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NATIONAL EDUCATION EVALUATION & DEVELOPMENT UNIT

DO ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN YOUR SCHOOL MEASURE UP?

Some lessons from schools that work

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Prepared by NEEDU

SUMMARY: Teachers in many schools have not always been able to assess learners properly. What is the situation in your school? Is it time for an overhaul or just a minor tune-up of your school's assessment practices?

As part of a series of policy briefs prepared by NEEDU to outline the best practices from the *Schools that Work II* study[1], this policy brief provides an overview of best practices—how good teachers conduct ongoing assessments and continuously adjust their classroom practices to achieve maximum performance.

Effective assessment practices in schools that work focus on four important questions with regards to learner performance. These are:

• Where are we going?
This involves **setting goals** and improvement targets

• Where are we now?
This involves establishing a baseline (**diagnostic assessment**) and monitoring progress against the set targets and goals (**formative assessment**)

• How do we close the performance gap?
This involves **taking corrective actions** as informed by the **analysis of assessment results**

• Where do we end up?
This involves evaluating the learning process (**summative assessment**)

INTRODUCTION

The debate about the optimum amount of *testing* in schools has been going on across the educational landscape for decades. Testing advocates contend that there are several benefits of more frequent *testing* such as:

- Increasing instructional effectiveness,
- Encouraging learners to study and review their work more often, and
- Providing opportunities for teachers to correct learner errors, to reward good performance, and to give learners a good indication of what they are expected to learn.

But others have raised concerns about frequent *testing*. One of the arguments is that over-testing takes time away from instruction. Researchers have produced many studies that are relevant to this debate. It is not, however, the purpose of this policy brief to enter into this debate. This brief seeks to address the following question:

What assessment practices, as reported by schools that work[1], have the potential not only to measure and report learning effectively but also to promote or enhance learning and teaching?

Distinction between *testing* and *assessing*: One major concern raised by those against frequent *testing* is that learners are over-tested. Counteracting this argument, other assessment experts have maintained that it is true that in some education systems learners are *over-tested*; but they are *under-assessed*.

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[1] In April 2017, the Minister of Basic Education commissioned the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) to conduct the *Schools that Work II* study. This study sought to examine the characteristics of top-performing schools in South Africa. The best practices discussed in this advocacy brief are based on the findings of that study. The full report is available on the Department of Basic Education website: www.education.gov.za. NEEDU can be reached at (012) 357 4231

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These experts[2] argue that there is a distinction between *testing* and *assessing.* They describe the distinction as follows:
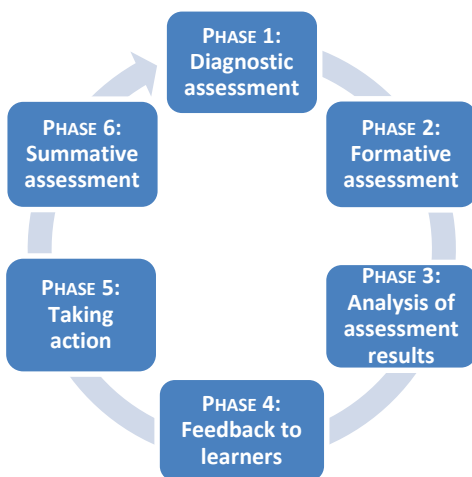
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- *Testing* implies an end-of-year, summative, evaluative, process in which learners submit to a test and the results–typically many weeks later.
- *Assessment* refers to a practice where learners are required to complete a task and then very soon–within minutes, hours, days, or no more than two weeks – they receive feedback that is designed to improve their performance.

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How *"assessment"* is defined in schools that work: In schools that work, the general term *"assessment"* is used to refer to all those activities undertaken by teachers that provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities and to adapt their teaching to meet learner needs.

Teachers in the schools that work or top-performing schools use different phases of the *assessment loop* effectively to improve learning and teaching. The *assessment loop* can be expressed as follows:

PHASE 1: Diagnostic assessment
PHASE 2: Formative assessment
PHASE 3: Analysis of assessment results
PHASE 4: Feedback to learners
PHASE 5: Taking action
PHASE 6: Summative assessment

EMPIRICALLY TRIED AND TESTED PRACTICES

While other schools rely upon the idiosyncratic assessment practices of individual teachers, schools that work develop common assessment practices. They re-

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[2] Reeves, D.B (2003). *High performance in high poverty schools: 90/90/90 and beyond*

inforce these common practices using quality and well-developed assessment items to determine whether or not learners have learned the content and skills taught.

Teachers in all content areas use a wide range of research-based and empirically tested assessment practices to advance learning and teaching. These practices are discussed below.

PRACTICE 1: CONDUCT DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT

Assessment experts argue that *diagnostic assessments* (sometimes known as "pre-assessments" or "assessments before teaching") is as important to teaching as a physical exam is to prescribing an appropriate medical regimen. While certain learners are likely to have already mastered some of the skills or concepts that the teacher is about to introduce is his or her lesson, others are likely to be deficient in prerequisite skills or harbour some misconceptions, …

… so why do teachers in schools that work conduct *diagnostic* assessments?

These teachers identify the following as benefits for diagnosing what learners already know or can do:

To check learners' prior knowledge and skill levels, abilities, strengths and weaknesses in order to avoid overestimating or underestimating what learners know.

To identify learner misconceptions so that teachers can confront them before they persist even in the face of good teaching.

To gather information that would assist teacher planning and guide differentiated instruction.

To profile learners' interests, reveal learning-style preferences and establish learning barriers.

To establish a baseline to which future learning can then be compared.

PRACTICE 2: CONDUCT FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The beneficial outcomes of *formative* assessment, otherwise known as assessment *for* learning, which have been highly touted by researchers and educators alike, are prevalent in the schools that work. Teachers in these schools use formal and informal formative assessment methods including quizzes, oral questioning, teacher observations, draft work, short-focused tests as continual checks for learner understanding.

Teachers use ongoing assessments to:

① Provide them and learners with specific **feedback on learning progres**s for the purpose of guiding teaching to improve learning.

② Gain more **information about learner proficiency** to adjust or modify their teaching and maintain or remediate the learning process on a continual basis.

③ Help learners **assess their current position** in relation to the set goals and targets, and to equip them with the tools to bridge the gap between the their present performance and set targets.

Teachers in schools that work help learners answer the following questions:

QUESTION 1

• **Where am I going?** To answer this question, every learner has concise learning targets. [Refer to Policy Brief N-03/2018 how schools that work do this].
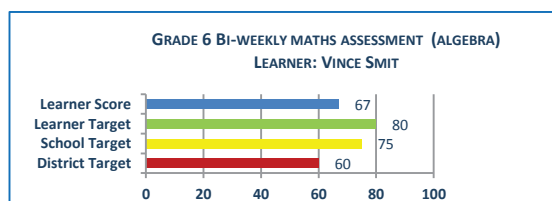
QUESTION 2

• **Where am I now?** To answer this question, learners must know where they are in relation to the set targets. To illustrate this, a top-performing quintile 1 school reports all assessment results in bar graphs as shown in the example below. In this example, the learner scored below his personal and school targets.

QUESTION 3

• **How do I close the performance gap?** To answer this question, teachers support learners to move from their current position to meet the school's and their own learning targets in different subjects.

QUESTION 4

• **Where do I end up?** To answer this question, learners, having taken responsibility for their own learning, get good results in the quarterly, mid-year and end-of-year examinations.

GRADE 6 BI-WEEKLY MATHS ASSESSMENT (ALGEBRA) LEARNER: VINCE SMIT

	Value
Learner Score	67
Learner Target	80
School Target	75
District Target	60

PRACTICE 3: ANALYSE ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Teachers describe the analysis of assessment results as an important phase of the assessment loop. To derive meaning from assessment results, teachers dig deeper into their results than just calculating average percentages per class and presenting the spread of performance in terms of the proportions of learners who achieved specific levels of performance, i.e., levels 1 to 7.

In this phase, schools that work do four interrelated activities chronologically. They:

- Analyse assessment results using question, item and error analysis
- Identify topics or concepts which are commonly found to be challenging
- Identify teachers and learners who are having problems with particular topics
- Discuss results, make informed decisions about curriculum delivery and what actions to take

> The analysis of results tells us not only learners who underperform but also teachers whose classes underperform. (Teacher, School LI-Quintile 4)

PRACTICE 4: PROVIDE FEEDBACK TO LEARNERS

Analysing assessment results is not the end in the top performing schools. Teachers in these schools give feedback to learners based on the careful analysis of formative assessment results. Their feedback practices measure up in that they meet four criteria reported in the literature as key aspects of effective feedback. These criteria are as follows:

Teachers provide feedback designed to improve learners' performance *promptly*

- "Making learners wait for weeks before they find out how they did in a test will not help them deal with their weak points timeously." (Teacher, School LH-Quintile 3)

Schools provide significantly more *frequent* feedback to learners

- "We provide feedback on a weekly basis." (Teacher, School LH-Quintile 3)

Teachers provide *specific* feedback to learners about their strengths and weak points

- Writing a comment "You can do better" is no more helpful than "There is a room for improvement."

Teachers give learners opportunities to *act on the feedback*

- Learners get more chances to refine, revise, practice, and retry.

PRACTICE 5: RESPOND TO ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Taking actions based on the assessment results is identified in literature as the final step in the assessment loop, hence this phase of the assessment loop is sometimes called "closing the loop." Armed with *diagnostic* information and *formative* assessment results, schools that work take three critical post-learner assessment actions as follows:

Teachers, learners, parents and SMT members are *held accountable* for learner performance

- This is discussed in detail in Policy Brief N-03/2018.

Teachers *make continual adjustments* in their classroom practices. This includes:

- Adapting aspects of teaching or revising methodologies in the classroom
- Reteaching problematic topics, differentiating instruction or providing extra classes
- Using team-teaching to address specific skills or concepts that learners find challenging
- Engaging in professional development programmes to empower themselves to address deficiencies revealed by formative assessment data [See Policy Brief N-05/2018]

Learners *take responsibility for their education*, Taking ownership and responsibility for their learning involves:

- Exhibitimg appropriate behaviours such as coming to class prepared, completing assignments and homework well and on time, and seeking additional help when they are struggling (e.g. attending extra classes)
- Engaging actively in class activities, asking questions when they are confused, studying, monitoring their own progress in meeting school and their own academic performance targets, and using kids-teach-kids (peer-support) programme to master material with which they struggle. [See Policy Brief N-10/2018]

PRACTICE 6: CONDUCT SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Teachers in schools that work rely heavily on *diagnostic* and *formative* assessments because they feel strongly that *summative* assessments (also called assessment **_of_** learning) are insufficient tools for maximizing learning "because by the time learners and their parents get to know how learners have performed, the assessment results are ancient history in their eyes" (Teacher, School KK-Quintile 4).