

**In Search of Deep Change:  
A Study of the Implementation of Assessment Policy in  
South African Schools**

by

Shamrita Devi Hariparsad

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of

PhD

University of Pretoria

2004

Approved by Professor Jonathan D. Jansen  
Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**I dedicate this dissertation to**

**Nirvaan Somers**

**My Son**

**My Inspirational Change Force**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Producing this dissertation was enlightening and challenging. I wish to thank the following colleagues, family and friends who assisted me through this bumpy journey.

Professor Jonathan Jansen, not only for his intellectual and critical guidance, but his continued encouragement and support. Professor Jansen is a true Supervisor, a Mentor, a Role Model! Thank you!

Nirvaan, for being my pillar of hope, strength and support.

Anita, Les, Dinesh, Camnee, Rajiv, and Ansuri for their unwavering love and devotion towards my well-being and success.

Suresh, who in his own unique manner has supported my academic journey.

Nireen, for her understanding and kind assistance.

Farida, a sincere friend who stood by me providing intellectual, emotional and moral support.

Professor Michael Samuel, for his critical comments and professional support.

Mr Duncan Hindle, for granting me leave from my workstation thus enabling me to complete this project.

Yvonne Munro who has always been very helpful.

Most importantly to the two courageous teachers, and their respective principals and schools, who so generously gave of their time and ideas.

I am sure that I may have excluded some important people in this list. For your assistance and support during my development in this research journey, I thank you.

## SUMMARY

Why has teachers' classroom work remained relatively stable despite an enormous amount of change in educational policy? In 1998 the national Department of Education of South Africa introduced a new policy on assessment to complement its new curriculum policy introduced in 1997. With its emphasis on performance-based outcomes, the assessment policy constituted a decisive and significant break from the past assessment policy. This research focuses on the implementation of the new assessment policy by classroom teachers. The study is guided by the following three research questions:

- 1: *What are teacher understandings and beliefs with regard to assessment policy?***
- 2: *In the context of official policy, how do teachers practice assessment in their classrooms?***
- 3: *How can the continuities and the discontinuities between official policy on assessment and teachers' assessment practice be explained?***

After reviewing the literature on policy implementation, the study articulated a broader conceptual framework drawing on the construct of 'deep change'. This perspective supplements rather than supplants dominant approaches to policy implementation. The 'deep change' framework suggests a more incisive approach to understanding the relationship between policy and practice.

This study presents and tests three propositions about change, namely:

**Proposition One:** That teachers may not have a deep, sophisticated understanding of a new assessment policy even if there is evidence of strong rhetorical commitment to the policy.

**Proposition Two:** That teachers may not be able to reconcile their own assessment beliefs and capacities with the stated goals of a new assessment policy.

**Proposition Three:** That teachers may find traditional assessment practices (that is, examinations and testing) to hold greater efficacy in the classroom than the alternatives required by a new assessment policy.

A case study approach was undertaken with two Grade 8 science teachers from two different contexts, one from an under-resourced township school, and the other from a well-resourced urban school. Using evidence from questionnaires, free-writing schedules, extensive pre-lesson and post-lesson interviews, prolonged non-participant classroom observations, teacher

records and documents, and student records and examinations, the study found that the two teachers had a surface understanding of the new assessment policy; the teacher from the well-resourced, urban school was able to implement some of the new assessment methods, while the teacher from the under-resourced, township school did not implement any of the new methods of assessment required by the new assessment policy; both teachers were unable to reconcile their own assessment beliefs and capacities with the stated goals of a new assessment policy; and both teachers found the traditional assessment practices (that is, examinations and testing) to hold greater efficacy in the classroom than the alternatives required by a new assessment policy.

In other words, the study found that teachers did not have a deep understanding of the assessment policy and did not change their assessment practices deeply as required by the assessment policy. The study argues that educational policies will do little to achieve deep changes in teachers' pedagogical practices without concurrent attention to a strong theory of change. The study concludes with implications for teacher learning, professional development of teachers, theory and research.

**Key words:** assessment reform, education policy change, education policy implementation, deep change, teacher change, theory of education, theory of change.

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