

Annual National Assessment (ANA): A SADTU perspective

Executive summary

The Annual National Assessment (ANA) is an assessment instrument introduced by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in 2011 to enable a systemic evaluation of education performance and thereby enhance learner achievement. Since its inception, ANA has been written annually and from 2012 the assessment includes all learners in Grades 1 - 6 and Grade 9. ANA targets Literacy and Numeracy because these have been found universally to be the key foundational skills for successful learning in school and beyond. However, there have been complaints that the results of ANA are not been used for the purpose it was intended for; it is argued that the results are used to assess teacher competency, and to categorise schools as performing and underperforming. Teachers also complain that ANA consumes much time, thereby hampering the smooth running of teaching and learning.

One of the biggest criticism of ANA is that in reality the assessment practices of teachers are dominated by a practice of recording and reporting of learners' scores, with limited focus on the use of assessment for addressing learning needs. ANA, thus, reinforces the traditional practice of 'teaching to the test', where educational success is measured by the achievement of scores and statistical interpretations of results.

In this paper, SADTU proposes that ANA should remain a systemic evaluation mechanism with appropriate time frames. SADTU encourages the use of ANA but cautions against unintended consequences and potential negative implications for teaching and learning; it proposes that ANA should be discontinued as an annual assessment and be administered over a period of 3 years. The motive for ANA to be administered over a three-year period is to enable systematic monitoring of educational progress at national and regional levels, and facilitating the qualitative documenting of teacher and learner performance over time. If ANA is to be administered over a period of 3 years, it can generate relevant and timely information for the improvement of the education system.

Background and context

Although assessment is often seen as a tool to measure the progress of individual learners, it also allows individuals, communities and countries to track the quality of schools and the educational system. Braun, Kanjee, Bettinger, & Kremer (2006) posits that a systemically valid test is one that induces in the education system curricular and instructional changes that foster the development of the cognitive skills that the test is designed to measure. High stakes tests like ANA can, and do, cause learners and teachers to focus their efforts on maximizing test scores which result in teachers "teaching to the test". This often results in negative consequences for the general quality of education. Braun et al (2006) noted that assessment practices and systems are systematically valid if they generate useful information that supports the continuous improvement in one or more aspect within the education system without causing unnecessary deterioration of the educational system. High stakes tests can lead to unwanted consequences such as narrowing of the curriculum and an excessive emphasis on test preparation. This high stakes test like ANA encourages rote-learning and the memorization of random facts to make scoring easy which in turn compromises

the achievement of broader educational goals. Schooling goes beyond the narrow-minded approach of testing and examination but is more about the development of the mind, knowledge construction, and critical and independent thinking. In most developing countries, assessment policies focus primarily on examinations with little or no emphasis on classroom assessment or on monitoring and evaluation of the system (Kellaghan and Greaney, 2001, cited in Braun, Kanjee, Bettinger, & Kremer 2006). The primary purpose of assessment is to inform teaching and improve learning. Assessment is about constructive learning processes and to provide useful feedback to learners, parents and teachers. As Shepard (2000) stresses, in contrast to past theories of knowledge acquisition, learning is now understood as an active process of mental construction and sense making.

In practice, ANA has become a burden to teachers due to its additional administrative demands, through meticulous scoring and record-keeping. Moreover, teachers feel that if the desired learner results through ANA are not achieved, it is due to their failures and incompetence. As emphasised by Kanjee and Sayed (2013: 463), large sums of money have been spent to obtain 'valid and reliable' information for use in improving learner levels of performance, but limited information and support are provided to teachers for how this should be attained. The lack of clear, unambiguous policy implementation guidelines and teacher support, therefore, constitute serious weaknesses in rendering ANA effective.

One of the assumptions underlying ANA is that the need to belong to high-performing schools will urge teachers to improve learning and teaching in their classes (Kanjee and Sayed, 2013: 458). However, teachers and schools do not want their schools to be classified as underperforming due to results obtained through ANA as it adds to the teaching and management challenges at schools, especially in an environment of inadequate support and lack of assessment training. To ensure the effectiveness of ANA, government should ensure that no child is left behind by directly addressing the challenge of low-performing schools. Many of these low performing schools suffer from inadequate resources and poorly trained teachers. They need assistance to be 'pulled-up', and thus become high-performing institutions.

There is a case to be made for having greater variety in the range of questions, as assessment of multiple intelligences or skills can foster learning and problem-solving techniques that have wider application. Short answer tests should be discouraged because they do not measure disciplinary mastery or deep understanding of the content knowledge. They only measure rote memorization skills and one's ability to do well on short answer tests. South Africa should develop tests that value process over final answers in the construction of ANA instruments. Assessment and learning activities should be structured around issues or questions which connect them with the subject's. Strategies that allow for students to demonstrate multiple ways of understanding and valuing their uniqueness, should be developed in the construction of ANA.

While ANA has potential value for systemic evaluation purposes, one-dimensional tools focused on outcomes alone, such as standardised testing, league tables or rankings, are increasingly been used as policy instruments often with negative consequences. The state should guard against the potential misuse of such instruments, for example, the

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), in the administration and planning of education systems. They should also avoid using the pilot study on the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) in the construction of potentially misleading comparisons between national higher education systems. Gipps (1999) identified that some countries are still using assessment to effect improvements to their educational systems. South Africa is no exception as it seeks to use ANA for tackling some of the educational challenges it faces. However, the low pass mark norms currently in place can negatively affect the economic status of a country as the quality of educational results is often compromised leading to increases in the pool of unemployable individuals, and lower employment rates.

ANA Policy recommendations

- **Discontinue administering ANA to Grade one learners:** In the South African context, most learners entering the education system in Grade One have not acquired sufficient knowledge and skills to be able to take the ANA test. It is expected that learners entering Grade One should have a solid foundation from Grade R, however it is known that many teachers teaching Grade R are not well qualified or competent enough to provide learners with the required knowledge and coping mechanism for higher grades. Even if teachers are highly qualified, the large class numbers of learners in Grade-R impedes teachers from giving learners individual attention; and due to lack of basic infrastructure and learning resources in the ECD phase many learners are disadvantaged. In this context, the implementation of ANA in Grade One takes away valuable time that can be spent on teaching and learning, and creating the basic education foundation that will reap rewards as the learner progresses to higher levels.
- **The alignment of the curriculum with ANA:** The CAPS document provides all teachers across all grades with a clear well-documented outline of the content that needs to be covered throughout the year. *“The learners will be tested on the language and numeracy skills they have learnt during the particular school year. Knowledge and skills developed in earlier years may also be assessed but the DBE provides guidelines on the scope of work to be covered in the tests” (Department of Education ANA Document).* Focusing on the scope of work to be covered in a single test is problematic as it encourages teachers to spend more time on the curriculum aspects to be covered in the test. This forces teachers to only focus on learners passing the ANA test rather than focusing on improving overall learning achievement. ANA should be aligned with the overall curriculum and not vice-versa. Learners should not be prepared to master knowledge for a single test but to master all relevant knowledge, with emphasis on critical and independent thinking.
- **Using ANA for constructive feedback to teachers, learners and parents:** *“Parents will be informed of their children’s performance by the school. The school will send out an ANA report to each parent that will give their child’s individual results and explain in which areas the learner has achieved and also the areas in which the learner will need to improve” (Department of Education ANA Document).* Assessment is about constructive feedback and not merely a

focus on the end-result. By emphasising feedback in the form of a report is to compromise the overall learning and teaching process. Assessment work is changing as the aim is no longer on results and grades only, but assessment for improving the learning and teaching process. Learners and teachers should be given back their scripts so that they can determine what went wrong and how they can improve or fix their errors. This will provide them with a clear understanding, the ability to think and gain new knowledge for themselves and for future use. It will encourage independent thinking, at the same time help reduce the high dropout rate at universities.

- **Embrace multiple intelligence testing:** The construction of ANA should incorporate a diversity of questions which test different “intelligences” to enhance learning standards and achievement for all learners, at the same time raising our country’s educational standards. Thus, learners with language abilities should be provided with opportunities to express themselves and write creatively, while those with strong numerical and artistic ability should have cognate assessment opportunities to develop. This will assist in closing the low achievement gap and South Africa being rated amongst the lowest when it comes to academic achievement.

Possible solutions

- A special redress fund can be used exclusively to target low performing schools where students’ performance lags behind other schools instead of using ANA to label schools. Many principals and their teachers see ANA as a labeling tool for their schools to be classified as falling either under quintile one or quintile two . The government can employ initiatives designed to improve learners’ performance such as recruiting and retaining quality teachers and principals in affected schools. To make it more attractive for teachers and principals to ‘up their game’, compensation (monetary or non-monetary) can be provided to such teachers and principals.
- Before and after-school tutorials can bridge the gap, providing struggling students the time and attention they need. The reality is that for many low-performing school learners, the school day is not long enough to cover all knowledge and skills areas adequately for them to achieve at high levels. Consideration needs to be given to using the expertise of many teachers and educators not in the system as well, and who are willing to contribute skills and experience through involvement in additional teaching activities after normal school hours and over weekends and holidays.

References

Braun, H, Kanjee, A, Bettinger, E and Kremer, M. (2006) Improving Education through Assessment, Innovation, and Evaluation. American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Cambridge.

Brooke, Gupton (2011) Multiple Intelligences: Implications for Classroom Use.

Gipps, C. (1999). Socio-cultural aspect of assessment in Review of Research in Education. 24:455-392.

Kanje, A and Sayed, Y. (2013) Assessment policy in post-apartheid South Africa: Challenges for improving education quality and learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, policy and practice*, Vol 20 (4): 442-469.

Shepard, L.A (2000). The role of assessment in a learning culture, *Educational Researcher* Vol. 29, Number7, pp.4-14.

DRAFT