

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

6.1 Introduction

The importance of all children achieving adequate reading outcomes by the end of third grade cannot be overstated. Awareness is growing nationwide of the dividends of early reading success and the dire consequences of early reading failure. “60% of Grade 3 children will have mastered the minimum language competencies in 2014, and 75% of Grade 3 children will have mastered the minimum language competencies in 2019” is the fashionable mantra resounding from the National Department of Basic Education, with popular appeal to the business community, parents, and teachers alike. The Annual National Assessments have focused national attention, effort, and resources on reading outcomes. The dark side of these assessments is that, at best, they provide summative information identifying children only after they have not met the standards. By this time, learners are performing well below their peers, and it is too late to modify beginning reading instruction to promote the acquisition of initial reading skills.

In an era of high-stakes outcomes, the message is clear: If we are going to promise all children they will be competent and proficient readers by third grade, we need a prevention-oriented, school-wide assessment and support system designed to pre-empt early reading difficulty and progress step-by-step toward outcomes that result in established, adequate reading achievement.

The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the major findings in this action research study, to highlight the contribution of this study to assessment in the context in which the study was conducted, to indicate the limitations, make recommendations for future research, and to end with a conclusion.

6.2 Results

The investment in the prevention of reading difficulties in the early grades is based on the principle that reading in an alphabetic writing system, although complex cognitively

and linguistically, is learned and can therefore be taught directly and systematically (Kame'enui & Carnine, 1998; Wolf & Katzir-Cohen, 2001). In addition, the research seems to indicate that the prevention of reading difficulties also depends on a multilevel assessment infrastructure and system that provides usable information on the nature (i.e., type, severity, and prevalence) of problems. In beginning reading, research on reading assessment enables us to identify and monitor reading problems early in a child's reading growth and development.

The **primary research question** for this action research study was formulated as follows:

What should a comprehensive and dynamic progress monitoring assessment system for the foundation phase consist of, and how should it be structured for implementation at district, school and classroom levels?

In this study, I used a metaphor to illustrate the core components of a progress monitoring assessment and support rocket system (cf. Figure 5.3). 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 rocket functions within a school-wide literacy system (i.e., the inter-related components that support learners to learn in a school). These components include assessment for different purposes, multiple levels of instruction/support, and literacy resources including aspects such as leadership, staff and material resources, and school culture. The system is the context. An effective system of assessment and support is critical to effective implementation of DIBELS NEXT. Without an effective system of assessment and support, a large number of learners may be identified as needing strategic and/or intensive support, and resources are allocated to remediation rather than prevention.

The rocket's flame is provided by **national policy documents** such as the *National Assessment Protocol*, the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. Foundation Phase Grades R to 3, Action Plan to 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025*, and the *National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12*. At **provincial level**, visionary and creative leadership is required to ensure that policy is implemented so that goals and targets are achieved in ways that take cognisance of diverse learners' strengths and

needs within a particular province. Real change cannot occur without the strong direction and focus of leadership. To ensure that the rocket is stable before lift-off, three **stakeholders** play a crucial **scaffolding role**; the district, the school, and the teachers in the classroom. Data-based evidence should be the driving force for instructional decision making and support intervention provided by these stakeholders. The reading assessment and support rocket system's **core chambers/compartments** are focused on addressing the following core questions, What is the problem? Why is it happening? What should be done about it? Did it work?

In order to ensure that the rocket remains functional, the **compartments** are checked each term as a learner progresses through the grades. At the beginning of the term, the first step is to identify learners who may need additional support. At the end of the term, the final step is to review outcomes, which also facilitates identifying learners who need additional support for the next term. In this manner, teachers can ensure that learners who are on track to become proficient readers continue to make adequate progress, and that those learners who are not on track receive the support they need to become proficient readers. The reaching of school-wide and individual learner targets are essential to learner success. If learners are making progress and are on their way to “hitting” the targets – well done! If learners are not making progress, make changes before it is too late!

The following **secondary research questions** were formulated for this study:

District Level

- How do districts set “benchmarks” (i.e., goals or targets) for literacy within the district?
- On what evidence (i.e., data) are instructional and support decisions based?
- What assessment documentation is provided to districts by schools?
- How are assessment results submitted by schools recorded?
- What do districts currently expect from schools and teachers in terms of learners' progress monitoring?

School level

- On what evidence does the school base its assessment targets?
- What will you do differently in order to achieve your targets?
- What progress monitoring guidelines are set for the foundation phase?
- How will the collected evidence (i.e., assessment data) be used to improve learner performance?
- Does the school make use of assessment data to recommend instructional changes to specific grades/classes?
- What kind of support is given to teachers in the underperforming grades/classes?

Classroom level

- What types of assessment do you use in your foundation phase classrooms?
- How do you monitor your learners' literacy progress in your classrooms?
- What core foundational literacy skills do you assess and monitor?
- How do you record learners' assessment results?
- What do you use the assessment results for?
- Do you make instructional adjustments based on the collected assessment data?
If so, what and how are adjustments made?
- What type of support do you provide to your learners struggling with literacy skills?

The results of the study are summarised under the main themes identified as they relate to the formulated questions:

Planning assessment

At district level assessment planning revolves around ANA exemplars, pre-ANA, and ANA. The primary purpose of the planning seems to be administrative: who will put exemplar papers on a CD, and distribute it to the schools, photocopying ANA papers, drawing up mark sheets, monitoring at schools, collecting ANA papers, and training

teachers on the interpretation of the memorandum. At classroom level assessment planning seems to rely exclusively on the CAPS document. Within the CAPS document the teaching content is linked to what is required in the informal and formal assessment activities. However, there is no indication that the assessment planning also incorporates an element of instructional decision making (i.e., instructional change) or possible learner support.

Setting goals, indicators or targets

An analysis of the results indicates that the goal relevant to this study is: **Increase the number of learners in Grade 3 who by the end of the year have mastered the minimum language and numeracy competencies for Grade 3.** The specific indicator is: **Percentage of Grade 3 learners performing at the required literacy level according to the country's Annual National Assessment.** The national target has been set at 60% for 2014 and 75% for 2019. The North West Province provincial target has been set at 56% for 2014.

From the data it is clear that all targets relate to improving overall language/literacy performance. For example, at district level the target is aligned with the provincial target, namely that 56% of the learners in Grade 3 should achieve acceptable levels of competency. At school level the target can be as high as 98% of the learners achieving acceptable levels of competence. The results do not seem to indicate that any **individual targets** are set for learners on the core foundational literacy skills. There is no way of determining whether there is **growth** in the learners' core foundational skills.

Recording and reporting assessment

The data indicate that assessment results are recorded in various formats, mostly guided by Department of Basic Education documents (cf. Appendices F, G, H, I, J, P, Q). Records should be used to monitor learning and to plan ahead. Recording of learner performance is against the assessment task, and reporting is against the mark obtained in a term, semester or year. In the foundation phase, recording and reporting is done by means of national codes and descriptions.

The main purpose of reporting is to provide learners with regular feedback, inform parents/guardians on the progress of the individual learner, and give information to schools and districts or regional offices on the current level of performance of learners.

Progression (Grades R-8) of learners to the next grade should be based on recorded evidence in formal assessment tasks. Teachers are required to record learner performance in all formal assessment tasks. With regard to school-based assessment, teachers are required to include a mark awarded for each assessment task and a consolidated mark.

With regard to this theme, I expressed concern that the recording and reporting of national codes and their descriptions does not pinpoint or emphasise a learner's strengths or needs in terms of the core foundational literacy skills. A code of 7 indicates that all is well, but this may in fact not be the case. A code gives an overall assessment of language/literacy competence, but does not give an indication of the core skills requiring support and/or differentiated levels of intervention. In order to make critical promotion decisions, usually for at-risk learners, it would be helpful if teachers had more accurate, reliable and valid assessment results at their disposal which were focused on core foundational literacy skills that are indicators of later reading achievement.

Interpretation and use of assessment results (i.e., decision making)

From the data it is clear that ANA dominates conversations related to assessment, especially in the foundation phase. This is to be expected as ANA has been identified as an important strategy to improve the quality of learning outcomes in the education system (cf. section 5.3.4.5; Appendix C). The results of ANA should be seen as complimenting and further supporting the assessment programmes used by schools to continuously assess the progress of learners. ANA results are also supposed to play an important part in the school academic improvement plans (APIP).

With regard to this theme, I wondered about the effective interpretation and use of assessment results, not only ANA but also school-based assessment results. I am of the opinion that the ANA results cannot be used to analyse learner performance at an individual level – one question on identifying initial sounds is not a true reflection of what that learner is capable of doing. I don't think that is what the ANA results should be used for. The school-based assessment results (both summative and formative) should fulfil this function. However, in order to ensure that all learners and schools receive targeted intervention it would be extremely valuable if a valid and reliable assessment and intervention system could be put in place. The assessments should fulfil a formative and preventive function, and not be summative and indicate overall language/literacy performance and progress.

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. Assessment results should be used to inform all decisions, plans and programmes for improvement. Decisions and plans on what, when and how to teach must be informed by the evidence that comes out of the assessments, both school-based and ANA assessments.

Support to stakeholders

The data indicates that the government documents play a crucial role in guiding the actions of the stakeholders. They very seldom deviate from the guidelines or requirements as stipulated in the documents. For example, at district level circuit managers and subject specialists are required to target underperforming schools (e.g., ANA results) for special support and intervention. Currently, the support is targeted towards helping the schools and teachers identify skill areas needing attention, helping them plan their assessment, helping them develop assessment activities and providing resources, if possible. The focus seems to be on professional development support. The district officials also mainly fulfil a monitoring and guiding role (i.e., are schools improving?). With regard to learner support, this is limited to what the time allows. Some children will receive individual attention which usually includes additional or different activities or tasks to complete.

Progress monitoring

The data indicate that Department of Basic Education documentation, departmental officials and teachers tend to equate progress monitoring with improved performance as measured against Goal 1, its indicator, and specific provincial targets (cf. chapter 5).

ANA results are also used as a means to monitor learners, districts and provinces in terms of progress. At classroom level teachers utilise their summative marks, which have been recorded on a self-developed score sheet, to determine when an “intervention” needs to take place and how they will do it.

The data indicates that progress monitoring relates specifically to “showing” or “proving” improved learner 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 learner make progress in core foundational literacy skills that evidence-based research has shown to have a major effect on reading achievement.

6.3 Contribution of the study

The impetus for this study emerged from the lack of research on progress monitoring assessment, and the use of assessment data to inform instructional decision making and learner support within the South African assessment context. The results of this study provided insight into what drives assessment (i.e., planning, recording, monitoring, support, etc.) at district, school and classroom levels.

The major contribution of the study lies in the development and successful implementation of a progress monitoring assessment and support rocket system at a school-wide level. Assessments can be a powerful tool for guiding meaningful conversation about learner achievement, but it can also mislead the uninformed. In the coming years, as learner achievement data becomes increasingly ubiquitous, it will be important for teachers to be able to responsibly decipher and communicate what educational data indicate. Integrating multiple sources of data and leveraging that knowledge to help guide learner basic early literacy skill outcomes is an increasingly important skill for teachers. This study endeavoured to contribute to the conversation by looking at teachers' assessment practices so as to enhance assessment education for teachers. Results of this study are meant to continue the conversation surrounding appropriate data use in the educational system. Additionally, results of this study may also help to inform research-based assessment curriculum for pre-service teachers and professional development materials for inservice teachers. Data may not speak for themselves, but such resources could help strengthen teachers' voices when speaking for the data.

6.4 Limitations of the study

One of the strengths of this study can also be considered a limitation. The action research study was conducted in a functional school where the support of the school

governing body, the school management team, the Head of the Foundation Phase as well as all teachers was overwhelming. Everybody was very enthusiastic about the project and very committed. The teachers were trained on the standardised measures of DIBELS Next. They were willing to make changes in their instructional approach and to learn how to use assessment data to support their learners – a practice that required additional time and effort because it was not happening very often in the school, especially in the Foundation Phase. This scenario is unfortunately not the reality of the South African education context. Teachers are under pressure to perform, the quality of their training and content knowledge is being questioned, and they are busy implementing a new curriculum. The results of the study may, therefore, not have been as positive if the study had been implemented in a different school within the Cloudy District.

In addition, the scope of the study and the permission of the Cloudy District did not make it possible to implement the school-wide assessment and support rocket system in more than one school in the district. Therefore, it was not possible to generate assessment reports that could indicate the success of the implementation of the rocket system at district level, and the implications that such results could have for making dynamic, accurate, and effective decisions relating to basic early literacy skill decision making specifically with regard to support to schools and teachers.

The benchmark goals used and referred to in this study have been developed primarily for learners in the USA. In order to ensure that the benchmarks are also relevant for the South African context a large scale quantitative research study is needed. The identification of at risk learners in this study should therefore be interpreted bearing this in mind.

6.5 Recommendations for future research

All types of assessment guide teachers in making decisions that affect the lives and the educational well-being of learners. To avoid misunderstandings or misinterpretations that can hinder sound decision making, it is necessary to have a comprehensive understanding of assessment results. If formative assessment is to be an integral part of professional practice, there needs to be a major investment made in teachers. This investment must begin with changes in preservice training. No teacher should exit a professional training programme without the knowledge to assess learner learning.

Furthermore, beginning teachers must have opportunities to develop and practice the skills of assessing before they are responsible for a class of learners. Teacher educators have a significant role to play in ensuring that teacher education programmes equip their students with the knowledge and skills necessary to integrate teaching and assessment in classroom practice.

Concern over teachers' assessment knowledge and skills should be addressed in future research. Self-efficacy is an important variable leading to success in demonstrating capabilities (Tschannen- Moran & Hoy, 2001). Self-efficacy relates to one's perception of his or her capabilities to bring about change or actions that can lead to desired outcomes. Studies have found positive relationships between teachers' sense of efficacy and learner achievement outcomes (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). However, few studies have specifically examined teacher self-efficacy specifically related to assessment.

French and Gotch (2011) developed a teacher self-efficacy scale based on teacher assessment practices and found the correlation between teachers' assessment knowledge and self-efficacy was low but within range of other findings comparing domain-specific efficacy and achievement. Results suggested that teachers' confidence in their knowledge of assessment concepts may exceed their actual knowledge of these concepts. This discrepancy is particularly concerning in an educational environment where a confident teacher may misinterpret test or assessment results. Future research examining self-efficacy may provide more insight into how likely teachers are to actually use and feel confident using educational assessment data.

The use of DIBELS Next measures in this study point to the need for more research examining DIBELS predictive strength in early assessment and support systems to better operationalize educational decision-making for our neediest learners.

6.6 Conclusion

Assessment for educational prevention requires more than just a new test; it requires a different conceptual approach from the current seemingly exclusive focus on the Annual National Assessments. In the Foundation Phase, such an assessment system in schools at minimum must reliably measure growth on foundational reading skills on a frequent and ongoing basis, predict success or failure on criterion measures of

performance (i.e., ANA), and provide an instructional goal that, if met, will prevent reading failure and promote reading success. Such an assessment system is based on the assumption that the measures not only document whether learners are learning but whether they are learning enough pre-requisite, foundational skills in a timely manner to achieve benchmark levels on high-stakes tests.

The prevention of reading difficulties is a national imperative. If we want to prevent reading problems, we cannot wait until children fail the Annual National Assessments. The assessment and support rocket system implemented in this study was developed to provide a prevention-oriented, assessment and support decision-making system to preempt early reading difficulty and ensure progress step-by-step toward outcomes that result in reading achievement for all children. Inherent in the rocket system is the premise that failure is not an option. Providing additional instructional support sufficient for each and every learner to achieve each benchmark goal is the only acceptable option. The choice is stark. Schools can invest resources in preventing reading difficulty and failure, or schools can expend substantial resources year after year attempting to remediate reading difficulty and failure. The costs of the second option to schools, society, and our children are unacceptable.