

## Sand Shifting: Curriculum Exploration and evaluation dichotomy

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**Paper type:** Research article

**Journal ISSN:** 2692-2800

### Abstract

This paper argues that a better alignment between curriculum policy and assessment practices has the capacity to change and transform the profile of educational institutions. To achieve this challenge, it advocates for a critical reflection on curriculum and assessment discourse especially by:

- Exploring the curriculum and assessment dichotomy
- Utilising the capacity building logic as a strategy to enhance alignment of curriculum policies and assessment practices
- Adopting curriculum policy and assessment and practices that are congruent with institutional differentiations and contextual dynamics
- Utilising the research logic to inform policy decisions and practices.

### Introduction

‘On Shifting Sands’ as a conceptual metaphor for this paper is a consequence of my interest in documentaries about nature. Part of this intrigue is attested to by my interactions with those who venture to explore experience and capture the mystical nature of the Kalahari. They describe the Kalahari as a manifestation of mystery and phenomenal human experience. To explore and experience the mystical nature of the Kalahari, they must demonstrate impeccable skills of discernment and exigency to cope with treacherous conditions and the ever-cascading sand for survival. For their own survival, the verbatim ‘Keep your eyes on the shifting sands’ reverberates in each explorer’s mind. It is indeed a constant reminder about the danger that is always lurking around them. Similarly, educational planning and provisioning is about the life and death of the nation. Poorly planned educational systems condemn nations to extinction.

This paper is not about the Kalahari explorations and concomitant dangers that such expeditions pose to potential explorers. It is about the changing perspectives in curriculum and assessment discourse. Through the use of the metaphor, ‘On Shifting Sands’ as an epitome of mystique and thermotaxis, the paper sets out to explore and interrogate the dynamics of aligning curriculum policy and assessment practices. It argues that a better alignment between curriculum framework and assessment practices is a plausible strategy to optimise educational change and transformation.

## Exploring Curriculum and Assessment Dichotomy

Over the past years, there has been an unsurpassed global interest in educational transformation discourse. This was a consequence of public outcry at the poor performance of learners across the curriculum. It was also due to huge financial expenses incurred as a result of dysfunctional educational systems. At the heart of these deliberations, is the need to find a lasting solution to educational challenges. This has led to a proliferation of educational initiatives across nations. Whether these curriculum initiatives will yield positive results is a subject of speculation. According to Harris (2000:1): In most western countries the pressure for change has manifested itself through government policies aimed at generating the impetus for school development. In reality, however, such policies have often proved counter-productive to innovation and change. The current dichotomy facing schools is one of greater central accountability and control, with an increased responsibility for self-management and development.

What Harris posits is relevant to the changing educational landscape in South Africa. The South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) that sets the broader context for educational transformation in the post-apartheid era makes it quite evident that there is need to measure educational outcomes against predetermined standards. These standards are provided for in the new curriculum framework that, in addition to stating the expected outcomes of education generally, lays down the minimum standards required from the teaching and learning processes across grades. This reflects a paradigm shift from inputs to processes and outcomes of schooling.

The adoption of the NQF is intended to integrate all aspects of education and training in this country. A key aspect of this framework is the recognition of skills and abilities of individuals at various levels of competency as stipulated across learning programmes. The enactment of both the legislative framework and policies is intended to achieve the set goals. It is about systems and alignment thereof. Whether such forms of alignment yield expected results, is another theme for interrogation. In the words of World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990):

Whether or not expanded educational opportunities will translate into meaningful development for individual or for society depends ultimately on whether people actually learn as a result of those opportunities, in other words, whether they incorporate useful knowledge, reasoning ability, skills and values...

At the heart of this questioning is the need to have systems in place to optimise the functionality of institutions of learning. The functionality of an organisation can be determined by its structural framework, professional capacity and expertise and organisational systems. This includes the crafting and utilisation of institutional development plans to enhance debate around curriculum and assessment issues.

Both curriculum and assessment are dialectically interwoven. The tendency to view them as separate dichotomies is misleading and tends to complicate their operationalisation. For curriculum initiatives to be declared credible, they ought to have well defined assessment framework and modalities of implementation. According to Walstad (2000: 1) "...it is difficult to separate assessment decisions from teaching decisions. Teaching and assessment in ...classroom are interconnected, as one affects the other". What Walstad articulates about assessment and curriculum interconnectedness, is both relevant and instructive in that it highlights the need to apply a holistic approach to assessment and curriculum decision-making. It also alludes to the need to demystify the notion of curriculum and assessment dichotomy. Furthermore, a lot of instructive strategies can also be derived from Fullan's (1993) scholarship on educational change and development. For instance, Fullan (1993:3) reminds us:

Change is ubiquitous and relentless, forcing itself on us at every turn. At the same time, the secret of growth and development is learning how to contend with the forces of change - turning positive forces to our advantage, while blunting negative ones. The future of the world is learning the future".

What Fullan suggests is further supported by Senge (1990) as cited by Fullan (1993) reminds us that the Greek word *metanoia* means 'a fundamental shift of mind'. Both advocate for a new framework for doing things. This applies also to adopting a new perspective on curriculum and assessment discourse. Darling-Hammond and Bullmaster (1997: 1075) remind us that:

If today's educational reforms are to succeed, they will require highly educated and well-prepared teachers who can make sound decisions about curriculum, teaching, and school policy. Indeed, all the solutions to the problems cited by contemporary education critics are constrained by the knowledge and capacities that those teachers possess, and by the school conditions that define how that knowledge can be used.

Evidence gleaned from literature on teacher education initiatives across the globe confirms that one of the challenges facing the teaching profession for the 21st century include a continual transformation of teacher education programmes that empower teachers in curriculum design and development including assessment practices (Giroux & McLarren, 1987; Grundy, 1987; Punch & Bayona, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Darling-Hammond & Cobb, 1995). According to Cutterbuck (1995)

Empowerment in its diverse forms becomes a springboard on which curriculum innovations can successfully be launched. He sees empowerment as a psychological drive that activates human beings to reconstruct their attitudes, perceptions and environment in which to actualise their dreams. It is a necessary mind shift that enables role players in education to embrace change.

**Curriculum And Assessment Alignment: Striving for Thermotaxis**

According to Darling-Hammond (1994: 25):

Changing assessment forms and formats without changing the ways in which assessments are used will not change the outcomes of education. In order for assessment to support student learning, it must include teachers in all stages of the process and be embedded in curriculum and teaching activities...assessment must also be an integral part of ongoing teacher dialogue and school development.

What Darling-Hammond posits raises questions about policy formulation, implementation and management. Part of the questioning is a consequence of public outcry about the poor learner performance and achievement. Furthermore, it is also a consequence of the impact of globalisation on educational systems. For countries to compete globally, they need to implement educational policies that are responsive to global challenges. Educational policy framework is at the centre of curriculum and assessment discourse. It becomes a mechanism that determines the nature of the education system and how it should be aligned. Obviously, the modalities of aligning the various components of a system will differ from context to context. Nevertheless, the following indicators form the basis for a school level alignment strategy:

- Policy framework
- Educational goals and objectives
- Institutional outputs
- Delivery systems
- Assessment and evaluation strategies and
- Learner performance and achievement.

To operationalize alignment strategies, schools need to evaluate their capacity and commitment to curriculum and assessment alignment.

Traditionally, curriculum alignment was perceived to imply achieving a match between tests and standards as given by the national framework. The areas of focus were:

- Content
- Performance
- Level of difficulty and
- Balance and range.

There is more to alignment than matching tests and standards. Alignment provides a synergy between policies, resources, curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment strategies. It serves as 'the logic between policy goals and the strategies enacted to meet those goals'. Alignment also serves as an accountability framework for improving learner performance and achievement across the curriculum. Policy alignment is a critical aspect of educational change and curriculum reconstruction. There is need for both vertical and horizontal alignment of policies to classroom contexts. Progress towards achieving such a synergy depends on the complexity of the components to be aligned and mechanisms set in place

to facilitate the envisaged alignment initiatives. Another aspect that needs mentioning is the capacity of institutions to deal with policy issues.

The current educational changes also afford role-players an opportunity to raise questions about the relationship between curriculum and assessment. This is a consequence of the tendency to perceive school effectiveness in terms of how schools perform in national examinations. Although, this is narrow and misleading, it nevertheless, demonstrates the public's passion about examinations. Whilst the debate about the value of terminal examinations rages on, critical questions about the curriculum and assessment dichotomy retain prominence. The unpacking of such a discourse enables us to gain a better understanding of how educational systems operate.

Educational assessment is viewed as a pivotal strategy around which national reforms should be anchored. Learner assessment in particular, has undergone profound changes. Traditional forms of assessment have been criticised for failing to establish a link between classroom methodology and what achievement tests purport to test and evaluate. It is against this background that Madaus (1994) argues that assessment practices like curriculum policies tend to favour the mainstream ideology. This according to Popham (1991) and Simmons and Resnick (1993) has led to a proliferation of state designed assessment frameworks. The use of state designed assessment strategies have been criticised to ignore contextual circumstances. To address this challenge, Darling-Hammond (1994:5) argues:

Top-down support for bottom-up reform where assessment is used to give teachers practical information on student learning and to provide opportunities for school communities to engage in 'recursive process of self-reflection, self-renewal'... the equitable use of performance assessments depends not only on the design of the assessments themselves, but also on how well the assessment practices are interwoven with the goals of 'authentic school reform and effective teaching'.

What Darling-Hammond posits is central to the current debate on the curriculum and assessment dichotomy. It also illustrates the need to align curriculum and assessment policies and practices.

Curriculum alignment is not a simple feat. It is a complex process that requires meticulous planning and optimal realignment of policy frameworks and classroom practices. Institutions of learning need to ensure that there is a 'fit' between what policy articulates and what actually takes place in our schools. In other words, do teachers follow national curriculum mandates? How closely interrelated are both their teaching and assessment strategies? Failure to achieve the desired level of alignment has serious educational implications. The importance of alignment in educational context is illustrated in figure 1.

Curriculum Alignment

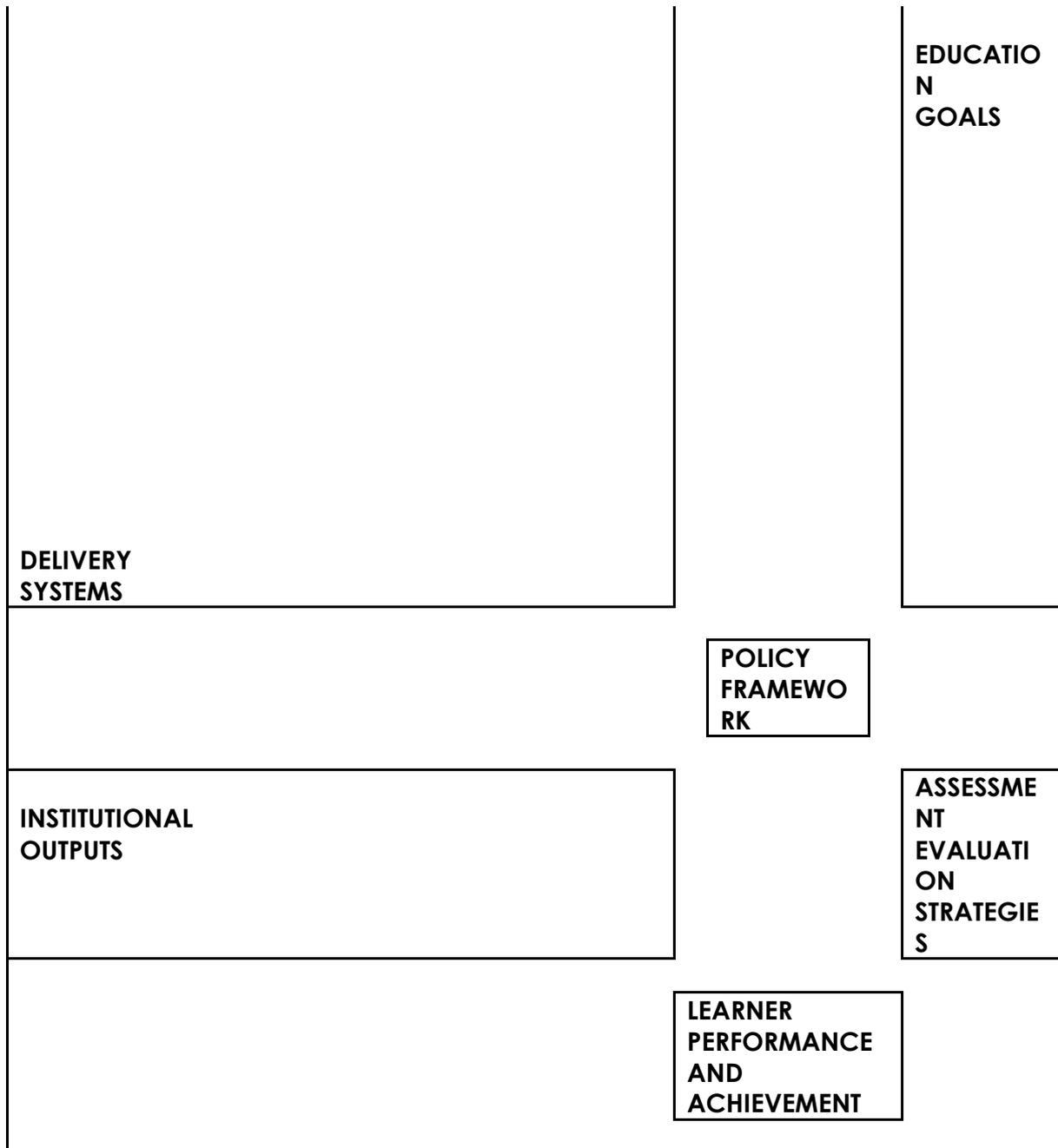


Figure 1. Curriculum Alignment

Maintaining balance between curriculum policy and assessment practices is a complex and daunting task. It is therefore, fitting to liken it to thermotaxis. What then is thermotaxis? It is a process by which warm-blooded organisms regulate their body heat and temperature. The notion of thermotaxis aligns well with the conceptual metaphor ‘On Shifting Sands’ as used in this paper. Weather conditions in the Kalahari change without notice, thus requiring explorers to acclimatise for survival. Failure to maintain thermotaxical balance could prove fatal. Likewise, institutions of learning cannot function optimally unless they have sound systems and function efficiently. They have to maintain a healthy balance between curriculum policy and assessment practices. Failure to strike a balance would render such institutions worthless and irrelevant to the socio-economic needs of the society.

Barnes et al., (2000: 645) argue that the principle of alignment should be viewed as: a degree of congruence between the expectations of a school system for students' performance and the various elements of the system's assessment arrangements. A corollary of this principle might be that expectations and assessment should be aligned in a clear, efficient, and economical manner".

Barnes et al, raise questions about systems functionality. Implicit in their argument is the need to have focus and mechanisms to attain the set goals or objectives. They argue that as a consequence of lack of (poor) planning, different and confusing curriculum mandates (messages) are often sent to various role-players about implementation strategies. Since there is no logic between curriculum mandates and operational framework, implementation becomes problematic. Similar views have been expressed by Fullan (1999: 66) who advocates for "a better alignment between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment at both system and school level".

In their study Barnes et al (2000) provide some empirical evidence that falsifies the assumption that assessment is a neutral element in curriculum discourse. They demonstrated that on the contrary, assessment is a:

Powerful mechanism for social construction of competence...Investment in quality assessment offers school authorities a powerful, cost effective means to model exemplary practice, while meeting the evaluative obligations of public accountability.

Their research analysis further highlights the need to ascertain that curriculum content is credible and relevant. They caution that the dynamics of the alignment logic should not be delimited to establishing synergy between curriculum expectations, teaching strategies and assessment practices. They recommend that to circumvent public displeasure regarding alignment processes, alignment discourse should also focus on the system's expectations and assessment strategies thereof. Webb (1997: 2) also cautions that "a careful alignment between expectations and assessment should be pursued to avoid 'over assessing a few outcomes at the expense of ignoring others'".

According to Barnes et al, a careful alignment of curriculum expectations and assessment practices generates a strong causative impact on classroom pedagogy. On the contrary, poorly aligned curriculum expectations and assessment mandates tend to exert 'coercive influence on classroom practices'. They caution that assessment mandates should not be used to restrict classroom practices, but rather reflect the range and scope of performance as articulated by the curriculum framework. This leads us to another critical question, namely, how is alignment measured? A review of literature on curriculum initiatives (Biggs, 2001; Shuell, 1986, Burns, 2001) confirms that the process can be achieved through the following strategies:

- Using National Frameworks
- Expert Consensus
- Benchmarking
- Common criteria etc.

The process of aligning curriculum and assessment practices requires the existence of a quality assurance framework. A review of literature confirms that benchmarking is often used as measure of quality control both in academia and business sector (Loosemore, 1996 & Mawson, 1994). Mawson (1994) defines benchmarking as 'a technique by which an organisation can compare its own methods, processes and practices and performances against other organisations'. Similarly, Losh (1994: 62) defines benchmarking as:

A systematic way of identifying the practices of successful enterprises and implementing them... Ultimately this is an inquiry process designed to identify what works and why? Once a successful practice is identified, it becomes a benchmark and serves as a reference point for establishing internal goals and objectives for increased performance.

Housley (1999) notes the following types of benchmarking:

- Generic benchmarking
- Competitive benchmarking
- Performance benchmarking
- Product benchmarking
- Functional benchmarking

- Cost benchmarking
- Process benchmarking etc.

It is not the intention of this paper to account for the many approaches to benchmarking. Nevertheless, a synopsis of both Process and Performance benchmarking will be given since they have some relevance to curriculum and assessment dichotomy discourse. Process benchmarking focuses largely on what makes systems functional and efficient. This includes gaining a better understanding about the functionality of both the organisational and management structures. Performance benchmarking, on the other hand, deals with the quality of system's outputs. In a nutshell, it's about the aggregation of the performance outputs as outlined by the system's performance indicators.

Exponents of benchmarking (Housley, 1999; Loosemore, 1996; Mawson, 1994; Price, 1994) cite the following benefits of benchmarking:

- Improved quality
- Maintenance policy
- Management information systems
- Improved processes
- Change facilitation
- Gained competitive advantage
- Flexibility
- Weaknesses identification
- Improved cost etc.

Every approach has operational limitations. This also applies to the use of benchmarking in educational context. If not carefully planned and utilised benchmarking can lead to over bureaucratisation of educational practices. Despite such limitations, benchmarking can bring substantial changes and improvement in an organisation if used intelligently. In the words of Housley (1999: 79) "Benchmarking is not a 'fad', and can be a 'fix' if used to bring about improvement. But benchmarking will be seen as a fad, and an expensive one ...if it is used to measure outputs".

Fullan (1993: 84) reminds us "learning organizations are a part of a greater complexity that requires a holistic view to survive and develop". An articulation firmly embedded in the conceptual metaphor used in this paper. Similar views have been articulated by Land and Jarman (1992: 30) who argue:

The reality of evolutionary success demonstrates that 'fitness' is not simply about 'adopting to an environment', but rather the continuing improvement in the capacity to grow and build ever more connections in more varied environments (we define growth and evolution as continuously making more extensive and increasingly complex connections inside the growing organism and with the varied outside environments).

The cumulative evidence gleaned from literature on school change and development ( Barnes et al 2000; Land and Jarman 1992; Fullan 1999 & Webb 1997) demonstrates that curriculum alignment processes should be underpinned by the provision and optimal utilisation of the following critical system's structures:

- Leadership
- Organisational structures
- Access to resources
- Personal and social dynamics
- Institutional context etc.

The leadership capacity of an institution is crucial towards achieving national standards and outcomes. It does so by ensuring that appropriate systems and processes exist to enhance the functionality of schools. The common view is that there is a link between strategic planning and institutional effectiveness. Through a carefully planned strategic framework, institutions can transform their profiles. Huggins (1980:4) defines a strategic plan as 'the systematic process of setting...objectives and making the strategic decisions and developing the plans necessary to achieve these objectives'. According to Huggins (1980) strategic plans offer institutions an opportunity to map up contingency options to anticipate contextual challenges and plan accordingly to circumvent such eventualities. Like 'Shifting Sands' strategic plans have to be reviewed from time to time to ascertain their viability. Maintaining

balance between institutional plans and their core business is another form of thermotaxis. Like the Kalahari explorers who rely on impeccable skills for survival, institutional plans too have to be well crafted and should reflect:

- Vision and mission
- Institutional functions
- Quality assurance policy
- Capacity building policy
- Research policy and
- Community partnerships.

A better synergy between these components has the capacity to facilitate curriculum and assessment alignment processes within and across institutions. The processes alluded to above depend largely on access to resources, professional relationship among role-players and the overall capacity to manage change.

#### Utilising the Capacity Building Logic to Enhance Curriculum Alignment

The success of institutions depends inter alia, on their capacity to grapple with change and related challenges. Institutional capacity building plays a crucial role towards transforming the profile of an institution. Institutional capacity building therefore, can be achieved through:

- Visionary and transformative leadership
- Comprehensive strategic plan
- Plausible implementation strategies
- Maintenance plan
- Adequate resources
- Will to invest in capacity building endeavours.

In his foreword, Spady (1998:vii-viii) offers us a most compelling form of leadership that would equal the task, when he avers: (i) it should be leaders who initiate improvements in their milieu or organisation (ii) leaders that get results by enlisting the support of others and sticking to their goal, and they make something better and different. The resonance of Spady's thesis is supported by Makgoba (1997:140). He proposes a paradigm shift in institutional leadership and praxis. He argues that such a shift would give leadership a new meaning and profile that "...must develop a new understanding of diversity that enables a real departure from the legacies of the past such as the dominant and recessive power relationships that are rampant in our institutions of higher learning".

Literature on educational change and leadership confirms that skilled and knowledgeable leadership has the capacity to transform the way institutions function (Giroux, 1987; Harris, 1994; Nkomo, 1998; Schwahn & Spady, 1998). Lenin once retorted "do not try to resolve new challenges by old methods. Nothing will come of it". Lenin's retort remains truly relevant as institutions grapple with the 21st century challenges. Lenin's words of wisdom are further vindicated by Gorbachev (1988) in his address to the CPSU Central Committee, Heads of the Mass Media, Ideological Institutions and Artistic Unions on: How to Restore the Image of Socialism through Democracy. He argues "The creative forces of society have been set into motion. Positive tendencies are appearing. This is exactly what changes life". The culture of life in our institutions of learning must change to meet the ever-changing needs of learners. Institutions need to cogitate a plausible institutional "perestroika" that would unleash capacity building initiatives inherent within these institutions. Professionalism, solid scholarship and impeccable work ethos should be a plausible scaffold upon which institutional capacity building strategies are anchored.

According to Darling-Hammond and Bullmaster (1997: 1071):

Developing a capacity for understanding requires both the time for this kind of extended, in depth learning, and the skilful guidance of teachers who can scaffold key ideas, anticipate misconceptions or stereotypes, and create learning experiences that build on students own thinking and reflect the standards for inquiry in the discipline.

Undoubtedly, professional development plays a critical role to transform pedagogic credibility of institutions of learning. In order to teach effectively teachers need to have a better understanding of the

disciplines they teach as well as the many different ways in which children learn (Darling-Hammond, 1990; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Shulman, 1987). As McLaughlin and Talbert (1993: 2-3) argue: Teaching for understanding ... requires change not only in what is taught but also in how it is taught... Teaching for understanding requires teachers to have comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of the subject matter, competence in representation and manipulation of the knowledge in instructional activities, and skill in managing classroom processes in a way that enables active student learning.

The thrust of McLaughlin and Talbert's thesis underscores the need for teachers to understand the dynamics of curriculum policy and assessment practices. They need to foster meaningful learning by designing appropriate learning tasks that engage learners to explore the frontiers of knowledge. Unfortunately, evidence gleaned from literature confirms the contrary (Darling-Hammond & Bullmaster, 1997; Fullan, 1993; Senge, 1990). For instance, classroom experiences reveal that the majority of teachers in developing nations struggle to establish synergy between classroom curriculum and assessment practices. This is a result of teachers' lack of understanding and knowledge of curriculum design and development. As a consequence of this professional deficiency, there is no 'fit' between what teachers teach and assess. Teachers' lack of appropriate and relevant skills in curriculum design and development is a major challenge that teacher education providers have to address urgently. According to Darling-Hammond and Bullmaster (1997: 1073):

...Teachers will need to be prepared to teach in the ways these new standards demands, with deeper understanding of their disciplines, of inter-disciplinary connections, and of inquiry-based learning. They will need skills for creating learning experiences that enable students to construct their own knowledge in powerful ways. In addition, teachers will need to understand and use a variety of more authentic and performance-based means for assessing students' knowledge and understanding, as well as evaluating students' approaches to learning.

Commenting on the invaluable role and expertise teachers bring to the classroom Shulman (1983:504) avers that:

The teacher remains the key. The literature on effective schools is meaningless, debates over educational policy are moot, if the primary agents of instruction are incapable of performing their functions well. No micro-computer will replace them, no television system will clone and distribute them, no scripted lessons will direct and control, no voucher system will bypass them.

What Shulman poses is both relevant and instructive as it raises questions about educational system's efficiency and credibility in addressing teacher empowerment issues. According to Fullan (1993) society in general has failed to acknowledge complexity of the teaching profession. He also blames society for bashing teachers for poor education results without first creating conducive conditions that would make teaching and learning successful. He further argues that teacher educators and teachers have not been proactive enough to break the cycle of dysfunctional systems.

To break the cycle of dysfunctionality, Schlechty (1990: 22) argues:

Teacher education could, I believe, be much improved if those who sought entry could be brought to understand that learning to teach requires considerable investment of time and talent. Thus, it is in the interest of quality teacher education to create conditions in which talented individuals are willing to enter programs that require them to undergo a longer period of development than is commonly the case in present teacher education programs.

Radical changes in teacher empowerment programmes are required to translate Schlechty's sentiments to reality. Schlechty's thesis is reiterated by Lichtenstein et al (1992: 80) who argue that the nature of teacher education programmes should maximise on "the knowledge that empowers teachers to pursue their craft with confidence, enthusiasm, and authority". Arising from Lichtenstein's proposition is the need for teachers to display sound knowledge and understanding of the following critical aspects of a school system:

- Knowledge of teaching profession
- Understanding of education policy
- Knowledge of learning programmes (disciplines)
- Knowledge of teaching and learning strategies and
- Understanding of assessment practices.

A display of both the knowledge and understanding of the above named aspects of the school system forms an important step towards understanding the dynamics of curriculum policy and assessment practices. Part of such an understanding is underpinned by the research capacity building opportunities within institutions of learning.

#### Utilising the Research Logic to Inform Policy Decisions and Practices

The upsurge of interest in research is a consequence of a plethora of factors, for instance, to promote the culture of accountability within institutions. Research is also used as a monitoring tool. This is as a consequence of the huge financial resources invested in educational initiatives. It is also an attempt to demystify public perceptions and distrust about research initiatives. It is also because of high expectations accorded to the science of research in education. Evidence gleaned from literature on research studies confirms that research plays a crucial role to provide pertinent data on the quality of educational systems and practices (Mwamwenda, 1994; Nyamapfene, 1999; Harris, 2000).

In 1999, the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) hosted a conference on 'Educator as Researcher'. One of the primary aims of the conference was "To move research agenda to the center of change process in education". The long-term vision of the conference was to encourage dialogue about strategies institutions might use to facilitate educators' transition to the world of research in order to become 'critical scholars'. The reality is that institutions cannot microwave researchers. It is a process that requires time, training, commitment and resources. According to Nyamapfene (1999) doing research is an imperative requirement for those entrusted with the responsibility of academia. He concedes that research capacity at institutional level needs to increase to match academic challenges. He believes that those involved in research are active thinkers committed towards utilising the research logic to construct knowledge and add to the knowledge discourse. The need to strengthen institutional research capacity is supported by Noble (1989) and Mwamwenda (1994).

The role of teachers in research should be explored as a strategy to enhance their growth as classroom researchers. This is also critical so that they log into research databases to inform their practice. Attempts to encourage teachers to become 'critical scholars' and actively participate in research projects should be underpinned by:

- Strong research leadership
- Mentoring and research capacity building
- Plausible development plan that clearly articulates institutional vision and research priorities
- Effective organisation and management of resources to optimise research outputs.

The impact of research in educational transformation and curriculum reconfiguration is well documented. According to Mwamwenda (1994) research plays a crucial role in shaping educational systems. For instance, it helps institutions to redefine their core business within the ever-changing global context. He argues that decision-making in education should be a consequence of research outputs. He concedes that lack of research output would compromise the image of the institution both nationally and internationally. In this case, it would even compromise the policy systems of such a country. In addition, Wickham and Bailey (2000) believe that research further enhances:

- Sharing and collaboration among stakeholders
- Dialogue on various educational issues
- Communication between teachers, learners and policy planners
- Performance levels of teachers and learners
- Teacher designed staff development initiatives
- Developing priorities for school planning
- Development to new forms of knowledge

The quality of research outs can be optimised by developing the culture of research within institutions of learning and relevant support systems. The strategy for achieving such a task is succinctly elaborated by Gaynor (1998: 70):

Pedagogical research must be strengthened to improve the quality of education. For example, in-service and action research should be carried out, and the research should be communicated to teachers in an effective manner. Schools must be allowed to have a direct input into the research process by, for example, becoming involved in research design and implementation.

A cumulative analysis of scholarship on research confirms the notion that if utilised intelligently, research can empower institutions with appropriate skills on curriculum and assessment alignment strategies. Through systematic research plans, institutions can align research outputs with tuition, thus ensuring a 'thermotaxis' between educational policies and classroom practices. This would further enhance the utility value of the research logic as an integral part of policy formulation and decision making strategy.

## Adopting Relevant Curriculum Policy and Assessment Practices

Curriculum policies are not cast in stone. They are a result of some ferocious dialogue and contestations among different stakeholders on the quality of envisaged educational systems. Curriculum deliberations too are a result of what Archer (1992) terms a decade of globalisation and its concomitant impact in institutional domains like science and technology, politics, economics and culture. Both Archer (1992) and Finegold et al (1993) view globalisation as 'a multi-faceted process' characterised by the principle of interconnectedness and flexible policy borrowing across countries. The adoption of educational policies and systems is a complex process that requires planning and access to resources to make systems functional. Educational systems are not cast on stone. They are a consequence of contestations and trade-offs between various role-players. South Africa is a typical example regarding the genesis of educational transformation.

For South Africa, 1994 signifies the end of apartheid legacy and beginning of an arduous struggle to attain educational transformation and curriculum reconfiguration. The challenge to attain the envisaged paradigm shift in policy and praxis is littered with a plethora of policy documentations for instance, the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) (1990); ANC Policy Framework (1994); the White Paper on Education and Training (WPET) (1995) and the NQF Curriculum Framework (1995). The cumulative impact of these policy documents reflects South Africa's commitment to an integrated approach to education and training. Commenting on the impact of the WPET, Christie (1997:111) argues:

In responding to the need for change, the WPET brings together a set of proposals to restructure the relationship between education and training, to introduce greater flexibility of structures, to enhance mobility between learning contexts, and to build quality on 'the scaffolding' of a National Qualification Framework. Together, these proposals aim at a policy of 'life-long learning', which would widen access to education and training as well as link it to human resource development policies.

The cumulative wisdom alluded to above is succinctly elaborated by Nkomo (1998:137)

Education is a process by which we seek to achieve the maximum enlightenment possible. This is accompanied by emancipating the individual (through the promotion of the realisation that there exists within one the capacity to transform one's circumstances) and by extension society, from ignorance, prejudice of all forms, parochialism, poverty and so forth.

The resonance of Nkomo's thesis consolidates explicitly the cumulative rigour that curriculum and assessment synergy bears on educational systems and practices. It is essential therefore, to create conditions that would enhance alignment of educational systems.

## Conclusion

The dictum 'Keep your eyes on the shifting curriculum discourse' seems to be an appropriate summation of the thesis of this paper. By being at the cutting edge of both the curriculum and assessment discourse, institutions of learning will be better equipped to interrogate the current educational policies and practices. It would further enhance the possibilities for institutions of learning to maximise their efforts in ensuring a better alignment between curriculum policy and assessment practices.

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