Whither National Assessments?

The Nexus of Policy Intentions and Implementation

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Presentation Outline

• Introduction
• Definition of national assessments
• Overview of the landscape of national assessments
• Policy imperatives for national assessments
  ➢ Purpose(s)
  ➢ Reporting of results
  ➢ Utilisation of assessment data
  ➢ Impact
• Theory of Action and Policy: Recommendations
Introduction

• Interest in large-scale national assessments of learner performance is increasing across developed and developing countries.

• South Africa has weighed in, not only into international assessments but has also conceptualised and implemented a unique approach to national assessments.

• South Africa’s approach to national assessments is unique both in scale and intended purpose(s).

• There’s need to ensure effectiveness, sustainability and quality of the assessments based on well-informed policy intentions and policy implemenation.
Definition of national assessments

• **National assessments** → large-scale assessments (national and international) of learners in identified subjects and grades, conducted annually or periodically on populations or samples of learners to generate data that must inform decision-making.

• Distinction between national assessments and examinations → often initially stated as distinguished by “low- and high-stakes” implications, respectively, but often the distinctions end up being **obfuscated**.
Focal questions steering literature review

• The often-observed obfuscation at the nexus of policy intentions and policy implementation regarding national assessments provided the impetus for writing this paper

  ➢ Are there common reasons shared by countries that conduct large-scale assessments?

  ➢ What distinguishes education systems that have realised sustained and successful large-scale assessments from those that did not?

• What lessons, if any, can we learn?
Views against national assessment ...

- supports policy-decisions that have not been adequately scrutinized and are based on measures with important psychometric limitations
- acts as a form of educational and social control that subverts the professional autonomy of educators
- holds teachers responsible for results with inequitable resources and contributes to feelings of lower self-efficacy
- undermines the quality of education by penalizing divergent thinking, creativity, and intellectual work in general
Views against national assessment ... 

- widens the gap between minorities and majority students by ignoring key factors known to affect student performance such as socio-economic status, language of origin, and the students’ physical and/or emotional health 

- narrows and distorts the curriculum by encouraging “teaching to the test” techniques which take valuable time away from non-tested subjects, particularly when high-stakes are attached to results 

- provides information that is of relatively little use to improving classroom practice
Views in support of national assessments ...

- Make students work harder and perform better on national and international assessments
- Identify the most successful teaching practices and proficient teachers
- Enhance teachers’ reflective and critical thinking when planning instruction
- Lead to positive increases in educators’ knowledge about testing and of testing issues
- Improve teachers’ assessment and instructional practices, particularly when they are involved in marking these assessments
Views in support of national assessments ... 

- stimulate action research that serves as a basis for school improvement
- provide schools with valuable information about the consequences of their past practices and program effectiveness
- damages children’s self-concept and leads to student disengagement
Overview: Key observations

• National assessments have often abounded following abandonment of the now unpopular school inspectorate systems, apparently to fill the monitoring “void” left by the transformation

• Uptake of national assessments has seen unprecedented increases following the two EFA world conferences (2000 and 2005) in Thailand and Dakar, respectively

• Key message in Dakar was: “Ensure that all learners achieve measurable learning outcomes of a high quality”, has increase in national and international and regional assessments
Key observations: Purpose of assessment

- Ranking, medium-stakes, often followed by either stick or carrot
- Accountability, high-stakes, name-and-shame
- Value added, low- to medium-stakes, recognises impact of contextual factors and rewards effort
- Curriculum review, no-stakes, recognition of importance of evidence in decision-making
- Monitoring (access, quality, equity and efficiency), no- to low-stakes, preferred where there are socio-economic disparities
- Set and maintain standards, low- to medium-stakes
Can We Have a One-Size-Fits-All Assessment?
Some of unintended consequences

• Education systems tend to fall easily into the temptation of either changing original purposes of assessments or adding (overloading) new demands

• Unplanned change of purpose of assessments resulting in resistance

• Under- or non-utilisation of assessment data resulting in low returns on incurred costs

• Teachers teaching to the test
Approach to reporting results

• Reporting style influences uptake and utilisation of assessment results

• Reporting results in raw scores (percentages) is fast-losing popularity because of evident short-comings → no-information, often norm-referenced

• Latest “theory-laden-measurement” approaches to assessment (IRT/Rasch) enhance opportunity for meaningful reporting and increase prospects for use of assessment data → information-rich, criterion-referenced

• Use of performance standards models expected levels of performance → everyone gets to know “how good is good enough”
Setting and reporting standards
Purpose of Standards and Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs)

• To provide coherent information across grades and subjects

• To guide the development of the assessments

• To guide teacher’s instructional efforts to ensure that students reach performance levels
Impact of national assessments

• Uruguay is a model example of use of national assessments with proven positive impact about 5% improvement in performance in less than five years

• What did they do?:
  
  ➢ Intensive communication of results
  
  ➢ Support to schools and teachers (including weekend workshops and discussion groups)
  
  ➢ Incentives to improving schools
Theory of Action and Policy Implications
Policy Implications

• Policy must spell out in unambiguous terms the purpose(s) of national assessments

• Strengthen policy implementation by building into the policy clear mechanisms for monitoring the implementation to avert possible obfuscation

• Report assessment evidence in ways that meet the needs of the end-users (no one-size-fits-all reporting)
Conclusion

• There’s general agreement on the importance of assessment data to inform various decisions in education

• There’s tendency to conveniently use assessment data for multiple purposes, particularly disproportionately more for accountability than for development

• South Africa has good opportunity to tread carefully, craft policy that is clear on the purpose(s) that national assessments must serve

• Monitor the feedback and utilisation of assessment data and track the impact on the system