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## Educators' adaptive assessment procedures in teaching English First Additional Language in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms in South Africa

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Primary school educators in South Africa often experience difficulties in applying recommended adaptive assessment methods in large multilingual classes, with these challenges being exacerbated when teaching and assessing English as First Additional Language (EFAL). In this article, we report on a study that explored Grade 6 educators' knowledge and use of adaptive assessment methods when teaching EFAL. The national *Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support* ([SIAS] Department of Basic Education [DBE], Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2014) underpins our study as a theoretical framework. We followed a qualitative research approach to examine the knowledge as well as the classroom practices of 6 purposively selected educators who taught EFAL. The study was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm and investigated educators' lived experiences integrating adaptive assessment procedures into the teaching of EFAL in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms. We relied on semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis to collect data and performed thematic analysis to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns. The findings from our study indicate that the participating educators perceived their training in inclusive education and their use of adaptive assessment methods as inadequate, especially in the context of large, under-resourced classrooms. As a result, we recommend that educators should receive the necessary support from the school-based support teams and the district-based support teams to use adaptive assessment methods when teaching EFAL.

**Keywords:** adaptations; assessment; barriers to learning; English First Additional Language; inclusive classrooms; Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS)

### Introduction

The national protocol for assessment (DBE, RSA, 2012:3) defines assessment as the collection, analysis, and interpretation of information to educators, parents, and other stakeholders in making decisions regarding learners' progress. In this regard, the national SIAS document stipulates the core purposes of assessment as that of informing instructional planning and promoting effective teaching and learning for all learners (DBE, RSA, 2014). Accordingly, educators will use assessment to determine what learners know and what they can do; and then make decisions on whether or not the learners had learned what was expected of them (Donald, Lazarus & Moola, 2014). Assessment is commonly divided into two main categories: assessment intended to aid classroom teaching and learning, and assessment programmes for public reporting, certification, selection, and system accountability (Hill & Barber, 2014). These categories are also known as formative and summative assessment.

Formative assessment implies a continuous assessment process, which is often informal by nature, follows a developmental approach and has been designed to monitor and support learning progress. This form of assessment is used to determine how much the learners already know about a subject, to diagnose problems, to motivate learners and to help them improve their learning (DBE, RSA, 2011). The focus of summative assessment, as described by the DBE, RSA (2012), is to determine whether learners have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills that they are expected to demonstrate by the end of the teaching and learning process. According to Reddy, Le Granje, Beets and Lundie (2015:117), summative assessment offers a comprehensive evaluation of learners' progress at a specific moment, such as the end of a quarter, year, or when transferring to another school.

Assessment in education aims to determine the learning and development that have taken place (DBE, RSA, 2011). When teaching English as First Additional Language (EFAL), educators are expected to adapt their assessment – taking all learners in their inclusive classrooms into consideration. In South Africa, the SIAS document promotes the adoption of a flexible assessment approach and plan that can cater to a variety of learner needs (DBE, RSA, 2014). This suggests that educators should employ diverse assessment methods while teaching EFAL to provide support and address the unique requirements of all learners in their classrooms as this will adhere to inclusivity and diversity.

Against this background, we undertook research that, among other aspects, explored the knowledge and use of adaptive assessment methods by Grade 6 educators teaching EFAL in inclusive classrooms in South Africa. The investigation formed part of a larger study that focused on educators' experiences in managing inclusive classrooms, with adaptive assessment methods forming part of such classroom management practices. By undertaking the research, we aimed to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the use of adaptive assessment procedures in teaching English in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms. According to Dreyer (2017) and Fesi and Mncube (2021), Grade 6 learners face barriers to learning because they struggle with reading and writing in English, thus we focused on this grade and more specifically on learning EFAL in an inclusive classroom. In addition, we hope that this study will inform school-based and district-based support teams about

the type of support and training interventions that educators require to enhance their knowledge and skills on how to use adaptive assessment procedures to teach EFAL in their classrooms.

#### Literature Review

##### *Teaching English as a first additional language in inclusive classrooms*

In this study, we conducted a literature review to determine how educators use the adaptive assessment procedures during their teaching of EFAL to get to know the assessment needs of all learners in their classrooms and to provide relevant support. Through the literature review we uncovered that teaching EFAL, particularly in under-resourced classrooms, continues to pose challenges for educators in South Africa. This is despite the national inclusive education policy (DBE, RSA, 2014), which mandates educators to teach and accommodate diversity in their classrooms. Stein (2017) emphasises the critical significance of selecting the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in combating biasedness and exploitation.

Inclusive education implies a commitment to educate all learners in a way that allows them to gain the maximum benefit possible in the school they attend or the classroom where they are taught. According to the policy on inclusive education, educators should aim to ensure an equitable, quality education system. In essence, inclusive education aims to create a fairer society and guarantee the right to education for every learner, irrespective of their unique characteristics or challenges (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2006). This policy acknowledges that the barriers that different groups of learners may encounter cannot be eliminated by promoting separate systems or schools but can rather be overcome through the promotion of an inclusive system that makes provision for diversity (UNESCO, 2006). This can be achieved when schools transform from so-called normal operating procedures to inclusive ones. However, this drive places the onus on ordinary schools to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners in mainstream education (Department of Education [DoE], 2001) – a task that educators on ground level may experience as challenging.

##### *Assessment in the inclusive classroom*

Lombard (2010:34) describes assessment as a “process of gathering, interpreting, recording and using information about learner responses to an educational task.” As such, assessment forms an integral part of teaching and learning (Donald et al., 2014:117). In undertaking our study, we adhered to the description of the DBE, RSA (2014:14), which states that “assessment does not only refer to assessment of scholastic achievement, but also to assessment that determines barriers to learning,

along with levels of functioning and participation, so as to determine support needs for learners who experience barriers to learning.”

Assessments are included for various purposes and at different times in the teaching and learning process. *Baseline assessment* will typically be used before learning starts and serves the purpose of determining what the learners know and what they can potentially achieve in terms of the planned learning process (Nel, Nel & Hugo, 2016). It can assist educators to identify learners’ previous learning and their knowledge of the curriculum content. However, according to the *Conceptual and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of Inclusive Education* (DoE, RSA, 2005), baseline assessment is not only used to assess learners, but also to support their learning. This implies that educators should first determine the learners’ operational level in a learning area (subject), before designing baseline assessment. For this purpose, the assessment standards of the previous grade should be used as a guideline. In line with the baseline assessment, teaching and learning support material and assistive devices may be adapted to support learners who experience barriers to learning – by means of clear, accessible, attainable tasks or activities (DoE, RSA, 2005).

Next, *diagnostic assessment* can take the form of continuous formal and informal monitoring of learners’ progress and encourages a diagnostic dimension which can identify learners’ individual strengths and needs, thereby helping educators to place learners and to provide enrichment or remediation (Donald et al., 2014). This type of assessment can further guide educators to pace learners by fast-tracking them, providing enrichment activities and supporting them when they experience barriers to learning (DoE, RSA, 2005). During diagnostic assessment, a multidisciplinary, collaborative approach is important, with colleagues who are involved with teaching the learners, and learners’ parents and other health professionals also forming part of the process. Nel et al. (2016) explain that formal assessments, such as standardised tests, may be employed or requested by these professionals to provide a holistic picture of a learner’s barriers to learning.

As was briefly mentioned earlier, *formative assessment* can be “used during a course of instruction and its purpose is to create an opportunity to use information gathered to provide diagnostic feedback to learners, helping them understand the limitation of what they have learned” (Killen, 2015:387). This form of assessment can, therefore, enable educators to provide formative feedback that can assist the learners to understand what they need to do to improve their learning (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], RSA, 2015; DoE,

2012). Educators can use the information that they obtained from formative assessments to adjust their instruction and, for example, include re-teaching or provide learners with additional opportunities for practice and achievement.

*Summative assessment* entails a final judgment of a learning programme or part of a learning programme to place learners on a level of achievement in relation to the selected outcomes (Killen, 2015). This form of assessment determines the overall achievement of learners, and it takes place at the end of a learning cycle, programme or phase – for example, at the end of the year in the form of an examination, as it is intended to provide a summation of the learners' achievements (Donald et al., 2014). Therefore, the purpose of summative assessment is to decide whether a learner has become sufficiently competent to pass through a gateway, in other words, whether the learner has reached an expected standard of competence. In such a case, learners can progress to the next grade or level, and undertake specific tasks.

Finally, *evaluative assessment* entails the collection of data on learners' achievements, using standardised tests and examinations (DBE, RSA, 2012). The data are then processed, analysed and interpreted; with the results being used for curriculum development, and the evaluation of the teaching and learning process in order to determine the suitability of the educational setting and other organisational functions for the provision of education. In other words, this type of assessment can provide a value judgment of impersonal entities and evaluate the suitability of the education system (Freeman & Lewis, 2009).

#### Theoretical Framework

The *Guidelines for Inclusive Teaching and Learning* (DBE, RSA, 2010) emphasise that all learners can learn, even if it is at a different pace and along different pathways. Therefore, in order to be fair to all learners, special arrangements (accommodations) may be necessary when it comes to assessment. Accommodations in assessment, also called curriculum adaptations (Friend & Bursuck, 2006:398–409), may include changing aspects of the presentation (e.g., format, layout, language); the way in which a test is administered (e.g., duration, number of breaks, reading aloud, using a scribe) and even the content of questions.

Landsberg, Krüger and Swart (2016:87) define the accommodation of barriers to learning as “adaptive acts or measures aimed at making the information and the question of each assessment item *equally accessible* to learners contending with the particular form and degree of barrier for which the accommodation is intended as to learners not experiencing that impairment.” Dettmer, Knackendoffel and Thurston (2013:55) summarise this view by referring to accommodations as

“changes in regular test conditions”, thereby emphasising the importance of *accessibility to the question* – not to the *answer* – for all learners. This implies that learning tasks should not necessarily be made easier, but rather more accessible – with learners still being expected to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Even though the exact meanings of adaptive methods of assessment, curriculum adaptations and accommodations can be debated, we use the concepts interchangeably for the purpose of this article, as done in many inclusive education policies of the South African DBE (2014) and DoE (2001).

The SIAS policy underpins this study as a theoretical framework on how to use adaptive methods of assessment or curriculum adaptations to support learning (DBE, RSA, 2014). Curriculum adaptation can be explained as a process of amendment and improvement of what is taught and how this is done – so that all learners are accommodated in the learning environment (Adewumi, Rembe, Shumba & Akinyemi, 2017).

The purpose of adaptive methods of assessment/curriculum is to minimise the impact of a range of intrinsic and extrinsic barriers on the assessment of learners (DBE, RSA, 2014). Adaptive methods of assessment/curriculum adaptations are intended to increase learners' access to general assessment and to provide equal access to instruction and assessment (Cortiella, 2005).

#### Research Methodology

Research designs are specific procedures involved in the research process – the methodological approach, aim of the study, data collection, data analysis, and the final stage of report writing (Creswell, 2013). We implemented a descriptive research design to identify the trends, themes, and categories in order to understand how Grade 6 educators use an assessment approach and plan that is flexible enough to accommodate a range of learner needs in their classrooms.

We followed a qualitative research approach and used in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of Grade 6 educators when assessing learners who experience barriers to learning in EFAL in inclusive classrooms. Our decision to follow a qualitative approach relates to the view of Denzin and Lincoln (2011:3) who state that “qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural settings, to make sense of, or interpret, those phenomena in terms of the meaning people attribute to them.” This approach allowed us to obtain the participants' stories, views and perceptions through interviews, thereby gaining in-depth data that assisted us in dealing with the research questions we set out to explore.

The primary research question was formulated as follows: How do Grade 6 educators use adaptive methods of assessment in teaching English as FAL in inclusive classrooms?

The following sub-questions further guided us:

- How do Grade 6 educators identify and assess learners who experience barriers to learning in English as FAL in inclusive classrooms?
- Which strategies do educators use to plan and implement individual education programmes in support of learners who experience barriers to learning in English as FAL?
- How are Grade 6 educators supported by the district assessment team when teaching and assessing English as FAL?

#### Research Sites and Participants

The research sites comprised three primary schools in the Gauteng province of South Africa. All three schools selected have been categorised by the DoE as inclusive schools or “full-service schools.” Such schools are ordinary institutions which are equipped to deal with a full range of barriers to learning that learners may experience in an inclusive education setting – and to provide the necessary support (DBE, RSA, 2010). In addition to the “ordinary” or “mainstream” learner population, inclusive schools should be accessible to most children residing in the feeding area, including those who experience barriers to learning.

Full-service schools should have effective school-based support teams (SBSTs) that meet every week to discuss the educational needs of learners who experience barriers to learning. The SBSTs should support educators with intervention strategies that, among others, are aimed at assisting struggling learners by teaching EFAL. As required by the SIAS policy, the SBSTs should work closely with the district-based support teams (DBSTs) and district assessment teams (DATs) of the national DoE, with the aim to respond to learners’ needs in a systematic way (DBE, RSA, 2014).

All three selected schools catered for learners from Grades R to 7. In School A (700 learners), the staff comprised a principal, a deputy principal, four heads of department and 28 educators as well as two guidance counsellors, one learning support educator, one resource educator and one home/school/community liaison educator. Most of the learners came from middle-class and working-class families who could afford to enrol their children at inner-city schools.

At School B (1,235 learners), the staff included a principal, two deputy principals, four heads of department, 27 educators and three learning support educators. Many of the learners came from families where the parents were unemployed and relied on pension grants and/or child support grants received from the Department

of Social Development (DSD). At School C (972 learners), the staff consisted of a principal, two deputy principals, four heads of department, 25 educators and one learning support educator. Many of the learners came from child-headed families and were orphans or vulnerable children.

In identifying the participating schools, we requested information about the inclusive schools from the DoE in the Tshwane South district office. After identifying the schools and obtaining the necessary permission to conduct research at these settings, we purposefully selected six participants – three English educators and three learning support educators. The participants were selected based on their qualifications and experience of teaching EFAL and we believed that they would be able to provide us with rich data on how educators use adaptive assessment procedures in teaching English FAL in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms.

#### Data Generation, Documentation, and Analysis

We relied on multiple methods to generate and document data. Firstly, we used semi-structured interviews, which allowed us to explore the participating educators’ perceptions and experiences of teaching learners who faced barriers to learning in EFAL in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms in South Africa. The interviews took place in the participants’ natural settings – the schools where they teach. We relied on interview protocols to ensure that we posed the same questions to all the participants; yet a flexible approach was followed in terms of the flow of the discussions and the order in which the questions were posed and explored further where needed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The interviews lasted 30 minutes per participant and follow-up sessions were arranged as part of member checking to cross-check our analysis of the data. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis purposes. We also made field notes during and directly after the interviews to capture what transpired during the interviews (Maree, 2016).

Secondly, we employed observation to naturally observe and listen to the occurrences within the research site (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). As non-participant observers we observed without participating actively in the situation (Bryman, Bell, Hirschsohn, Dos Santos, Du Toit, Masenge, Van Aardt & Wagner, 2014). More specifically, we observed and compiled field notes during the EFAL lessons presented by the participants and during break times in the school context. In this way, we were able to gain insight into the participants’ practices when teaching learners who encounter barriers to learning in EFAL.

Thirdly, we analysed official documents, focusing on stipulations and explanations of

assessment directives. We analysed the *Education White Paper 6: building an inclusive education and training system* (DoE, 2001); the *Guidelines for the implementation of full-service/inclusive schools* (DBE, RSA, 2010); the *National protocol for assessment Grades R–12* (DBE, RSA, 2012); the *Policy on screening, identification, assessment and support* (DBE, RSA, 2014); the *Revised policy on the minimum requirements for teacher education qualifications* ([MRTEQ] DHET, RSA, 2015); and the *White Paper on the rights of persons with disabilities* ([WPRPD] DSD, RSA, 2016).

Following the data generation process, we relied on the thematic data analysis method to identify and categorise themes and to report on repeated patterns in educators' views, knowledge and experience from semi-structured interviews conducted in the three selected schools (Maree, 2016). Throughout, we were guided by the principles for ethical research. We acquired permission to conduct research in the schools from the University of South Africa (ethics certificate reference number: 2013 OCT/7409346/CSLR) and from the Gauteng Department of Education. We further requested permission to interview the educators from the principals of the selected schools. The educator participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and they were provided with consent forms to agree to be interviewed and observed while teaching. Furthermore, we informed them that their participation was voluntary and that they may withdraw their participation at any given time without being prejudiced. To protect the identity of the educator participants, pseudonyms were assigned to them. They were also given the assurance that any information that they shared would be treated confidentially and stored securely on a password-protected computer, as outlined by Creswell (2016).

### Results of the Study

Based on the thematic data analysis we completed, we identified five themes related to the adaptive assessment procedures implemented by the educator participants. These themes capture data on the perceived role of an educator as assessor of learning, the assessment of learners who experience barriers to learning, strategies for individual education programmes (IEPs), curriculum-adaptive methods of assessment, and provision of support by DATs to educators.

#### Theme 1: Role of the Educator as Assessor of Learning

The participants seemingly understood the meaning of assessment in the school context and they unanimously agreed that assessment forms an integral part of the teaching and learning process in the classroom. Participants showed insight in terms

of their role in assessing learning and they seemed to be informed about what this entailed and which formats could be used when assessing learners in class.

One of the participants, for example, explained her understanding of the concept of assessment in the following way: *“assessment is used to gather information to develop a deep understanding of what learners know, understand, and can do with the knowledge gathered during the process of teaching and learning”* (Participant A). Later, in elaborating on this view, Participant A added:

*Assessment is a further step and this entails deliberately gathering information in order to ascertain whether the problem does in fact exist and, if it does, what the nature and scope of the problem is, and what steps could be taken to help the learner concerned.*

Another participant supported this view and indicated that assessment can assist educators to identify learners' weaknesses and strengths so that the educators could know where and when to support learners who faced barriers to learning in EFAL. In further confirmation, another participant said that *“assessment also refers to the systematic gathering of information about component parts of the things to be evaluated”* (Participant C). When prompted to elaborate, Participant C shared the following view: *“Therefore, assessment can be in the form of formal tasks and non-formal tasks; and it is in the form of tests, assignments, projects, classroom activities and homework.”*

In confirmation of the participants' views and understanding of their role as assessors of learning, the revised MRTEQ stipulates that educators need to understand that assessment forms an essential part of the teaching and learning process, thus, they ought to integrate this view into the teaching and learning process. In this regard, educators are expected to understand the purposes, methods and effects of assessment, and to provide helpful feedback to learners when assessing their work. Educators are furthermore responsible for designing and managing both formative and summative assessments in ways that are appropriate to the level and purpose of the learning task and that meet the requirements of accrediting bodies such as the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

#### Theme 2: Assessment of Learners who Experience Barriers to Learning

In response to a question on how educators of Grade 6 English First Additional Language identify and conduct the assessment of learners who experience barriers to learning in inclusive classrooms, the participants identified several suitable assessment techniques such as observation, interviews and informal testing as strategies they employed to obtain the necessary information about

each learner. They referred to both formal and non-formal tasks that require demonstration of knowledge and skills. One of the participants described her experience as follows:

*I make use of ordinary methods such as observation, interviewing and informal testing of the learners' learning environment. I follow up any defiant behaviour that I may detect in the learner in order to obtain concrete proof as a basis for trying to solve the learner's problems. I provide each learner with a variety of opportunities to demonstrate his/her competence in different ways and in different contexts.* (Participant A)

Another participant referred to adaptation of the curriculum as well as differentiation during classroom activities in order to assess learners according to their levels of understanding. In this regard, the participant said:

*I do curriculum adaptation; and when I [have] realised that this learner has a problem, I need to assess them differently at a lower level, for instance when I teach grammar/language structure opposites, I need to use pictures so that the learners can understand easily. Thus, I would assess learners on what they have been doing currently on the support programme, while they are still mastering the concepts.* (Participant H)

The participants' contributions reflected their view that the assessment of learners who experience barriers to learning entails a process of gathering information, monitoring progress and making educational decisions about learners. According to the participants it is important to determine the nature and severity of any barriers to learning that are identified as a result of an educator's assessment. Furthermore, the participants emphasised that identification of barriers to learning would necessarily require decision-making and planning of a support programme.

### Theme 3: Strategies Involved in Individual Education Programmes (IEPs) for Learners who Experience Barriers to Learning

The participants displayed an awareness of and insight into possible strategies that they could rely on when having to plan and implement an IEP with a learner who experiences barriers to learning. One of the participants explained some important steps in the process:

*The process is started by thorough screening and identifying of each learner's specific needs....This process can be conducted in a form of an interview, where the learner is invited by the educator and asked some questions to detect the history, background and the personal information, and from there the educator will establish the support that is needed by the learner.* (Participant C)

Another participant focused on important aspects to consider when formulating an IEP. She indicated that, in order to support learners who experience barriers to learning, IEPs need to accommodate the learners' specific experiences, their learning styles and activities that are on the learners' levels of

development. Several other participants agreed that educators needed to develop questions and activities aimed at different levels of ability and that they should provide opportunities for a variety of participation levels such as individual, pair, and small-group activities, in order to accommodate learners who experience barriers to learning. According to the participants, it is important to assess and evaluate learners based on individual objectives and progress.

The participants did, however, not regard this as an easy task, however – specifically with regard to EFAL in Grade 6 inclusive classrooms in their schools that all formed part of the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS) programme. Schools included in the GPLMS programme receive annual teaching plans, lesson plans/programmes and assessment plans from the national DBE. These plans and programmes need to be followed and implemented uniformly with all learners, irrespective of their individual inclusive education status. As a result, the participants experienced the adaptation of assessment for IEPs as a challenge. One of the participants explained that, when an educator was to assess a learner and the learner had not achieved the learning objectives, the GPLMS framework would provide prescribed measures to support the learner in achieving the learning objectives – leaving little room for unique adaptations by the educator.

In such a case, the learner will be provided with a frame of reference to understand the learning task (DoE, 2012). With regard to the teaching of EFAL, the participants explained that this is outlined in the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for the Intermediate Phase, Grades 4 to 6 (DBE, RSA, 2011). In addition, the *Strategy for teaching English across the curriculum* provides generic guidance on writing across the curriculum, for example, structuring and writing a paragraph for EFAL, Grades R to 12 (DoE, 2013:11). Even though our analysis of the SIAS policy on the development and implementation of IEPs indicated the importance of other role-players such as multi-disciplinary committees, the parent/caregiver, nurses, educational psychologists and social workers, the participants did not mention any of these. Their contributions primarily focused on the process that they would follow in developing IEPs, as well as some ways of implementing these in the context of having to adhere to restrictions implied by the GPLMS programme.

### Theme 4: Curriculum-adaptive Methods of Assessment

All but one participants confirmed that they adapted their assessment methods to minimise the possible impact of a range of intrinsic and extrinsic barriers on the assessment of the learners. They

shared the view that all educators ought to adapt the ways in which they assess the learners in their class and explained their stance by referring to possible scenarios. For instance, they said that when a learner was unable to read or write due to one or other reason such as an injury or an eyesight problem, but can respond verbally, the educator can adapt the assessment by allowing oral responses (oral exams) instead of requiring written work. These views are supported by our analysis of the relevant policy documents on adaptations of assessment format.

Participant E mentioned the following: *“Special concession is an alternative/adaptive method of assessment granted to learners who encounter barriers to learning.”*

It can be deduced that the participants demonstrated sound knowledge of curriculum-adaptive assessment methods. Regardless of their understanding of what this entails, though, less evidence was included in the data on the way in which they used general inclusive assessment strategies in practice to attend to individual learners' specific needs. Some examples were, however, mentioned by three of the participants who reported that they had differentiated and applied adaptive methods of assessment in their teaching to accommodate the needs of individual learners. For example, during baseline assessment, the participants would assess learners at the beginning of a new year to establish the nature and extent of any barriers to learning faced by learners in their class as well as the learners' academic level of performance at that stage, with the purpose of applying suitable strategies for adaptive assessment.

#### Theme 5: Support by District Assessment Teams (DATs)

In terms of the support provided by DATs to Grade 6 educators of EFAL, all the participants indicated that the DATs had been providing support to them. The DATs had reportedly supported them by facilitating workshops to assist school assessment teams (SATs) as well as educators with interventions and inclusive assessment strategies for learners who experience barriers to learning. This finding points to the importance of DATs continuously offering their support to SATs in terms of departmental assessment policies and practices. According to the participants, many educators held a rather narrow understanding of assessment, which necessitates ongoing training by DATs and attending to aspects such as curriculum differentiation as well as different assessment methods and techniques as part of inclusive education practices.

Our analysis of the relevant policy documents confirms this; yet it also indicates the importance of DATs and SATs screening, identifying and

assessing learners as early as possible upon their entrance into formal schooling, to provide effective learning support (DBE, RSA, 2014). In this regard, it is important for SATs and SBSTs to know learners well and to plan effectively in order to accommodate various learning styles and differences in learning. As indicated earlier, assessment in inclusive classrooms implies continuously assessing the needs of all learners, which includes outcomes in specific learning areas and developmental progress made by learners. Such assessment is done against the background of all learners functioning in systems, referring to all aspects of the school, the curriculum, classroom management and teaching practices.

## Discussion

### Theme 1: Role of the Educator as Assessor of Learning

We followed a qualitative research approach in conducting our research and used in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis to examine the educators' adaptive assessment procedures in teaching EFAL in the Grade 6 inclusive classrooms. Based on the MRTEQ (DHET, RSA, 2015), the study findings reveal that educators, acting as assessors of learning, recognise assessment as a vital component of the teaching and learning process. They possess the knowledge and skills to integrate assessment seamlessly within this process. Educators are expected to comprehend the objectives, techniques, and impacts of assessment, while providing constructive feedback to learners during the assessment of their work. Additionally, educators hold the responsibility of designing and managing both formative and summative assessments in alignment with the level and purpose of the learning tasks. These assessments should also meet the criteria set by accrediting bodies, such as the SAQA.

### Theme 2: Assessment of Learners who Experience Barriers to Learning

Educators' qualifications, skills and experiences are paramount in learner support, especially for learners who experience diverse barriers to learning and participation. The educators further emphasised that it was not only about qualifications; educators must also be confident as this will assist them to make the curriculum accessible through asking relevant questions, pitching their lessons at the appropriate level and becoming innovative; embracing different teaching tools like technology in making curriculum content and assessment accessible for their learners. Links (2009) suggests a few forms of alternative assessment, which can be used in EFAL in inclusive classrooms. For example, amanuensis can be used with learners whose reading and writing ability prevents them from giving a true reflection of their competence.



In such a case, the educator (or another designated person) will act as a scribe for the learner, reading questions to the learner and/or writing down the learner's spoken words (answers) verbatim. Embracing technology and software – where a learner can dictate while the program does the writing – is another way of ensuring that learners with barriers to learning are not disadvantaged.

### Theme 3: Strategies Involved in Individual Education Programmes (IEP) for Learners who Experience Barriers to Learning

The participating educators indicated that additional time was another option that could be considered for learners who experience reading or writing problems or who use a computer based on a physical disability. Additional time will allow such learners an additional 10 to 30 minutes per hour to complete a formal assessment, depending on the severity of the learning barrier. Other learners who may benefit from additional time include those who may experience unavoidable interruptions, for example, those who need to take medication or who are suffering from seizures. The use of tape-aids, video recordings, oral-to-teacher examinations, reading to the learner, computers or Dictaphones, alternative questions, enlarged text, subject credits planning aids, braille and the assistance of sign language interpreters are other alternative forms of assessment (DBE, RSA, 2014). Whichever strategy an educator decides on, any educator who wants to support learners who experience barriers to learning in EFAL should keep in mind that general inclusive assessment strategies need to be flexible. As such, the educators should be guided by the unique needs of the learners who require support.

### Theme 4: Curriculum-adaptive Methods of Assessment

#### *What is curriculum adaptation?*

Curriculum adaptation involves tailoring instruction to cater to the diverse learning needs of all learners. It entails providing various methods for processing information and showcasing acquired knowledge, aligning with each individual's optimal and efficient learning style (Kaur, 2013). Curriculum adaptation can be defined as a process of modifying and enhancing what is taught and how it is delivered, with the goal of accommodating all learners within the learning environment (Adewumi et al., 2017). Adapting assessment practices refers to modifying the ways in which educators gather information from learners in the classroom. These adaptations go beyond expanding test-taking parameters, such as adjusting time limits or employing scribes for recording purposes. Curriculum adaptations also encompass using multiple criteria to evaluate learners' work, providing structured answer frames on worksheets, allowing oral tests, incorporating

visual aids in assessments, reading the test aloud to students, assessing both processes and final products, comparing a learner's current performance to their past performance, offering diverse practice strategies, and providing choices for completing required assignments (Kaur, 2013).

Mzizi and Rambuda (2014) indicate that it is critical that educators apply curriculum adaptation of the learning environment – including seating arrangements, environmental factors such as the volume of the sound, the lighting, the teaching processes, how learners are motivated, the skills of learners and involvement of learners. They further emphasise the importance of considering the learning style and the level of the learner when compiling content. The educator's teaching material should cater for all learning styles. Concrete objects should be used together with practical activities for a longer time. The number of activities could be reduced without compromising the concepts and skills that should be focused on.

### Theme 5: Support by District Assessment Teams (DATs)

In support of educators utilising adapted assessment measures, other stakeholders should also play a role. The DBE should, for example, provide training and capacity building opportunities to help educators acquire skills in applying the SIAS policy to ensure that all learners are screened in order to identify learners at risk and develop a plan to support learners who experience barriers to learning. Closely related, continuous training or workshops at school and district level may be offered to educators on the use of adaptive assessment methods to strengthen their capacity to effectively assess and support learners in EFAL in inclusive classrooms. The DATs should also monitor the work done by SATs with the aim of supporting them with the relevant procedures on how to screen, identify, assess, and provide support to ensure that the educational needs of individual learners are met.

### Conclusion

The findings of our study indicate that Grade 6 educators have been using various methods to adapt the curriculum and to ensure the inclusion of all learners in English FAL classrooms. The participants used different strategies such as dedicated time, individual work, group work, additional assignments and adapting lessons according to the learners' levels. Despite these efforts and a fairly good understanding of what adaptive assessment procedures entail, the participants may benefit from additional guidance and support to explore a broader range of adaptive strategies when wanting to support learners who experience barriers to learning. Furthermore, attention was drawn to the importance of continued



training of educators to understand how effective adaptive assessment measures may be used to support learners who experience barriers to learning.

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### Authors' Contributions

MC conducted the participant interviews and took the lead in writing the article. MC and RT conducted the writing analysis. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

### Notes

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- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
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