

The development of a school-wide progress monitoring assessment system for early literacy skills

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Thesis submitted for the degree *Doctor Philosophiae* in
Curriculum Development the Potchefstroom Campus of the
North-West University

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May 2014



Dedication

With pride and affection I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my beloved father,

Koos Venter,

for his love and measureless support from Heaven.

His words of inspiration and encouragement in pursuit of excellence, still linger on.

Acknowledgements

Undertaking this PhD has been a truly life-changing experience for me and without the invaluable support, patience and guidance that I received from many people, this study would not have been completed, at least not sanely. It is to them that I owe my deepest gratitude.

First of all, with enormous pleasure, I express my deep indebtedness to my promoter, mentor and friend, Prof. Carisma Nel. Her exceptional guidance, support, friendship, and enthusiasm were critical for my studies and it will inspire me throughout my career. She has taught me both consciously and unconsciously, and the joy and enthusiasm she has for her research was contagious and motivational for me. Her patience, flexibility, genuine caring and concern, and faith in me during the dissertation process enabled me to attend to life while also earning my PhD. She's been motivating, encouraging, and enlightening me on my PhD journey. She has never judged nor pushed when she knew I needed to juggle priorities. We've laughed together and she's always been kind when I needed to cry. When others doubted, she remained a fan and when I became too serious, her humour and light heartedness allowed me to laugh and lightened my mood. I am also thankful for the excellent example she has in her capacity as a successful woman, mother and professor. Her good advice, support and friendship have been invaluable on both an academic and a personal level. For this, I cannot thank her enough. I am forever grateful. Thank you Prof. Carisma.

I would like to say a heartfelt thank you to my Mom and Dad, Koos and Sarie. Both have instilled many admirable qualities in me and given me a good foundation with which to meet life. They've taught me about hard work and self-respect, and persistence. Mom, especially, you are a great role model of resilience, strength and character. I owe you much more than I am ever able to express. Thank you for always believing in me and encouraging me to follow my dreams and that you supported and helped me during every stage of my personal and academic life, and longed to see this achievement come true. I deeply miss my father who is not with me to share this joy.

I would like to thank all my friends and family, especially my parents-in-law, for all their help, love and encouragement. My deepest appreciation is expressed to them for their

love, understanding and inspiration. Without their blessings and encouragement, I would not have been able to finish this work.

I must acknowledge, with tremendous gratitude and deep thanks, my loving, supportive, encouraging and patient husband. Le Roux was there for me in the most difficult periods, always making them bearable. Through his love, patience, support and unwavering belief in me, I've been able to complete this journey. Le Roux has been a true and great supporter and has unconditionally loved me during my good and bad times. He had faith in me and my intellect even when I felt like digging a hole and crawling into one because I didn't have faith in myself. This past year has not been an easy ride, both academically and personally and therefore I want to truly thank you for sticking by my side, even through every excruciating step and mood change -- I could not have completed this journey without you by my side. For your constant encouragement and trust in my abilities, I am immensely thankful.

Above all, I owe it all to Almighty God for granting me the wisdom, health and strength to undertake this research task and enabling me to its completion.

Abstract

Across the country, there is growing awareness of the dividends of early reading success and the stark consequences of early reading failure. A number of assessment studies in recent years have shown that the educational achievement of learners in South African schools is unacceptably poor. The 2011 Annual National Assessment results indicate a 35% literacy rate for South African learners in Grade 3 and a 30% literacy rate for learners in the North West Province of South Africa. According to Kanjee (2008), there is a growing trend in South Africa towards the use of assessment to improve learning.

The aim of this study is to develop a school-wide progress monitoring assessment system for early literacy skills. In beginning literacy the development of this school-wide progress monitoring assessment system will be based on the premise that useful assessment of learner progress should be formative in its instructional effects and that it needs to focus teacher attention on data representing the results of their efforts. The development of a school-wide progress monitoring assessment system can help identify and strategically intervene before learners become part of the low South African literacy rate statistic.

It is generally recognized that reading is developmental and acquired over time. From the convergence of more than 30 years of scientific research, researchers now have a solid scientific understanding of the core foundational skills in beginning reading. Foundational skills are prerequisite and fundamental to later success in a content area or domain. These skills differentiate successful from less successful readers and most important are amenable to change through instruction. One example of a comprehensive assessment system designed to assess these key foundational skills of early literacy for young learners is the *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS). DIBELS measures, by design, are *indicators* of each of the Basic Early Literacy Skills.

In this study, the aim is to collaborate with subject specialists (district level), school management teams (school level), and teachers (classroom level), in order to obtain an in depth understanding of assessment practices in general, and specifically progress monitoring assessment as well as the assessment support needs of teachers and learners. The collaborative aim is to establish a school-wide progress monitoring assessment system that will not only enhance the assessment practices of teachers, but

also the system-wide decisions that need to take place so that effective instructional decisions can be made at all levels, and most importantly at the classroom level.

In this study I chose to conduct a 16 month action research project in one primary school (i.e., the Happy Valley School) in one specific district (i.e., the Cloudy District) in the North West Province. From the data it is clear that ANA dominates conversations related to assessment, especially in foundation phase. Both at district and school level there is no clear indication that the information generated from assessments is key evidence to continuous improvement in teaching and learning. The data also indicates that the government documents play a crucial role in guiding the actions of the stakeholders. The data indicates that progress monitoring relates specifically to “showing” or “proving” improved learning in language/literacy as measured by ANA. In addition to ANA, and at classroom level, teachers monitor progress fairly “randomly”; they can decide what to ‘look’ for, usually by using their summative assessment marks, when deciding whether a learner is making progress or not. It is possible, therefore, that no two teachers will look at the same foundational literacy skill when deciding whether the learner is making progress in a particular skill. There is also no guideline for teachers in terms of what to aim for in order to ensure that learners make progress in core foundational literacy skills that evidence-based research has shown to have a major effect on reading achievement. In this study, I used a metaphor to illustrate the core components of a progress monitoring assessment and support rocket system. The aim of the rocket is to ensure that **all** learners achieve “lift off” and hit the identified targets, at all grade levels, on the way to reading success. In order to ensure that the rocket is launched effectively, all stakeholders have to fulfil essential tasks or roles. The assessment and support rocket system implemented in this study was developed to provide a prevention-oriented, assessment and support decision-making system to pre-empt early reading difficulty and ensure progress step-by-step toward outcomes that result in reading achievement for all children.

Keywords: reading assessment, progress monitoring, early literacy skills, comprehensive assessment system, beginning reading, instructional decision making, literacy levels

Opsomming

Daar is oor die hele land 'n toenemende bewustheid van die voordele van vroeë leessukses, maar ook die ernstige gevolge van mislukking met vroeë leessukses. 'n Aantal assesseringstudies oor die afgelope paar jaar het aan die lig gebring dat die onderwysprestasie van leerders in Suid-Afrikaanse skole onaanvaarbaar swak is. Die Jaarlikse Nasionale Assesseringsresultate (ANA) vir 2011 toon 'n geletterdheidskoers van 35% vir Suid-Afrikaanse leerders in Graad 3 en 'n geletterdheidskoers van 30% vir leerders in die Noordwes-Provinsie van Suid-Afrika. Volgens Kanjee (2008) is daar in Suid-Afrika 'n toenemende geneigdheid na die gebruikmaking van assessering om leer te verbeter.

Die doel met hierdie studie was om 'n assesseringstelsel vir die monitering van vordering met vroeë geletterdheidsvaardighede in alle skole te ontwikkel. As uitgangspunt sou die ontwikkeling van hierdie assesseringstelsel vir die monitering van vordering in alle skole gegrond wees op die aanname dat nuttige assessering van leerders se vordering uit 'n onderrig-oogpunt vormend moet wees en dat dit onderwysers se aandag moet vestig op data wat die resultate van hul pogings verteenwoordig. Die ontwikkeling van 'n assesseringstelsel vir die monitering van vordering in alle skole behoort te kan help met identifisering en strategiese intervensie voordat leerders deel word van die swak Suid-Afrikaanse geletterdheidstatistiek.

Daar word algemeen aanvaar dat lees ontwikkelend van aard is en oor tyd aangeleer word. Uit die samevoeging van meer as 30 jaar se wetenskaplike navorsing het navorsers nou 'n deeglike wetenskaplike begrip van die kerngrondslagvaardighede wat met lees begin. Grondslagvaardighede is 'n voorvereiste en fundamenteel vir latere sukses in 'n inhoudsarea of -sfeer. Hierdie vaardighede onderskei suksesvolle van minder suksesvolle lesers, maar die belangrikste is dat hulle ontvanklik is vir verandering deur onderrig. Een voorbeeld van 'n omvattende assesseringstelsel wat ontwerp is om hierdie sleutel-grondslagvaardighede van vroeë geletterdheid vir jong leerders te assesser, is die *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills* (DIBELS). DIBELS-metings is uiteraard *aanduiders* van elkeen van die basiese vroeëgeletterdheidsvaardighede.

In hierdie studie was dit die doel om met vakspesialiste (distriksvlak), skoolbestuurspanne (skoolvlak) en onderwysers (klaskamervlak) saam te werk ten einde 'n grondige begrip

te verkry van assesseringspraktyke in die algemeen, en spesifiek assessering van vorderingsmonitering, asook die behoeftes van onderwysers en leerders aan assesseringsteun. Die samewerkende doel sou wees om 'n assesseringstelsel vir die monitering van vordering in alle skole tot stand te bring wat nie alleen die assesseringspraktyke van onderwysers kan versterk nie, maar ook die stelselwye standpunte wat ingeneem moet word sodat effektiewe onderrigbesluite op alle vlakke geneem kan word, waarvan die belangrikste op klaskamervlak.

Ek het derhalwe besluit om 'n aksienavorsingsprojek van 16 maande in een primêre skool (te wete die Happy Valley-skool) in een spesifieke distrik (naamlik die Cloudy-distrik) in die Noordwes-Provinsie te onderneem. Uit die data blyk dit dat die ANA gesprekke oor assessering oorheers, veral in die grondslagfase. Op sowel distriks- as skoolvlak is daar geen duidelike aanduiding dat die inligting gegenereer uit assesserings die sleutelbewyse bied tot deurlopende verbetering op die gebied van onderrig en leer nie. Die data dui ook aan dat die regeringsdokumente 'n kritiek belangrike rol speel in die rig van die optrede van die belanghebbendes. Voorts toon dit dat die monitering van vordering spesifiek te doen het met “die toon van” of “bewys van” verbeterde leer in taal/geletterdheid soos gemeet deur die ANA. Bykomend tot die ANA, en op klaskamervlak, moniteer onderwysers vordering redelik ‘lukraak’; hulle kan besluit waarna om ‘op te let’, gewoonlik deur gebruik te maak van hul summatieweassesseringspunte wanneer besluit word of 'n leerder vordering maak al dan nie. Dit is derhalwe moontlik dat nie twee onderwysers na dieselfde grondslag-geletterdheidsvaardigheid sal oplet wanneer besluit moet word of 'n leerder vordering maak met 'n bepaalde vaardigheid al dan nie. Daar is ook geen riglyne wat onderwysers lei sodat verseker kan word dat leerders vordering maak met kerngrondslag-geletterdheidsvaardighede wat volgens bewysgebaseerde navorsing die grootste uitwerking op leesprestasie het nie.

In die studie het ek 'n metafoor aangewend om die kernkomponente van 'n assessering- en ondersteuningstelsel vir die monitering van snelle vordering toe te lig. Die doel met die vuurpylgedagte was om te verseker dat **alle** leerders op alle graadvlakke ‘gelanseer word’ en die geïdentifiseerde teikens tref op die weg na sukses met lees. Om te verseker dat die ‘vuurpyl’ effektief gelanseer word, moet alle belanghebbendes noodsaaklike take verrig of rolle speel. Die assessering- en ondersteuningsvuurpylstelsel wat in hierdie studie geïmplementeer is, is ontwikkel om 'n voorkomingsgeoriënteerde assesserings-

en ondersteuningsbesluitnemingstelsel te bied om voorkomend op te tree ten opsigte van vroeë leesprobleme, asook om bestendige vordering na uitkomste wat uitloop op leesprestasie vir alle kinders te verseker.

Sleutelwoorde: lees assessering, assesseringstelsel vir die monitering van vordering, omvangryke assesserings stelsel, beginner lees, onderrigbesluite, vroeë geletterdheidsvaardighede

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¹ The appendices can be found on the disk that is included.