ON THE POLITICS
OF PERFORMANCE IN
SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION:
AUTONOMY, ACCOUNTABILITY
AND ASSESSMENT

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Introduction

There is a small but important literature (Edwards, Nicoll & Tait, 1999; McLaren, 1998; Jansen, 2001) on the ways in which particular discourses about teaching and learning emerge within education systems as a consequence of the increasing integration of such systems under globalization. This literature holds that globalization is not simply a process of economic integration on a planetary scale in real time (Carnoy, 2000), but also a process of educational integration that is reflected in trans-national discourses about educational events such as assessment and examinations (Edwards & Usher, 1997). Third World States at the margins of globalization are not immune to this process of educational integration (Jansen, 2000). A partic-
ularly powerful measure of this process is the concept of performance, which remains a pervasive expression of South Africa’s integration into the economic, political and cultural logic of globalization.

I will begin this article by describing the ways in which the discourse of performance emerged within the South African context after the legal termination of apartheid during the early 1990s, the inauguration of the first democratic and non-racial government in April 1994 under the presidency of Nelson Mandela, and the installation of a new education system starting in late 1994. The discussion is then advanced in an analysis of a particular instance of educational reform in which the discourse and practice of performance is prominently expressed, i.e. the new national policy on whole-school evaluation. I conclude by drawing the connections among the theory, politics and epistemology of performance within the South African education system, and its implications for educational change after apartheid.

The policy context and the emergence of performance assessment

The history of struggle against apartheid was marked by an emphasis on democratic participation, on consultative processes, on an ethos of community (rather than the individual), and on the value of collective experience (ANC, 1994). The Yellow Book, regarded as the base document of the African National Congress' on education and on which all major government education policies since 1994 have been built, claims that:

We are committed to an open and publicly accountable process of policy development. Indeed the democratization of the policy process and of the education and training system as a whole lies at the heart of our policy framework. In this respect, the framework builds on processes already underway which point to the democratization of the system [...] Participatory, consensus-building policy development [is something] from which we have learned much (ANC 1994, p. 5).

It was surprising, therefore, that the first official policy documents of the new State were premised on statements of final outcomes, on expert-driven change, on a ‘top-down’ policymaking apparatus that marginalized stakeholder involvement in the planning and execution of educational change, and on individual and institutional performance (Nxesi, 2001; Jansen, 2001).

In its general curriculum vision, the State adopted an educational philosophy called outcomes-based education (OBE) that permeated all education and training policies. As I have shown elsewhere, the precise origins of OBE in South Africa is unclear (Jansen, 1999), but its central tenet is that the entire education system should be re-engineered away from an emphasis on what the teacher or curriculum ‘covers’ in a period of instructional time, towards what learners can actually do (perform or demonstrate) as a result of certain educational inputs.

The school curriculum plan, called Curriculum 2005, listed sixty-six specific