THE USE OF ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK TO ENHANCE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract
Poor performance of learners in public primary schools in South Africa in the national, regional and international benchmarking assessments is a matter of concern for the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Literature suggests that inadequate and limited pedagogical knowledge of teachers to cope with the implementation of curriculum reforms and the interpretation of assessments contributes to this poor learner performance. The DBE has introduced four curriculum reviews in the basic education system of South Africa between 1997 and 2012. Subsequently, the Annual National Assessment was introduced and implemented in 2011 until 2014. Both these reforms prompted a need for strengthening the use of assessment feedback to support primary school teachers to improve the process of teaching and learning. This paper discusses the use of assessment feedback to improve teaching and learning in public primary schools in a South African school district. A qualitative approach, located in an interpretative paradigm, was adopted for this study while the requisite data was gathered by means of individual and focus group interviews, as well as documents analysis, observation of meetings and a cluster workshop. The finding of the study is that poor reading, inability of learners to answer questions due to lack of critical thinking and problem solving skills are the main causes of poor learner performance in public primary schools in South Africa. It is recommended that the use of assessment feedback for supporting teachers to improve learner performance should focus on enhancing the teacher content knowledge, the choice of teaching strategies, the setting of quality tasks, and improving the feedback practices.

Keywords: *assessment feedback; learner performance; off-site workshops, public primary schools; teaching and learning*

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Background/ Introduction

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) in South Africa is faced with a challenge of improving the performance of primary school learners in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ). Researchers such as King-McKenzie, Bantwini and Bogan (2013: 25) as well as Jansen (2011) reported that teachers are often blamed for the poor learner performance in mathematics and literacy due to inadequate and limited pedagogical knowledge to cope with the implementation of curriculum reforms and the interpretation of assessments. Jansen (2011) further suggested that effective intervention and support should be undertaken to improve the knowledge levels of teachers. To date, four curriculum reviews have been introduced in the South African schooling system between 1997 and 2012. Furthermore, the Annual National Assessment (ANA) was introduced and implemented for the first time in Grades 1 to 9 in 2011 until 2014. Both these reforms prompted a need to strengthen the use of assessment feedback to support primary school teachers in order to improve teaching and learning.

Assessment is a broad term with various definitions. Capraro et al, (2011: 3), define assessment as "a process for documenting, in measurable terms, the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs of the learner." The Great School Partnership (2015), defines assessment as the use of variety of methods or tools by teachers to evaluate, measure, and document the academic readiness, learning, progress, skill acquisition, or educational needs of students. The subject assessment guidelines of the Department of Basic Education defines assessment as a "continuous planned process of identifying, gathering and interpreting information about the performance of learners, using various forms of assessment" (DBE, 2012a: 97). All these definitions attest that assessment involves four steps, namely, generating and collecting evidence of achievement; evaluating this evidence; recording the findings, and using this information to understand and assist the learner's development in order to improve the process of teaching and learning (DBE, 2012a: 97).

Assessment, in the context of this study, refers to the systemic collection, review, and use of information about education programmes undertaken for the purpose of improving learning and development. The assessment process culminates when assessment results are used to improve subsequent learning, which is referred to as the assessment feedback in this study. Assessment include both formative assessment (assessment for learning) and summative assessment (assessment of learning), which are used to identify individual student weaknesses and strengths so that teachers can provide specialised academic support and educational programmes (DBE, 2012a: 97; Great School Partnership, 2015). In short, formative assessments refers to the use of the results to modify and improve teaching techniques during an instructional period, while summative assessment means evaluating the academic achievement at the conclusion of an instructional period (Great School Partnership, 2015). Summative assessment is usually associated with tests and examinations (Wilson, 2011: 1).

Assessment is widely recognised as an important part of the learning cycle. Internationally, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) places much emphasis on the 'quality education for all' in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills during standardized testing used to determine learner performance (UNESCO, 2015: 189). In the United States, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001) was introduced to "ensure that all learners make adequate progress on core academic areas" (Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small & Jacobson, 2009: 511). Under NCLB, districts that fail to make adequate yearly progress for multiple consecutive years were subjected to increasing interventions (Ransford, et al., 2009: 511). This approach is common in countries which

implement the national testing to benchmark the performance of learners in schools. However, the NCLB did not generate meaningful school improvement or progress in closing student-achieving gaps (Mintroop & Sundermann, 2009). As a result, the NCLB and its methods were replaced by the 'Race to the Top' (RTTT) programme, instituted by president Obama, which has brought about the adoption of common academic standards and assessments (McGuinn, 2012: 144).

In South Africa, the mandate of the DBE is "to improve the quality of basic education, including raising learner test scores in Grades 1 to 9 and enhancing the quality of teaching, school supervision and support" (DBE, 2011, 2013c). The DBE aspires to see an upward trends of learner achievement in the TIMMS, PIRLS, and SACMEQ. Since the launch of the Foundations for Learning in 2008, there has been a strong focus on using assessments to improve teaching and learning as well as learner performance. Important lessons learnt during the implementation of the ANA programme, provided a more diagnostic interpretation of learner achievement (DBE, 2019: 28). The ANA lessons have been incorporated into the current National Integrated Assessment Framework (NIAF), consists of three tiers of assessment, namely, systemic evaluations, diagnostic assessment and summative assessment (DBE, 2019: 28, DBE, 2018: 24). Since 2015, considerable effort has been made in training Foundation Phase teachers on the use of the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) tools (DBE, 2019: 28).

Spiller (2014: 1) reported that students and teachers frequently express disappointment and frustration about the use of assessment feedback process. A study by Rammala (2009) on factors contributing towards poor learner performance of Grade 12 learners, revealed that the possible causative factors of poor learner performance include the use of English as a medium of instruction, lack of facilities, unavailable learner support material, lack of discipline, heavy workload due to rationalisation and redeployment of teachers and confusion with regard to the application of the new curriculum (Rammala, 2009; iv). Similarly, the 2014 ANA report indicated that Grade 9 learners struggle to respond to questions requiring the use of their own words in both Home Language and First Additional Language; inability to interpret a sentence or give an opinion; lack of the editing skills to write letters (DBE, 2014a: 10). In mathematics, the Grade 9 learners used incorrect mathematical terminology and properties; lacked basic algebraic skills; and to solve applications in Geometry and problems involving spatial manipulations (DBE, 2014a: 10). The report on the 2018 National Senior Certificate Examinations echoed the same concern about the recurring challenges of learners struggling to read, unable to do basic mathematics and to answer questions that require analytical reasoning or interpretation (DBE, 2019). All of these challenges were evidenced in the ANA, PIRLS, TIMMS and SACMEQ benchmarking assessments.

The DBE has undertaken a wide range of assessment feedback interventions. This included the road shows which were conducted in all the nine provinces of South Africa to inform school management teams about the difficulties with the quality of literacy and numeracy in schools (DBE, 2013a: 8; DBE, 2012b: 6). Formal assessment tasks exemplars were introduced to improve the level of questioning in the classroom and provide educators with lesson plans (DBE, 2013a). In addition, a national target of 60% was set for learner achievement in Grades 3, 6 and 9 literacy (language) and numeracy (mathematics) (DBE, 2011, 2012b).

Statement of the problem

It has been widely reported that learners in public primary schools of South Africa perform below standard in the national, regional and international benchmarking assessments. Literature suggests that the inadequate and limited pedagogical knowledge of teachers to implement the curriculum reforms and interpretation of assessments contribute towards poor learner performance. To date, South Africa has

implemented four curricular changes in Grades 1 to 12 between 1997 and 2012. In addition, the Annual National Assessment (ANA) was introduced and implemented for the first time in Grades 1 to 9 in 2011 until 2014. Both the curricular changes and the ANA testing exposed the challenges of poor reading, lack of critical thinking and problem solving skills for learners in public primary schools in South Africa. To this effect, there is a need to strengthen the use of assessment feedback to support teachers to fulfil a mandate of improving teaching and learning in public primary schools of South Africa.

Objectives of the study

The objective of this paper is to extend the scope of the existing body of knowledge by reflecting on the use of assessment feedback to support primary school teachers to improve learner performance. The findings of this paper provide insight on the use of assessment feedback as desired and perceived by primary school teachers. This paper provides insight to subject advisors and school management teams, as external and internal sources of support for teachers, to critically analyse and reflect on their roles when using assessment feedback to support teachers. The findings and recommendations of this paper provide a better perspective on the use of assessment feedback to support teachers to improve teaching and learning.

To date there is a dearth of both national and international research on the use of assessment feedback to support primary school teachers to improve teaching and learning. A review of research on education in South Africa indicates that there is little evidence of research conducted in primary schools since "over the past 18 years, attention has been heavily concentrated on the top end of the system (Grades 10–12), particularly on the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination at the end of Grade 12" (DBE, 2013b: 11). This study shifts the focus of research on the senior grades by investigating the use of assessment feedback in the lowest end of the system, namely, the Grades 1-9.

Conceptual framework underpinning this study

The use of assessment feedback to support teachers to improve learner performance in this study was explored within a hybrid framework, consisting of the organisational support theory and the policy framework for improving the quality of teaching and learning[2]. Organisation support theory posits that employees consider how well their organisation meets their socio-emotional needs as indicative of how supportive the company is towards their development (Eisenberger, Hutington, Huttchison & Sowa, 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli & Lynch, 1997; Shore & Shore, 1995). The policy framework for improving the quality of teaching and learning is conceptualised from goal number 6: 'Education for All' (EFA) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which focuses on improving the quality of education worldwide (UNESCO, 2015: 189). Both the theory and policy framework were used for this study considering that teacher support cannot be entirely addressed by either the organisational support theory or the UNESCO policy framework for improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Jansen (1998:6) describes teacher support in South Africa with regard to curricular reform as "uneven, fragmented and, for many teachers, simply non-existing." Eighteen years later, Van der Berg et

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al. (2016:26) echoed a similar concern that "teacher support is far from adequate in most public education systems." Several South African studies (Smith, 2011; Mahlo, 2011; De Clercq, 2007; Mashau, Steyn, Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2008; Narsee, 2006; Ramolefe, 2004; Sivhabu, 2002; Jansen, 1998) reported that teachers do not receive thorough, appropriate and/or sufficient support in the South African schools. Similarly, Frempong, Reddy and Mackay (2013) noted that the Action Plan to 2014 document of the DBE does not specify on how schools and education stakeholders were required to use the ANA data to improve teaching and learning.

The current National Integrated Assessment Framework (NIAF) for the General Education and Training (GET) includes the provision of standardised diagnostic assessments to all Grades 3, 6 and 9 learners; regulation and standardisation of assessment through the implementation of an Integrated Assessment Framework for Grades 4-11; quality assurance of classroom-based assessment (SBA) in the GET band; assessment of the performance of the education system through independent administration of Systemic Evaluation once every three years (DBE, 2018; 49). The international literature indicates that high performing countries in literacy, science, and mathematics such as Finland, Singapore, Australia, Japan and United States have made a remarkable departure from offsite to onsite support level (Sumner, 2011; Ransford, Greensburg, Domitrovich, Small & Jacobson, 2009; Dominguez, Nichols & Storandt, 2006; Monrad, May & Amsterdam, 2002).

Research Questions

The following two research questions underpinned the study:

1) How do primary school teachers experience external support on the use of assessment feedback to improve learner performance in a South African school district?
2) How do primary school teachers experience internal support on the use of assessment feedback to improve learner performance in a South African school district?

These questions lead to reasoning / substantiation on how assessment feedback can be used to enhance the teaching and learning environment.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research approach was deemed appropriate for the purpose of this study as it is "inductive and allows the researcher to describe and understand the particular situations, experiences and meanings of people and groups before developing and/or testing more general theories and explanations" (Frankel & Devers, 2000:253). A case study design was adopted for this study because it provides for the use of multiple sources and techniques during the data gathering process. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006:316), a case study design focuses on one phenomenon in order to understand that phenomenon in depth, regardless of the number of persons or sites.

This study was conducted in three primary schools offering Grades 1-9 in the Nkangala school district in the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa. There are four school districts in the Mpumalanga Province, namely, Bohlabela, Ehlanzeni, Gert Sibande, and Nkangala districts. The Nkangala district was chosen because of its proximity to the researcher. The three schools were purposively sampled "to gain insight about the research questions based on their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought" (Cohen, Manion & Morisson, and 2007:115). Only the schools offering the Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3), Intermediate Phase (Grades 4–6), and Senior Phase (Grades 7–9) were included in the sample in order to gain an understanding about the use of assessment feedback to support teachers to

improve learner performance in the lower grades of the education system. The information of the schools is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: The information about the schools

School	A	B	C
Learner enrolment	345	754	926
Type	Semi-urban	Urban	Township
Quintile ranking	Quintile 3	Quintile 1	Quintile 5
Learner population group	100% African	70% Whites	100% African

As shown in Table 1 above, school A is a semi-urban school, located in the mining area. It is a quintile 3 school (neither poor nor rich) consists of 345 learners of African descent. School B is an urban school, located in the town. It is a quintile 1 school (rich), consists mostly White learners and had a total of 754 learner enrolment. School C is a quintile 1 school (the poorest of the poor) located in the township, consists of learners from African descent with a total enrolment of 926 learners.

The participants in the study were three principals, eight heads of department and nine post-level 1 educators. The three principals were selected based on their role as managers of schools, while the heads of departments (HODs) and post-level 1 educators were purposively selected by the principals as information-rich participants. The rationale for enabling principals to select the HODs and post level 1 educators was to avoid selecting "quiet, uncooperative or inarticulate individuals" (Shenton, 2004:65). To guard against biases and preferences, the principals were requested to select HODs and post level 1 educators with requisite experience on curriculum implementation and the use of assessment feedback to support teachers. Thus, all the participants selected provided more elaborated responses and prompts on the use of assessment feedback to support teachers to improve learner performance in the Foundation, Intermediate and Senior Phases. The biographical information of the principal participants is represented in Table 2 below:

Table 2: The biographical information of the principal participants

Principal participants			
Participant	P1	P2	P3
Gender	Female (F)	Female (F)	Male (M)
Age	45	60	60
Race	African (A)	White (W)	African (A)
Qualifications	B.Ed. Hon; ACE; JPTD	FDE, HED	BA Ed Hon; BA; SED & SEC.
Total number of years as a principal	4 years	1 year	38 years

As shown in Table 2 above, P1 stands for principal number one, P2 stands for principal number 2, and P3 stands for principal number 3. There were two females and one male with the racial make-up of two Africans and one White. All the three principals had appropriate professional qualifications. P3

had more experience as the principal; only P1 and P2 were less experienced in their positions as principals. The biographical information of the head of departments (HODs) is presented in Table 3 below:

Table3: The biographical information of the HOD participants

HOD participants									
Participant	HOD 1	HOD 2	N/A	HOD 3	HOD 4	HOD 5	HOD 6	HOD 7	HOD 8
Gender	F	M	N/A	F	F	M	F	F	F
Age	58	50	N/A	42	49	41	32	53	52
Race	A	A	N/A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Qualifications	SPTD	HDE	N/A	ACE, SPTD	ACE, JPTD	B.Ed.	B.Ed.	B.Ed. Hon & JPTD	SPTD
Total number of years as an HOD	Acting	10	N/A	1	6	5	2	29	Acting

As shown in Table 3 above, HOD1 to HOD8 represents head of departments from number one to eight. There were only two HODs employed in school A due to the small size of the school with a total enrolment of 345 learners. All the HODs in the sample were entirely Africans and predominantly females with the exception of two males. All the eight HODs had professional qualifications and were suitably qualified. Most HODs in the sample were primarily experienced HODs. The biographical information of post-level 1 educators is presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4: The biographical information of the teacher participants

Teacher participants									
Participant	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9
Gender	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Age	49	44	46	51	44	43	58	40	55
Race	A	A	A	W	A	A	A	A	A
Qualifications	B.Ed. Hon; ACE; SPTD	ACE, FDE, STD	ACE, JPTD	HED, SPTD	B.Ed. Hon, FDE, JPTD	B.Ed. Hon	ACE, JPTD	SPTD	B. Tech
Total number of years as a teacher	13	22	6	29	20	20	25	11	29

As shown in Table 4 above, T1 to T9 represents post-level 1 educators from number one to nine. The sample of post-level 1 educators consisted entirely of females with the racial make-up of eight Africans and one White. All the post-level 1 educators were suitably qualified and their teaching experience ranged from 6 to 29 years. Thus, the sample comprised primarily experienced post-level 1 educators.

Data Collection

The study followed strict ethical conduct, based on permitted access and consent to participation, as well as protection of participants and secured data. The three techniques used to collect the requisite data were the interviews, document retrieval and non-participation observation. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from the participants during the individual and focus group interviews. The strength of a semi-structured interview is that it provides the "researcher with an opportunity to ask questions and record answers from one participant at a time and decide on follow-up questions from the responses of the participants" (Creswell, 2002: 215).

The individual interviews with the principals and focus group interviews with the HODs were conducted in their own offices. The focus group interviews with the post-level 1 educators took place in the library in school A, laboratory in school B and media centre in school C. The focus group interviews were preferred for this study because "having more than one interviewee present provides two versions of events, a cross-check, and one can complement the other with additional points, leading to a more complete and reliable record" (Arksey & Knight, 1999:76). All the participants were asked the same semi-structured questions which were guided by the research questions and theoretical framework. Each interview session lasted between 40-60 minutes, and were audio recorded with the participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. All the participants participated voluntarily in the interviews.

The second stage of data collection was document analysis including the School Improvement Plans (SIPs), subject advisors and school-based class visit reports, and the Annual National Assessments (ANA) results. These documents were retrieved to establish the documented evidence for using assessment feedback to support teachers in schools. The third phase of data collection was observing three phase meetings (one phase meeting in each school) and one cluster group workshop for teachers teaching Grade 9 Mathematics. The purpose of attending the phase meetings and a cluster workshop was to determine the use of assessment feedback to support teachers during these encounters.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to analyse the data that was collected from the interviews, documents and observation. Leedy and Ormrod (2013:148) defined content analysis as "a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases." Similarly, Cohen et al. (2007:475) described content analysis as the "process of summarising and reporting written data – the main contents of data and their messages." In addition, Cohen et al. (2007:476), further clarified that, content analysis "can be undertaken with any written material, from documents to interview transcriptions, from media products to personal interviews."

The codes were categorised to establish the emergent nature of themes, trends and patterns that were cross-referenced with the research questions to ensure that the researcher did not lose focus (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993:480). The analysis process was further informed by probing questions aimed at identifying thematic relationships between the various categories. The categories, patterns and emerging themes were then linked to the research questions and discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

The data that had been collected from the school improvement plans, whole school evaluation reports, subject advisors and school-based class visit reports, ANA results and observations of the meetings / workshop were subjected to content analysis.

Findings from the interviews

Two distinct themes, consistent with the two research questions, emerged from the interview data. They were: 1) experiences of external assessment feedback; and 2) experiences of internal assessment feedback support. Several sub-themes made up each main theme. Table 4 below indicates the two main themes and the sub-themes.

Table 4: Emerging themes and sub-themes

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Theme 1: External support for teachers on the use of assessment feedback to improve learner performance	a) Sources and types of external support for teachers in public primary schools b) Provision of external support on the use of assessment feedback c) Views about external support on the use of assessment feedback
Theme 2: Internal support for teachers on the use of assessment feedback to improve learner performance	a) Internal support on the use of assessment feedback b) Challenges and expectations of internal support on the use of assessment feedback c) Proposal to strengthen internal support on the use of assessment feedback

Theme 1: Experiences on external assessment feedback support

The provincial and district officials, circuit managers and subject advisors (curriculum implementers) were identified as sources of external support for teachers. The subject advisors emerged as the main source of external support for teachers. P3 noted that:

> "*The subject advisors conduct workshops and train teachers on setting standardised question papers. They supply teachers with intervention guides and the CAPS policy. They also provide one-on-one support to teachers at the school*."

All the participants mentioned that teachers benefit from the off-site workshops in terms of acquiring information on the content coverage, lesson preparation, assessment techniques, and guidance on setting the examination question papers. In addition, the participants attested they received training on the national intervention strategies, which focused on implementation of the ANA, monitoring of curriculum coverage, national reading interventions and provision of exemplars, support material and workbooks. However, it emerged from the interviews with the participants that the off-site workshops do not provide teachers with information to support learners with different cognitive levels and learning difficulties in class. Similarly, the national interventions did not provide teachers with guidance on how to deal with learners with learning difficulties.

Participants across the schools expressed a need for additional workshops and classroom-based support for teachers. T5 explained that: "*The workshops are very informative and we gain a lot, it is just*

that they are normally conducted once a year per subject and this robs us of an opportunity to gain more information." P1 asserted that, "*Teachers need more support in the classroom teaching; not the once-off class visit*." The shortage of subject advisors was identified as a challenge for limited support for primary school teachers on the use of assessment feedback. In this regard, HOD7 explained that, "*The CIs have many schools and teachers to support and cannot be in all the schools all the time*." Participant T9 supported this sentiment by stating that: "*Some of the CIs try their level best to support teachers in schools, but they are few to provide the desired support*."

The majority of the participants in all the research sites experienced the external support on curriculum matters as surveillance intended mostly to ensure compliance with the prescripts. This view was clearly expressed by T3 by stating that, "*When the CIs come to our schools, it is just monitoring and looking for mistakes. They come to schools to update their own records with an intention to prove to the higher authorities that they support teachers in schools*." Participant P1 expressed a similar concern by stating that, "*The officials visit teachers in schools for the sake of compliance, they do not focus on areas of support*." There was no evidence of external support for teachers on the use of assessment feedback to improve learner performance.

Most of the participants expressed a desire for off-site workshops to be conducted during the school holidays (break) in order to circumvent the loss of teaching time. T7 captures this concern very well by stating that:

> *Take, for instance, this year, we attended the MST (Maths, Science and Technology) workshop for 3 days. However, their timing was wrong because the workshop was conducted during school hours. It would have been better if such a workshop was conducted during school holidays.*

HOD8 surmised that:

> *The 1+4 approach of the Department of Education to support Grade 9 teachers poses a challenge because these teachers do not teach only Mathematics, and there is no catch-up plan in place. It would be better if such trainings are conducted during school holidays.*

Appeals to conduct the workshops for teachers during school holidays increased at the time of implementation of the DBE's '1+4 teacher development' programme, which was designed to train teachers teaching Mathematics in Grade 9 on Monday on the content they teach on Tuesday to Friday.

Theme 2: Experiences on internal assessment feedback support

Three (3) sub-themes were identified within this main theme, namely: internal support on the use of assessment feedback, challenges and expectations of internal assessment feedback support, as well as proposal to strengthen internal assessment feedback support. The School Management Teams (SMTs) were identified as the main sources of internal support. According to the participants, the SMT members are familiar with the schools and the behaviour of learners. Thus, the participants expressed the view that the SMT members have a potential to provide continued support. The views of the participants in this regard were clearly expressed by P2 who stated that: *"Effective support comes within the school, not from people outside the school. HODs are able to identify the loopholes and provides solutions."*

According to the principals and post level 1 participants, the role of the HODs includes conducting phase and subject meetings, observing classroom teaching, and control learner books and portfolios. P1 expressed the view that: "*HODs support post level 1 educators to implement the curriculum, check portfolios for teachers and books for learners, conduct class visits, and provide feedback to me as the principal*." Similarly HOD1 mentioned that, "*We conduct internal workshops and monitor that the teachers use the previous ANA examination question papers to familiarise learners with the ANA testing*." It emerged that the ANA exemplars were mainly used by all the schools to support teachers in preparation for learners for the ANA testing.

Some of the participants expected additional support to be provided for teachers teaching fundamental subjects like Mathematics, Life Science and Technology. HOD9 suggested that, "*Teachers teaching Mathematics, Life Sciences and Technology should be developed through the skills development courses and support programmes offered by non-governmental organisations (NGOs)*." However, it emerged from this study that the Grades 1-9 teachers in this school district do not participate in projects offered in certain sectors in some provinces in South Africa, aimed to enhance the content knowledge and instructional delivery skills for high school teachers, such as the Mpumalanga Secondary School Initiative (MSSI), Dinaledi, Khanyisa programme and Integrated Education Project (IEP). The DBE acknowledged that profiling of teacher development needs in key school subjects is a challenge the education system faces (DBE, 2019: 16).

The shortage of HODs was experienced as the main challenge in all the research sites. Participants argued that it is virtually impossible for one HOD to support teachers in all the subjects that are offered in schools. HOD5 argued that, "*Nobody is a specialist in all the subjects since every teacher specialises in two or three subjects during teacher training."* T3 expressed the following view:

> *I can say, the SMT members are trying their best to support us but we do not have enough HODs in every department. For example, in our school, we have one HOD for the Intermediate and Senior Phases. I am the language teacher, he is the maths and science teacher, and his knowledge is only limited to his area of specialisation.*

The participants blamed the learner-educator ratio system of the DBE that it limits the appointment of school management teams and teachers in schools. To that effect, the school management teams find themselves obliged to provide support to teachers in subjects which they have no or limited knowledge. In this regard, HOD5 argued:

> *I personally think the government is failing us with the pupil-teacher ratio when it comes to the allocation of posts in schools. Imagine, I am the only HOD in the Intermediate Phase and, definitely, I cannot provide support to all the six learning areas [subjects].*

To remedy the situation, participants across research sites expressed the desire for appointment of more HODs in schools. The views of the participants in this regard were clearly articulated by T5 who stated that, "*The Department of Education must appoint enough HODs because, currently, there is one HOD in the Foundation Phase in most schools*." The expectation is that effective support for teachers will be achieved by the appointment of the sufficient number of HODs in each school.

Findings from document analysis

The findings from the data analysis is as follows:

School Improvement Plans

The 2015 school improvement plan for school A identified nine objectives, namely, a) the basic functionality; leadership, management, and communication; b) governance and relationships; c) quality of teaching and teachers' development; d) curriculum provision and resources; e) learner achievement; f) school safety, security and discipline; g) school infrastructure; h) parents and community. The main challenges identified in the SIP for school A were understaffing, teacher incompetence in the subjects they teach, misalignment of subject allocation and subject specialisation of teachers, and insufficient resources for Technology and Natural Sciences subjects. However, the SIP of school A does not specify how these challenges were going to be addressed.

The 2015 school improvement plan for school B focussed on eight areas, namely: a) the strategic planning (time table planning, subject meetings, planning of teaching); b) policy review; c) human relations (improved communication between the SMT and staff); d) lesson planning, preparation and presentation (weekly forecasts; e) term plans, work schedules, subject frameworks); f) learner assessment (rubrics, CASS, various assessment techniques, portfolios, foundations for learning, completion of marks); g) analysis of examination data (quarterly); h) and extracurricular participation (athletics, soccer, netball, cricket, excursions, choir, tennis, arts festival, cultural concert). The SIP for school B did not express the kind of assistance required in each of the identified areas. It only states that the CAPS training would be provided by the DBE.

The focus areas for the 2015 school improvement plan of school C were: a) monitoring of teachers to revise the ANA previous question papers; b) training teachers on content gap; c) ensuring adherence with the pace setters/syllabus; d) networking with the best performing schools; e) managing assessment through the School Assessment Team; f) monitoring the improvement of learner performance; and g) monitoring implementation of different teaching strategies. Although the focus areas were identified in the SIP for school C, but no details were provided on how these areas were going to be achieved.
The finding was that the objectives of the SIPs across the three schools were too generic. They did not indicate the people responsible for implementing the objectives, time lines, and did not focus on the use of assessment results to support teaching and learning.

Whole School Evaluation reports

None of the schools studied were in possession of whole school evaluation reports. The principals indicated that their schools were not visited by the WSE teams for the purpose of whole school evaluation. As a result, there were no inferences to be drawn on the role of the district teams with regard to support for primary school teachers on the use of assessment feedback. The Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts (DBE, 2012b: 10) noted that education districts are responsible for evaluating too many education institutions of which they are unable to render effective services to all of them.

Subject advisors and school-based class visit reports

The completed reports for subject advisors and HODs evaluated in the three schools assessed teachers on four aspects, namely: a) creation of positive learning environment; b) knowledge of curriculum and learning programmes; c) lesson planning, preparation and presentation; and d) learner assessment. A rating scale of 1-4 was used, where a 1 = unacceptable, 2 = satisfies minimum expectations, 3 = good and 4 = outstanding. All the reports managed to identify the strengths and areas of developments

for individual teachers. The challenge was the lack of follow up support for teachers on the identified areas of developments. It was verified that the subject advisors complete a new report every time a teacher is evaluated in the next cycle without considering the previous recommendations. This created an impression that the class visit reports are developed for the sake of compliance than for professional teacher development.

Annual National Assessments (ANA) results

The rationale for analysing the ANA results in the three schools was to determine the learner performance in the ANA testing and the support provided to improve learner performance to schools performing below the national target of 60%. The ANA results of the three schools for the three-year period, from 2012 to 2014, are presented in table 5 as follows:

Table 5: ANA Results for the three schools during 2012–2014

SCHOOL A		**2012**	**2013**	**2014**
Grade 3	Home Language (HL)	65%	68%	67%
	Mathematics	35%	49%	61%
Grade 6	Home Language (HL)	50%	58%	55%
	Mathematics	38%	42%	45%
Grade 9	Home Language (HL)	66%	53%	48%
	Mathematics	40%	42%	30%

SCHOOL B		**2012**	**2013**	**2014**
Grade 3	Home Language (HL)	65%	46%	58%
	Mathematics	64%	56%	60%
Grade 6	Home Language (HL)	51%	54%	63%
	Mathematics	56%	29%	36%
Grade 9	Home Language (HL)	39%	44%	48%
	Mathematics	18%	22%	20%

SCHOOL C		**2012**	**2013**	**2014**
Grade 3	Home Language (HL)	11%	38%	46%
	Mathematics	21%	36%	45%

Grade 6	Home Language (HL)	15%	48%	47%
	Mathematics	20%	25%	36%
Grade 9	Home Language (HL)	53%	44%	45%
	Mathematics	20%	11%	13%

The grade 3 learners of school A performed above the national target of 60% in the Home Language in from 2012 to 2014. In Mathematics, the grade 3 learners of school A performed below 60% in 2012 and 2013, except in 2014 which they achieved 61%. The grade 6 learners of school A performed consistently below the national average in both the Home Language and Mathematics over the cycle of three years. The grade 9 learners of school A achieved 66% in the Home Language in 2012, but below the national average in 2013 and 2014. The overall learner performance in school A indicates that the national target was not met in Mathematics in all the three grades.

The grade 3 learners of school B achieved 65% in the Home Language in 2012, but performed below 60% in 2013 and 2014. In Mathematics, the grade 3 learners of school B performed above 60% in 2012 and 2014, except in 2013. The grade 6 learners of school B performed below 60% in the Home Language in 2012 and 2013, but achieved 63% in 2014. The grade 9 learners of school B performed below the national target in both the Home Language and Mathematics from 2012 to 2014. The average analysis of the ANA results for school B indicated performed performance which is below the national target in both the Home Language and Mathematics.

The ANA results for School C indicates that the school performed below the national target of 60% in both Mathematics and Home Languages over a period of three years from 2012 to 2014 in all the three exit grades. Surprisingly, this underperformance of this school during the ANA testing did not draw the attention of the district and circuit officials to use the ANA results to support teachers to improve learner performance.

Findings from observations

The researcher attended three phase meetings: one Foundation Phase meeting in school A, one Intermediate Phase meeting in school B, and one Senior Phase meeting in school C. Each of these phase meetings were chaired by the HODs in all the three schools. The meetings discussed the annual and termly plans, lesson preparations, assessment teaching plans, and classroom visits / observations by the HODs. More emphasis was placed on teachers meeting the time lines and keeping up with the pacesetters. However, the phase meetings did not discuss the use of assessment feedback to support teachers to deal with learners with learning difficulties in class.

The '1+4 teacher development' cluster workshop for educators teaching mathematics in grade 9 was a rehearsal of the presentations of the Mathematics lessons which were going to be presented to grade 9 learners during that particular week. The teachers critiqued the lesson presentations and explored best approaches capable of helping learners to grasp the content to be taught from Tuesday to Friday with ease. However, the workshop did not discuss use assessment feedback to support learners with mathematical challenges such as answering questions requiring critical thinking and problem solving skills. This finding is consistent with the report on the 2018 National Senior Certificate Examinations

(DBE, 2019) which reported that learners are struggling to read, answer questions that require analytical reasoning or interpretation, and are unable to do basic mathematics.

Discussion

The participants experienced the off-site workshops to be quite informative in terms of providing teachers with information on content coverage, lesson preparation, assessment techniques, and setting the examination question papers. However, the disadvantage of the off-site workshops is that they focus mainly on the introduction and explanation of curricular changes without providing teachers with information on how they are required to use the assessment feedback to support learners with learning barriers such as difficulties with reading and challenges for answering questions requiring critical thinking and problem solving skills. In addition, the participants were concerned that the off-site workshops are conducted during school hours. To this effect, the participants proposed that the off-site workshops should be conducted during school holidays in order to circumvent the loss of instructional time for learners.

It emerged from this study that primary school teachers do not receive internal and external support on the use of feedback assessment feedback to improve teaching and learning from the subject advisors and school management teams. In addition, both the subject advisors and school management teams do not provide follow up support to teachers on the areas of development identified during classroom visits. As a result, the participants experienced the site visits as surveillance intended mostly to ensure compliance with prescripts, which seldom focused on supporting teachers to improve learner performance. This finding is consistent with studies by De Clercq and Shalem (2014), Mavuso (2013) and Van der Berg, et al. (2011), which reported that the visits of subject advisors and district officials tend to fulfil an almost exclusively monitoring role and are, often ineffective in providing a systematic support in the form of advice, coaching and mentoring of teachers at the classroom level.

The participants prefer the on-site (school-based) support than the off-site support workshops. They indicated that the school management teams are familiar with the learning environments and are capable of providing continued support. The international literature indicates that high performing countries in literacy, science, and mathematics such as Finland, Singapore, Australia, Japan and United States have made a remarkable departure from offsite to onsite support level (Sumner, 2011; Ransford, et al., 2009; Dominguez, Nichols & Storandt, 2006; Monrad, May & Amsterdam, 2002).

The shortage of human resources was identified as the main challenge for supporting teachers in the public primary schools of South Africa. There were few subject advisors and school management teams appointed to support teachers in the South African school district studied. In this regard, members of the school management find themselves obliged to support teachers in subjects which they have no or limited knowledge, considering that teachers in South Africa specialise in two or three subjects during teacher training. The participants blamed the DBE system of allocating posts in schools based on the learner-educator ratio that it is inaccurate, as it always provides less than the required number of teachers and school management teams in schools.

Another finding of this study was that the ANA results were not used to support the schools which showed an uncharacteristic decline in the ANA testing. For instance, there was no intervention support provided to one of the school in the sample which performed consistently below the national target of 60% over a period of three consecutive years of the ANA testing. The lack of support for underperforming schools is consistent with the assertion by Reddy and Mackay (2013) that the Action Plan to 2014 document of the DBE does not specify on how schools and education stakeholders were required to use

the ANA data to improve teaching and learning. To date, there is no evidence of the use of information about education programmes undertaken for the purpose of improving learner performance in the public primary schools in South Africa.

Conclusion

This study revealed that primary school teachers do not receive support on the use of assessment feedback for the purpose of improving learning and teaching in public primary schools in a South African school district studied. The off-site workshops tend to focus on introduction and explanation of curricular changes without providing information on the use of assessment feedback to improve learner performance in public primary schools. In the absence of a clearly formulated and coordinated approach for using the assessment feedback to support primary school teachers, the challenge of poor reading, lack of critical thinking and problem solving skills for learners will continue to prevail in public primary schools of South Africa. McKinney (2009: 86) advised that if learners perform below the level of achievement, the level of support should be contextualised and made appropriate to the challenges experienced.

This study, therefore, recommends that the use of assessment feedback to support teachers should focus on enhancing the teacher content knowledge, the choice of teaching strategies, the setting of quality tasks, and improving the feedback practices. Capraro, et al. (2011: 3) emphasised that teachers must be given an opportunity to decide on the specific knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs warrant assessment; at what point and for what specific purpose they should be assessed; and which tools might best accomplish these classroom-based assessments. Greater insight into this topic can be achieved through solicitation of the views of district officials, circuit managers and subject advisors (curriculum implementers) to specify the use of assessment feedback to support teaching and learning in primary schools.

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