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Comparing school based assessments with standardised national assessments in South Africa

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Abstract

This study compares school based assessments to standardised national assessments in South Africa. The purpose of this research was to understand widespread evidence of a discrepancy in South Africa between the judgements of mathematical achievement made within internal school-based assessments (SBA) and external standardised national assessments (SNA). The study considers the possibility of a mismatch between the design feature rules of SBA and SNA and explores the nature of this discrepancy at a Grade 6 level in three different school settings (suburban, township, and inner-city).

The context of the study was characterised by the aims espoused for assessment in South African national policy interpreted in terms of an activity theory-based nested conceptualization of motives, goals and operational activities. Specific interest was directed at how operations or design features at national policy document level come to function as “rules” for SNA and SBA activity systems. The study was then directed towards explanations and findings on discrepancies between advocated rules and espoused design feature rules interpreted from an analysis of artefacts in SNA and SBA. The key artefacts analysed in the study were the Annual National Assessment (ANA) designed by the Department of Basic Education and the internal SBA assessments designed by Grade 6 teachers.

The study shows that motives and goals that advocate design rules are inferred from a curriculum implementation discourse, with less emphasis on psychological needs and curriculum standards. The enacted activities are considerably varied across school settings. This is evidenced by lower levels of coverage and range and scope of questions in the township school in comparison to the suburban and inner city schools, even when the local district is a protagonist. Across activity systems, comparative analysis of SNA and SBA artefacts showed that there were critical disjunctures leading to deviations from suggested design features, with the state driven ANA and district mediation tools unable to close the gap. The study concludes with notable theoretical and policy implications for thinking about Grade 6 SNA and SBA activity systems in South Africa.