Curriculum reform and teaching in South Africa: making a ‘paradigm shift’?

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Abstract

South Africa’s post-Apartheid Grades 1–9 curriculum, Curriculum 2005, has been introduced with many good intentions and an abundance of perceived educationally correct rhetoric. It requires that teachers make a ‘paradigm shift’ from their old teaching practices to new ones. In order to understand better the processes which might be involved in such a transition, a small study was conducted of the way in which Grade 4 teachers performed the assessment of English reading. The results of the study pose fundamental questions about the manner in which Curriculum 2005 has been conceived and introduced. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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The transformation of the school curriculum in South Africa was an urgent priority of the education ministry of the government of national unity. The first step towards this was taken not long after the 1994 election when ‘interim’ syllabuses were created for immediate implementation in schools. The committees which designed the syllabuses were required, first, to unify the existing syllabuses of the racially segregated education departments into single documents and, secondly, to remove the worst aspects of apartheid which were manifest in the existing syllabuses. The process pleased no-one as it did not go far enough and the education departments were not prepared to provide new textbooks for the interim syllabuses. The pressure to produce ‘the new curriculum’ and the need to adapt instruction in schools to the recently developed National Qualifications Framework on outcomes based education principles led to the hurried development of what has become known as ‘Curriculum 2005’ for Grades 1 to 9 during 1996 and 1997. It was introduced formally in Grade 1 in 1998 for the first time, though primary schools have been encouraged to adopt its main features in their curricula as soon as they are able. It will be introduced formally into Grade 7 in 2000.

A key feature of Curriculum 2005 was the decision (made before any substantial discussion had taken place) that the first aspects to be developed, before any other structures had been conceptualised, were the outcomes. They would be written on a clean slate, with no conscious influence of what might have been done in other parts of the world (Siebörger, 1998: 47). In the event, the writing of these outcomes took much longer than initially expected and when the curriculum...
was first made public at the end of March 1997 all that was published were sixty-six outcomes (in eight Learning Areas), assessment criteria (read sub-divisions of the outcomes) and range statements for each of the outcomes. Teachers received information about the curriculum in a number of official and semi-official booklets. Although little developmental work had been done at that stage on the place of assessment in the curriculum, it was recognised from the start that teachers’ methods of assessment would have to change if the curriculum was to be implemented successfully. The following selected quotations from booklets on Curriculum 2005 represent the information given to teachers with regard to the transformation of their teaching and assessment.

- Differences between the “old” and “new” approaches: OLD — passive learners; exam-driven; rote-learning...; textbook/worksheet-bound and teacher centred...; teachers responsible for learning; motivation dependent on the personality of the teacher. NEW — active learners; learners are assessed on an on-going basis; critical thinking, reasoning, reflection and action...; learner-centred; teacher is facilitator; teacher constantly uses groupwork and teamwork to consolidate the new approach...; learners take responsibility for their learning; pupils motivated by constant feedback and affirmation of their worth’ (Department of Education, 1997a: 6–7).

- South Africa is in a transition, characterised by transformation in every sphere of life, including the sphere of education and training. Embraced in this transformation is the significant paradigm shift in the way people think about learning and the way it is organised in education and training…. Changing to a new game would mean setting a new vision and approach for education. This approach would drift the state’s regulatory emphasis away from the amount of time spent in school, to the specification of rigorous outcomes for student achievement. It would require a shift from focusing on teacher input...to focusing on learner outcomes’ (Department of Education, 1997b: 6).

- In outcomes-based education, we must place more emphasis on formative assessment, which has often been neglected. But summative assessment is also important because this is what we need to record formally — the learner’s achievements at different levels... The main use of information from all assessment tasks should be formative and developmental to help the learner and the teacher, and the second use of some of the information, when appropriate, should be summative’ (Pahad, 1997: 46).

To what extent were South African teachers prepared to face the imposition of this ‘paradigm shift’ upon them with almost no say at all in the key decisions (the adoption of an OBE approach and the introduction of learning areas) about the new curriculum and very little support, directly or indirectly through new learning materials? A small study of assessment by primary teachers in the Cape Town area was undertaken to elicit an understanding of what was involved. The study included seven Grade 4 teachers of English reading (all women) at five schools, previously ‘white’ and ‘black’. As teachers in the Western Cape province are, on the whole, better qualified than those in other provinces and as reading is an activity which is regularly evaluated by teachers at Grade 4 level, it was assumed that, if anything, these teachers would be better prepared than others to face the changes envisaged. The stated purpose of the study was to observe whether teachers who were accustomed to using continuous assessment summatively were able to use more formative means of assessment. Its results, however, provide a more general insight into the difficulties which are likely to be encountered in the implementation of Curriculum 2005.

Continuous assessment was officially introduced into South African schools as policy by the provincial education departments in 1995. It was described in one circular as ‘an approach to assessing a range of learning processes and products through which teachers, learners and parents gain ongoing feedback on a learner’s progress’ (Western Cape Education Department, 1996: 3). More simply, it is the continuous updating of assessments of performance and is in contrast to terminal assessment, which is assessment at the
end of a programme of learning. Instead of being assessed only once, with continuous assessment there are frequent pauses for learners to be assessed during the course of the programme. The first description contains elements of the formative use of assessment within it. Formative assessment refers to the use to which continuous assessment is put, namely to inform educators and learners about a learner’s progress in order to improve learning. Continuous assessment may, obviously also be used for summative purposes, to report the achievements of a learner to others, rather than to inform the learning process (Siebörger and Macintosh, 1998: 24–25). The ‘paradigm shift?’ intended by the designers of Curriculum 2005, in this case, is the move from using continuous assessment for summative purposes, such as establishing what progress a reader has made in order to be able to report it at the end of the term, to using it formatively to aid pupils in their learning.

1. The assessment of reading in Grade 4

Teachers in the study were identified as teachers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. They taught at schools A, B, C, D, and E. Schools A, C and D were previously ‘white’, schools and Schools B and E were previously ‘African’, schools, chosen because they appeared to reflect two extremes of schooling. Teacher 1 taught at School D. The school accommodated all races, though whites were still the majority. Her class was comprised of thirty learners — all English speaking and she used English as the medium of instruction. Teacher 2 taught at School C. She had taught for the past two years. The majority of her class of forty-four learners was Xhosa speaking; a minority spoke English and Afrikaans. She used English as the medium of instruction. Teacher 3 taught at School E. She had fourteen years teaching experience. Her class consisted of forty-two learners — all Xhosa speaking. The teacher expressed this as a serious problem, having to teach English reading to learners who were only exposed to the language while at school. Although English was the medium of instruction, the teacher always found herself in a situation where she had to translate into Xhosa. Teacher 6 taught at School A. She had been teaching for the last twenty-four years. Her class was comprised of twenty-five learners all of whom were English speaking and the medium of instruction was English. Teacher 7 taught at School C and had teaching experience of six years. Black pupils were now the majority in her class of forty-four learners. The majority were Xhosa speaking, with English and Afrikaans minorities.

The main data used in the study were derived from an analysis of video recordings of a one-hour reading lesson conducted by each of the teachers, supplemented by pre- and post-lesson interviews and questionnaires. A video observation schedule was constructed using the format and adapting certain items from a Formative Observation Instrument designed and used by the Florida Beginning Teacher Program, 1982: 241–246). For purposes of the study, use was made of those items that indicated teacher assessment practices and feedback, supplemented with appropriate additional items. The schedule designed used four categories, each with a range of components: comprehension and conceptual understanding; reading strategies; conventions of print; and interpretation skills. Using it, it was possible to identify moments when the teacher assessed appropriately and when she offered appropriate feedback. It also enabled the identification of instances where the teacher missed the opportunity to assess or used an inappropriate strategy to assess.

For data description and analysis the method of constant comparison used by Gipps et al. (1996: 170)) to establish models of teacher assessment among primary school teachers in England was adapted. The constant comparison method was used to locate patterns and common formative assessment practices among the teachers. First, the
video observation schedule was used as an analytical tool to identify instances in which the teacher assessed and provided feedback to the learners formatively or where the teacher missed doing so. A second analytical tool developed was one that was based on Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). The concept of the ZPD used as an analytical tool allowed one to determine whether the teacher’s assessment focused on the areas of learning which were still developing, whether the assessment allowed for interaction between the assessor (teacher) and assessed (learner) such that the learner’s mental processes and strategies of learning were identified and enhanced, and whether, while assessing, the teacher had focused attention on analysing the learners’ incorrect responses with a view to understanding how the child was thinking and offering feedback to assist the learner to make correct responses (mediation). Three categories (interaction between the assessor and the assessed; focusing assessment on the developing areas of the learner; and analysis of the learners’ incorrect responses) were constructed to assist the analysis. To complete the ZPD schedule, a ‘quote sort’ was used. According to (Gipps et al., 1996: 170), a quote sort involves the researcher writing what he/she wants to find or measure in form of a quotation. The researcher then uses the participants’ words and actions to determine whether they depict what is reflected in the quotation. Data collected from the video observation schedule and examples from the transcripts were used to decide for each teacher whether each quote was: 1. Very much like her; 2. Quite like her; 3. Not really like her; 4. Not at all like her. The final phase of data analysis was an overall comparison of what the seven teachers did and said in order to trace emerging patterns of teachers’ understandings and commonly used assessment procedures. It also attempted a rough picture of the extent to which the teachers had used assessment formatively in the observed lessons. The categories on the video observation schedule were used to class the emerging patterns and the ZPD schedule was used to measure the extent to which the teachers assessed formatively.

Four categories were used in the analysis of the video observation schedule: (1) comprehension and conceptual understanding; (2) reading strategies; (3) conventions of print (for example, punctuation, tenses) and (4) interpretation skills. The results revealed the following. In comprehension and conceptual skills, five teachers (Teachers 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6) assessed learners’ comprehension by asking closed questions. Four teachers (Teachers 3, 4, 5 and 7) assessed comprehension by asking open-ended questions. Two teachers (Teachers 4 and 5) assessed by extracting words from the text and asking the learners to read them and give their meaning. Only one teacher (Teacher 1) assessed comprehension by asking the learners to dramatise what they were reading, and only one teacher (Teacher 2) assessed by telling the learners to ask questions about the text. Finally, one teacher (Teacher 6) assessed comprehension by asking the learners to re-arrange in correct order, muddled sentences extracted from the text. None of the seven teachers assessed comprehension through asking the learners to apply what they were reading to other contexts. Teachers also missed using opportunities to assess sufficiently. Five teachers (Teachers 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6) missed opportunities by only providing praise for the correct responses, two teachers (Teachers 2 and 7) by merely reporting achievement, one teacher (Teacher 3) by supplying the correct answers alone and one teacher (Teacher 6) by asking other learners to decide right/wrong answer without any further comment.

In relation to the reading strategies employed, only two teachers (Teachers 2 and 5) assessed learners’ prediction strategies by asking learners to predict what was going to happen next in the text. One teacher (Teacher 7) assessed learners’ ability to deal with unfamiliar words by giving the learners clues to try and guess the unfamiliar words. None of the seven teachers used any of the following as strategies to assess the learners’ ability to deal with unfamiliar words and to predict respectively: asking the learners to read the whole sentence and returning to guess the unfamiliar word; asking learners to use illustrations to guess unfamiliar words; asking learners to use phonic knowledge to sound the unfamiliar words or asking other learners to predict. With conventions of print it was found that three teachers (Teachers 1, 5 and 7) assessed conventions of print by noting the lear-
ners’ errors and giving clues to learners to self-correct. Two teachers (Teachers 5 and 7) asked analytical questions to assess learners’ understandings of certain conventions of print. Two teachers (Teachers 6 and 7) called other learners to try to assist in achieving the missing skill and one teacher (Teacher 7) called on learners to give information regarding their errors. Four teachers (Teachers 1, 2, 3 and 6) sufficiently assessed learners’ conventions of print by merely supplying correct answers when learners miscued. In the fourth category, two teachers (Teachers 2 and 4) assessed learners’ interpretation skills by pushing the learners to give reasons for their answers, two teachers (Teachers 4 and 7) by urging the learners to think further about the answers they gave and one teacher (Teacher 4) by asking the learners to explain the meaning of certain events in the text. On the other hand, three teachers (Teachers 2, 3, and 6) missed the opportunity to assess learners’ interpretation skills by failing to urge learners to explain or give reasons for their answers.

Vygotsky’s theoretical construct of the ZPD was next used to attempt to identify the extent to which teachers used assessment formatively. Here the teachers were rated (very much like her/quite like her/not really like her/not at all like her) according to the three criteria: the interaction between the assessor and the assessed; the teacher’s focus on skills which the learner was in the process of developing and the teacher’s analysis of the learner’s incorrect responses. On the first criterion, none of the teachers were rated ‘very much like her’, though Teachers 1, 2, 4 and 7 did interact with their pupils on occasion, but not consistently. Teachers 3 and 5 did so in one or two instances and Teacher 6 did not work with her learners on the given assessment tasks at all. Teacher 1 was the only teacher who could with certainty be said to be focusing on skills which the learner was in the process of developing. Teachers 2, 4 and 7 did engage learners in challenging tasks to assess their levels of understanding on occasion, but also gave unchallenging tasks. Teachers 5 and 6 rarely engaged learners in challenging activities. Thirdly, there were no teachers who consistently assessed learners’ incorrect responses with a view to giving them an opportunity to self-correct. Teachers 1, 2, 4 and 7 did do so in a number of instances but also supplied the correct information without giving learners a chance to try to self-correct. Teachers 5 and 6 rarely analysed learners’ incorrect responses and Teacher 6 did not probe incorrect responses, supplying only the correct response.

On the strength of this analysis it was possible to classify the teachers into three groups, viz. frequent formative assessors, occasional formative assessors and infrequent formative assessors and it was possible to discern the emerging assessment strategies used by the teachers.

Only one teacher, Teacher 1, was identified as a frequent formative assessor. She occasionally used appropriate assessment strategies but on other occasions used inappropriate assessment strategies to assess the various reading skills. At some times the teacher used assessment strategies that enabled her to assess the skills sufficiently, but sometimes she employed assessment strategies that only partially assessed the learners’ reading skills. According to the analysis of the video observation schedule and the ZPD categories while, on the one hand, Teacher 1 did not always use appropriate assessment strategies to assess the learners’ reading (according to the video observation schedule), on the other, she did use her assessment as a means of providing feedback to the learners in a way that aided their learning (according to the ZPD categories). A comparison of her responses to the questionnaire completed after the lesson and the results of the above analysis showed agreement between what she said and what she did. Teacher 1’s understanding of formative assessment as a ‘shared’ activity when she engaged co-operatively and interactively with learners on the given assessment tasks was reflected on both the video observation schedule and the ZPD schedule. Three teachers (Teachers 2, 4 and 7) were classified as occasional formative assessors. These teachers, like the frequent formative assessor, at times used appropriate assessment strategies and at other times used inappropriate strategies to assess the learners’ comprehension skills, reading strategies, conventions of print and interpretation skills. They occasionally employed assessment strategies which adequately assessed the learners’ reading skills, but at times employed assessment strategies which
only partially assessed the learners' ability to read. The video observation schedule and the ZPD categories reflected that Teachers 2, 4 and 7 albeit occasionally and albeit unconsciously used assessment formatively. They occasionally used classroom assessment as a means of supporting and increasing children's thinking and learning respectively. The questionnaire revealed a fairly good understanding of formative assessment as far as Teacher 4 was concerned and a conceptual misunderstanding of formative assessment as far as teachers 2 and 7 were concerned. The remaining teachers 3, 5 and 6, were classified as infrequent formative assessors. At times they used appropriate assessment strategies and at times inappropriate ones when assessing comprehension, reading strategies, conventions of print and interpretation skills of learners in reading. In this regard, Teachers 3, 5 and 6 were similar to Teachers 1, 2, 4, and 7. The key difference lay in the number and frequency of the appropriate and inappropriate assessment strategies used by each teacher. Based on the analysis of the ZPD schedule with examples from the video observation schedule, Teachers 3, 5 and 6 did not use assessment as a means of negotiating meaning and understanding with the learners. Neither dialogue nor interrogation were evident in the lessons. The teachers simply directed and told learners what was supposed to be done in order to complete the assessment tasks. The same may be said about learners' incorrect responses. The teachers did not use the learners' incorrect responses as a means of mediating understanding. Since the three teachers' assessment practices did not explore the learners' ZPD through mediation, their major focus was on assessing those reading strategies that had already developed (summative assessment). And this at the expense of those strategies which were in the process of developing (formative assessment). It was therefore concluded that teachers 3, 5 and 6 did not use classroom assessment as a means of providing feedback to the learners in a way that aided and improved the children's understanding and learning. The questionnaire revealed that Teacher 5 had a reasonable understanding of formative assessment, but the video observation schedule and the ZPD categories showed that she had not yet put this understanding into actual practice. The questionnaire revealed that Teachers 3 and 6, had no idea of what formative assessment meant, and the video observation schedule and the ZPD categories confirmed the two teacher's lack of knowledge of the concept.

Assessment strategies which were regarded as indicative of the formative use of assessment were also extracted from an analysis of the video observation schedule, as were strategies that were regarded as showing little, if any, formative use of assessment. The analysis of the ZPD schedule was used to inform the identification of the assessment strategies. Prevalence of an assessment strategy was measured by the number of teachers who utilised that strategy in their assessment practices, and a strategy was regarded as prevalent if it was used by three or more of the seven teachers.

Only two of the commonly displayed strategies used assessment formatively. The first employed was asking open-ended questions. It was used in four of the seven cases in the study. Teachers who utilised this as an assessment strategy could assess the learners' levels of thinking and understanding. The teachers could, therefore, focus their assessment on developing those areas in which the learners still needed assistance with so as to help them understand the text or to enable them think critically and give sensible responses. The other common strategy which made formative use of assessment was noting learners' errors and offering helpful hints to assist learners to self-correct. It was employed by three of the seven teachers. Through this means the teachers helped the learners to participate in or contribute to correcting their own errors rather than having the teachers as the sole suppliers of the correct responses.

On the other hand, the table revealed four common strategies which made little, if any formative use of assessment. These strategies limited the teachers' opportunity to use assessment as a means of assisting children's performance. Closed questions were used by five of the seven teachers. This strategy demanded specific answers from the learners. It limited the learners' opportunity to think deeply about the text they were reading. Likewise, it also limited the teachers' chances to interrogate the learners to assess how the learners were thinking or understanding the task, and so to increase their
understanding and learning. Secondly, teachers read the unfamiliar word for the learner. All the seven teachers used this strategy. By using this as the sole strategy of assisting learners to deal with unfamiliar words, the teachers limited their opportunities to assess what strategies the learners already had in place (self-regulation) and what strategies still had to be learnt through other-regulation. In the third place, teachers supplied the correct information in response to the learners’ incorrect responses. This was an assessment strategy used by four of the seven teachers. It limited the teachers’ opportunity to assess and enhance the learners’ ability to develop independent thinking skills. The teachers were the sole suppliers of information and there was no learning and independent thinking taking place on the part of the learner. Finally, teachers did not ask learners to explain or give reasons for their answers. This practice was displayed by three of the seven teachers. By not asking learners to explain their answers, the three teachers missed the opportunity to examine the prior knowledge of the learners and establish how the learners were thinking. The teachers missed the opportunity to expand on this knowledge and engage with the learners’ metacognitive thinking.

2. Questions posed

The study showed that formative assessment was part of the classroom practice of some teachers in South Africa (exemplified by Teachers 1, 2, 4 and 7). Though common practices were few, there were a number of assessment strategies that were used in a formative manner by the teachers in the study. It would require a finer analysis than was possible in the study to establish the extent of the common practices and how teachers made choices about whether and when to use them. These issues lie at the heart of the transformation envisaged by the authors of Curriculum 2005. The study demonstrated that it was unlikely that change was likely to result by simply informing teachers of the need for a new style of teaching. At the very least the change to the formative use of assessment would require the identification of desirable assessment strategies and a means to instil the confidence which teachers would need to develop them in an independent way. During the course of the research it was observed that the more a teacher employed interactive and child-centred methods of teaching, the more that teacher was likely to be able to use assessment formatively. The reverse was also true.

The study poses larger questions for the transformation of the South African curriculum. One is whether it was wise to follow the route of issuing the outcomes and their apparatus before preparing teachers (and parents) for the changes in pedagogy intended to accompany their introduction. The introduction of the continuous assessment policy was the only preparation that had been given at all. Not only has there been a very widespread misconception that these changes in pedagogy are necessarily a part of a system of outcomes based education (the conflation of Curriculum 2005 and OBE in the public mind), but the generally negative reaction elicited at the first announcement of Curriculum 2005 has meant that before changes in teaching strategies will take place, the majority of teachers will need to be persuaded of the benefits of an outcomes based approach. The study revealed that there was not a strong correlation between teachers who could describe what formative assessment was and those whose practice resembled it.

The ‘paradigm shift’ has been a very dubious strategy at best for the introduction of Curriculum 2005. As the results of the study indicate, teachers do not abandon one strategy for another, nor do they consistently use strategies which they accept as the better ones. There is possibly a drift towards an increasing use of strategies regarded as more desirable. Strategies are not adopted without having confidence in their success, both for teaching and learning. Whether one accepts the definition of a ‘paradigm shift’ as popularised by Stephen Covey (1992: 29),’ ...what we might call the “Aha!” experience when someone finally “sees” the composite picture in another way’, or the more detailed (and possibly less appropriate) definition of the Department of Education, ‘from one way of looking at something to another; a move to a new mindset, a new attitude, a new way of thinking; a change to a new game with a new set of rules —
when the rules change then part of our world changes’ (Department of Education, 1997b: 6), the use of the term ‘paradigm shift’ together with lists of OLD (read: no longer acceptable) and NEW (desirable) practices is, in the light of the study, highly questionable. The changes which are required to conceptualise teaching as an interactive activity in which both the teacher and the learner participate in the teaching and learning process are not adequately described as either “Aha!” or “a new mindset”. Setting old and new practices in opposition to each other also obscures the reality that there is a gradual movement from one towards the other, which might be facilitated at times by new insights and perceptions. If Curriculum 2005 is to make the desired impact in classrooms across the country much closer attention will have to be paid to what happens in them at present and to the ways in which to facilitate meaningful changes successfully.

References


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