resources, if possible. The focus seems to be on professional development support. The district officials also mainly fulfil a monitoring and guiding role (i.e., are schools improving?).

With regard to learner support, this is limited to what time allows. Some children will receive individual attention which usually includes additional or different activities or tasks to complete.

Our reflection on this theme is that the study suggests that both teachers and district officials would benefit from training in quality assessment, as well as the ability to use assessment results to make effective instructional decisions.

5.7 Progress monitoring

From the data it is evident that Department of Basic Education officials and school teachers tend to equate progress monitoring with improved performance as measured against the specific provincial targets already referred to above.

ANA results are also used as a means to monitor learners, districts and provinces in terms of progress. At classroom level teachers are supposed to utilise their summative ANA marks to determine when an "intervention" needs to take place and how they will do it.

In our reflection on this theme, we would like to emphasise the fact that the data indicates that progress monitoring relates specifically to "showing" or "proving" improved learning in language/literacy as measured by ANA. In addition to ANA, teachers monitor progress fairly "randomly"; they can decide what to 'look' for, usually by using their summative assessment marks, when deciding whether a learner is making progress or not. It is possible, therefore, that no two teachers will look at the same foundational literacy skill when deciding whether the learner is making progress in a particular skill. There is also no guideline for teachers in terms of what to aim for in order to ensure that learners make progress in core foundational literacy skills that evidence-based research has shown to have a major effect on reading achievement. There is no evidence that specific progress monitoring assessments (e.g., Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills – DIBELS) are used at classroom level. The ANA was not designed to be a true progress monitoring assessment instrument as defined in evidence-based reading assessment literature.

6. Conclusion

All teachers assess learners, but the use of the data obtained from inferences based on test scores may be less consistent. Well-designed assessment instruments can generate valuable data which can be used to inform reading literacy development. Achieving success in reading is more than simply having a testing tool or even administering it. Merely assessing and not using the data to inform teaching is a waste of time. Teachers need to know how to use the data (provided it is valid and reliable), and what decisions to take to remedy problem areas once they have been flagged by an early literacy screener.

Assessment for educational prevention requires more than just a new test; it requires a different conceptual approach from the current seemingly exclusive focus on the Annual National Assessments. The DBE (2013b:7) acknowledges that "no technically defensible comparisons can be made on the results of ANA 2013 to those of previous years although the results of each year are valuable for the year under review". In the Foundation Phase, a comprehensive assessment system in schools must at the minimum be a valid and reliable way to measure growth in foundational reading skills on a frequent and ongoing basis. The data gleaned from the analyses of results must be useful for predicting success or failure on criterion measures of performance, and for determining an instructional goal that, if met, will prevent reading failure and promote reading success. What is needed thus is a comprehensive assessment system that not only documents whether learners are learning, but whether they are learning enough pre-requisite, foundational skills in a timely manner to achieve the set benchmark levels. ANA as a large-scale assessment cannot fulfil all of our assessment needs and is overstepping its boundaries in that it is trying to be an all-encompassing test that can diagnose and monitor learners' progress at national, provincial, district and school level. It has not been designed to fulfil a reliable or valid function at individual learner level, and this is where essential support is needed.

The prevention of reading difficulties is a national imperative. Inherent in a prevention-oriented, assessment and support decision-making system is the premise that failure is not an option. Providing sufficient additional instructional support to assist learners to achieve the benchmark goals, and ensuring teachers are appropriately trained to fulfil their roles as facilitators of reading literacy are essential. The choice is stark. Schools can invest resources in preventing reading difficulty and failure, or schools can expend substantial resources year after year attempting to remediate reading difficulty and failure. The costs of the second option to schools, society, and our children are unacceptable.

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