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Continuity and progression: the Achilles' heel of the National Curriculum Statement for Geography?

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As has happened in many western democracies over the past few decades, post-apartheid South Africa is undergoing educational reform resulting from, among other things, the specification of assessment standards within the school sector. The soon-to-be-replaced syllabi provided some description of what could be taught in a specific subject (the content) as well as broad intentions regarding the aims and objectives of teaching and learning. However, what these syllabi lack(ed) are subject specific assessment standards on which curriculum planning and teaching practice could be based, and from which learner progress might be monitored. The newly formulated National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for Geography in the Further Education and Training (FET) band concerned with Grades 10, 11, and 12, provides the learning outcomes for the band, the assessment standards for each grade as well as broad outlines of content to be covered. Whether these assessment standards will in fact enhance Geography teaching in each of the relevant grades and lead to improved learner achievement will depend on a number of factors. Continuity and progression are two important factors. Recent developments in the area of subject specific assessment standards are described and reflected on and an analysis of the FET Geography assessment standards and their implications for assessment are provided.

Keywords: Assessment, assessment standards, continuity, Geography, National Curriculum Statement, outcomes-based education, progression

Introduction

Globally education systems are undergoing continuing change. According to Rambuda & Fraser (2004:10), one such change is the shift from a philosophy that focuses mainly on the transmission of information to one based on a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. In South Africa this shift is evident in an outcomes-based education (OBE) curriculum introduced shortly after the country's first democratic elections. The intention of this new curriculum is to replace the traditional pedagogical style of rote learning with more learner-centred pedagogical approaches, which engender critical thought. Mason (1999:137) argues that OBE in South Africa aims at addressing the legacy of apartheid by promoting the development of skills to prepare all learners for participation in an increasingly competitive global economy. According to Wilmot (2003:313), OBE is one of a plethora of new education policies which articulate a new vision for education in South Africa. The explicit purpose of these policies is to reconstruct and transform the legacy of the past by focusing on priorities such as achieving redress, equity, quality, and democracy in education.

The curriculum change process currently taking place in South Africa will gain further momentum with the phasing in of the National Curriculum Statement for Further Education and Training Schools (General) in the year 2006. Of a total of 247 subjects offered under the current curriculum for secondary schools (Report 550) only 27 subjects (if the three language levels are taken as separate subjects) will, according to approved policy, be offered. Geography as part of the Human and Social Studies learning field will be offered as either a core or an elective subject (Department of Education, 2003a:19).

The shift to OBE in South Africa requires changes to assessment practices. In this article we wish to focus on changes in assessment policy which are presented in the National Curriculum Statement for Geography and to identify inadequacies in the policy in what we term continuity and progression. The article is divided into three parts. First we briefly discuss assessment as a key area of curriculum change. Second we discuss the curriculum development process in relation to the NCS for Geography. Third we critically discuss the constructs continuity and progression with respect to the NCS for Geography.

Assessment: a key area of curriculum change

Assessment is one of the key areas of curriculum transformation since successful implementation of the new curriculum largely hinges on it. Post-apartheid assessment policy mirrors contemporary international trends in more authentic and continuous approaches to assessment (Shepard, 2000). Current curriculum reforms also encompass a new assessment framework based on achieving learning outcomes (LOs) for a particular band and achieving assessment standards (ASs) for each grade, inviting a shift from a summative and norm-referenced approach to a formative and criterion-referenced approach (Department of Education, 2003b).

In the assessment of the learning outcomes, the assessment standards capture what learners are expected to know and what they are able to do as a result of appropriate teaching and learning in a particular grade and subject. Standards-referenced assessment frameworks differ from country to country. In the Netherlands assessment standards are set at the end of primary school, and again at the end of the compulsory high school whereas in England these key points are at entry into school and at ages 7, 11, 14, and 16 (http://www.bosnsw-k6.nsw.edu.au, 2004). In South Africa the assessment standards provide the learning and teaching foci per grade aimed at preparing the learner to be able to demonstrate his/her expected competence in terms of the learning outcomes at the end of the band. This would be Grade 9 in the case of the General Education and Training (GET) band and Grade 12 in the case of the FET band. In each grade therefore, the standards-referenced assessment refers to the process of collecting and interpreting information about the learners' progress in terms of the assessment standards as key reference points for decisions and judgements on their progress and achievement.

Although assessment guidelines in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) for the GET and in the NCS for the FET represent improvements (in scaffolding teaching and learning) on its forerunner Curriculum 2005 (C2005), a critical analysis of these documents reveals particular shortcomings in the assessment framework. In this article we suggest that one key shortcoming is related to continuity and progression. To illustrate this shortcoming, we discuss the curriculum development process after 1994 and use exemplars from the Geography NCS (Grades 10 to 12) as illustrative cases.

The curriculum development processes

In order to understand the way in which assessment standards for Geography in the South African school sector have been structured and how continuity and progression might be ensured, a careful analysis of both the Social Sciences assessment standards in the GET and the Geography assessment standards in the FET is required, since the latter process was informed by critical reflections on the former one.

From C2005 to the RNCS

The RNCS attempts to provide more structure and support to teachers than C2005. While it is an improvement on its forerunner, it still has weaknesses. One of the central aims of the RNCS is to articulate clearly the assessment standards per grade against which learners are to be

Table 1 Learning outcomes and their associated assessment standards for Grade 5, adapted from Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R–9 (Schools)

LO1: The learner is able to use enquiry skills to investigate geographical and environmental concepts and processes	LO2: The learner is able to demonstrate geographical and environmental knowledge and understanding	LO3: The learner is able to make informed decisions about social and environmental issues and problems
We know this when the learner is able to: • identify information from various sources (maps, atlases, books) • organise information under given headings • identify symbols used in different kinds of maps (include plan view, grids and map keys) • locate places using a simple grid referencing system and directions • identify important political boundaries and key human and physical features on large scale maps • use information from sources (including own observations) to answer questions about people and places, such as: 'Why is it like that?' • use geographical and environmental concepts and terms to report on enquiries in different ways (e.g. writing a paragraph, using a poster, artwork)	We know this when the learner is able to: • describe the features of the local settlement including land uses, and compare these with examples from other places (*people and places*) • describe the importance of access to resources and services for people living in settlements (*people and resources*) • describe how basic human needs were met in the past and are met at present (*people and environment*)	We know this when the learner is able to: • identify issues associated with resources and services in a particular context (*identify the issue*) • identify the factors that influence why some people have better access to resources compared to others in a particular context (*factors affecting issue*) • suggest ways to improve access to resources in a particular context (*make choices*)

Table 2 The Grade 5 knowledge focus for Geography in the Social Sciences learning area

Knowledge focus for Grade 5
The knowledge focus for achieving the Learning Outcomes in Grade 5 is reflected in: • The physical structure of South Africa: – location of physical features: mountains, highveld plateau, coastal plains, rivers and other features of the landscape, also oceans; – relationships between physical features and human activities, including ways in which human activity is changing physical landscapes. • Climatic regions of South Africa and their temperature, rainfall and vegetation characteristics, as well as links to economic activities and settlement. • Resources: – links between natural resources and economic activities (like mining and manufacturing) in South Africa, as well as the impact of these activities on settlement now and in the past; – renewable and non-renewable resources: use and abuse of natural resources in South Africa, with a focus on water and energy resources. • Population: distribution and density patterns in South Africa, as well as natural and social factors (such as forced removals) affecting them. • Health and welfare: – distribution of diseases: disease types including cholera, malaria and others such as tuberculosis and diseases related to mining; – explore why some people are more at risk than others; – ways of reducing risks associated with disease (such as contracting and spreading disease), taking precautions and preventative actions. • Mapwork: field sketches, drawing maps, using indexes, map scale, cross-referencing information on different maps.

assessed. According to the Department of Education (2003b:7) assessment standards are "criteria that collectively provide evidence of what a learner should know and demonstrate at a specific grade. They embody the knowledge, skills and values per grade required to achieve the learning outcomes". The overriding learning outcomes are seen in the same document as a statement of an intended result of learning and teaching as they describe the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that learners should acquire at the end of a band. The Geography LOs and ASs in the Social Sciences Learning Area for Grade 5 (Intermediate Phase) in the General and Education (GET) band are listed in Table 1.

Apart from the formulation of ASs per grade, another improvement of the RNCS is that teachers are provided with guidelines with respect to the context and content through which the learning outcomes can be achieved by means of the ASs. An example of the knowledge focus for Grade 5 is illustrated in Table 2.

If the assessment standards for Grade 5 are carefully analysed, it becomes evident that they do not only state the particular skill, concept or value as reflected in the policy document. In certain instances, especially those constituting the Knowledge and Understanding LO, the context and content in which the assessment standards are to be achieved are also spelt out. The fact that achievement of the ASs is a statutory requirement for learners to progress to the next grade (Department of Education, 2003a:11) gives rise to another concern. If the knowledge foci for achieving these ASs of Grade 5 are carefully studied (see Table 2), it becomes clear that a substantial part of the prescribed content for the Geography component of the Social Sciences Learning Area falls outside the statutory requirement because most of the knowledge foci do not correspond to (or are not written into) the assessment standards. Questions that arise are the following: Are teachers expected to introduce learners to knowledge foci which do not correspond to the assessment standards? Do teachers first have to design learning programmes with content (derived from the knowledge foci) which align with the assessment standards and only include the content selections which do not correspond to the assessment standards, if time allows for their inclusion in learning programmes? The difficulty of the policy formulation is that it may lead to confusion since what is required is open to interpretation. We do not wish to prolong this discussion. Suffice it to say that shortcomings in the RNCS in the Geography section of the Social Sciences Learning Area were identified by the team who wrote the NCS for Geography in an effort to improve the formulation of the latter policy. Against this background we discuss the processes involved in the writing of the NCS for Geography (Department of Education, 2003a).

The writing of the NCS for Geography[1]

The NCS writing process started at St George's Hotel, Gauteng, in the year 2002. For a year and a few months, writing groups consisting of members that met the constitutional requirements in terms of race, gender and other considerations, designed the NCS for FET Schools (General), for subjects mentioned earlier in the article. The process, guided by the Ministerial Project Committee (MPC), was an extension

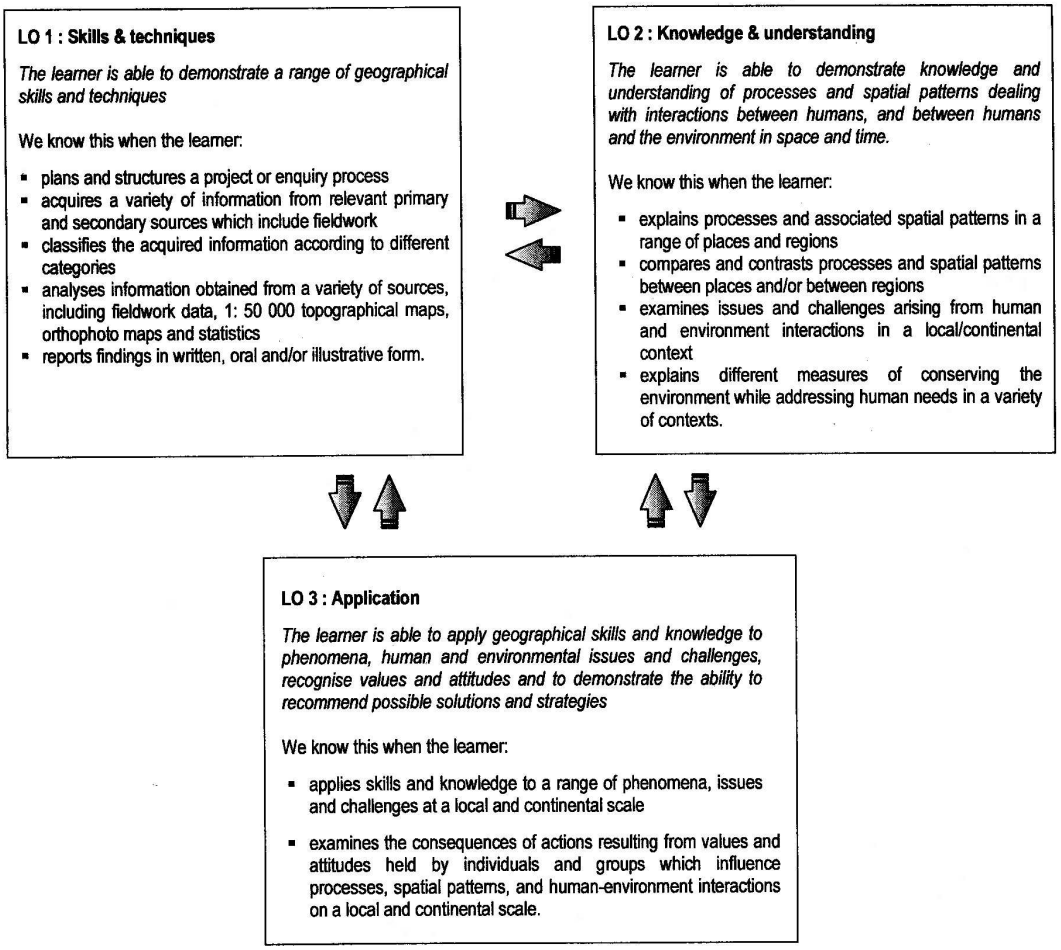

Figure 1 Learning outcomes and associated assessment standards for Grade 11, adapted from National Curriculum Statement Grades 10–12 (General)

of the RNCS writing process that had just been completed. One major shortcoming of the process was that none of the participants had sufficient opportunity to conduct thorough research in order to determine what would be the most appropriate curriculum format and structure for the South African school sector at the beginning of a new century. The possibility of incorporating insights gained from deep reflection about the merits of what was being designed, however, was minimised by predetermined frameworks and tight time-frames. In addition, those (mainly teachers) who now have to use and implement the Geography NCS curriculum with its limitations (as we shall later point out) and requirements, did not support the Geography writing group in the sense that they did not engage thoroughly with the draft statements and further opportunities provided during the field-testing process. Teachers, their organisations, academics, and professional bodies did not use the opportunity afforded them to actively participate in the process. This was evidenced by the fact that in the three field testing attempts, only nine geography teachers in their individual capacity, five professional organisations, and four persons from tertiary institutions critiqued and commented on the draft curriculum statements.

Based on lessons learned from the GET process, where not all of the knowledge foci were aligned clearly with the ASs, the decision was taken to formulate generic ASs linked to the three LOs of the FET band. No knowledge foci were prescribed. However, this raised new problems. Teachers now have the responsibility for ensuring that progression takes place across grades. It also begs the question of whether teachers have the time and in many instances the competence to fulfil this particular role in curriculum design. We shall return to these matters later in our discussion. Figure 1 illustrates a representation of the three learning outcomes and the accompanying assessment standards for Grade 11 for Geography as described in the NCS.

The FET writing groups were instructed by the National Ministry of Education to build on the foundations laid by the GET Learning Areas. One of the implications was that the FET had to build on the progression levels that had been incorporated into the assessment standards of the GET learning outcomes. This resulted in the creation of 13 'levels' of progression, i.e. from Grade R to Grade 12. However, at no stage was there any debate on what might constitute progression or even on the concept of progression within the context of the development of children's thinking and learning.

There are a number of problems related to the 13-level progression scale within the assessment standards:

- Levels are too shallow, with progression differences between two levels too close.
- Levels are aligned with a grade, creating the danger that teachers may hold on to the traditional pass/fail mindset, perceiving the assessment standards as merely a grade requirement and not as part of a progression continuum.
- There is a danger that teachers will see the assessment standards as describing skills, knowledge, concepts, and values to be continually repeated in a grade, instead of seeing them as levels within a band.
- None of the policy documents for both bands (GET and FET) deals thoroughly with issues of how the scale of 13 levels may be applied.

Table 3 Competence levels for Grade 11

FET Geography Assessment Levels: Grade 11

6-level assessment scale		**LO 1: Geographical Skills and Techniques** (*Practical competence*) The learner is able to demonstrate a range of geographical skills and techniques
		COMPETENCES The learner:
6	80 – 100% Outstanding	• demonstrates competence in all the elements of the assessment standards for this outcome, *and in addition*: • manages his/her own learning • works in a logical and focused manner • makes some abstract connections • makes clear and logical interpretations of evidence • substantiates some judgments using evidence
5	60 – 79% Meritorious	• plans a geographical research project of limited extent in a familiar context • integrates information from a variety of sources • compares and contrasts information from a variety of sources • analyses the information acquired in order to answer the initial question • substantiates findings in written, oral or illustrative form
4	50 – 59% Satisfactory	• plans and structures a project or enquiry process • acquires consistently a variety of information from relevant primary and secondary sources which includes fieldwork • classifies the information acquired according to different categories • analyses information obtained from a variety of sources, including fieldwork data, 1: 50 000 topographical maps, orthophoto maps and statistics • reports findings in written, oral and/or illustrative form
3	40 – 49% Adequate	• plans and structures a project or enquiry process • acquires information from relevant primary and secondary sources which includes fieldwork • classifies the information acquired according to different categories • analyses information obtained from a variety of sources, including fieldwork data, 1: 50 000 topographical maps, orthophoto maps and statistics • reports findings in written, oral and/or illustrative form
2	30 – 39% Partial	• identifies issues and formulates questions for an investigation, but is unable to plan and structure a project • acquires information from fieldwork and a variety of other sources • organises information graphically, pictorially and diagrammatically • analyses information obtained from sources • reports findings in oral and/or written form, at times needing support
1	0 – 29% Inadequate	• identifies issues but is unable to formulate questions for an investigation • acquires information from sources provided by the teacher • organises information in written and graphic form • analyses information from a single source with support • is unable to report findings logically in oral and/or written form with support
		LO 2: Knowledge and Understanding (*Foundational competence*)
6-level assessment scale		The learner is able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of processes and spatial patterns dealing with interactions between humans, and between humans and the environment in space and time.
		COMPETENCES The learner:
6	80 – 100% Outstanding	• demonstrates competence in all the elements of the assessment standards for this outcome, *and in addition*: • shows initiative in managing their own learning • demonstrates solid understanding of many geographical concepts, principles and theories • makes abstract connections, manipulates and uses knowledge of the relationships between physical and human environments
5	60 – 79% Meritorious	• explains the influence of processes and associated spatial patterns in a range of places and regions • accounts for the similarities and differences in processes and spatial patterns between places and between regions • explores possible responses to issues and challenges arising from human and environment interactions in a local/continental context • examines different approaches used to sustain the environment that take into account different knowledge systems in a variety of contexts
4	50 – 59% Satisfactory	• is able in a variety of situations to explain processes and associated spatial patterns in a range of places and regions • compares and contrasts processes and spatial patterns between places and/or between regions • examines issues and challenges arising from human and environment interactions in a local/continental context • explains different measures of conserving the environment while addressing human needs in a variety of contexts
3	40 – 49% Adequate	• explains processes and associated spatial patterns in a range of places and regions • compares and contrasts processes and spatial patterns between places and/or between regions • examines issues and challenges arising from human and environment interactions in a local/continental context • explains different measures of conserving the environment while addressing human needs in a variety of contexts.
2	30 – 39% Partial	• describes processes and associated spatial patterns in places and regions • identifies similarities and differences in processes and spatial patterns between places or between regions, but is not able to compare and contrast these processes and patterns • describes the links between environmental problems and social injustices in a local/continental context • describes the interdependence between humans and the environment at different scales
1	0 – 29% Inadequate	• only describes processes in places and regions • with support, recognises similarities and differences in processes between places or between regions • identifies the links between environmental problems and social injustices in a local context • insufficiently describes the interdependence between humans and the environment at different scales

Table 3 (continued)

6-level assessment scale		**LO 3: Application** (*Reflexive competence*) The learner is able to apply geographical skills and knowledge to phenomena, human and environmental issues and challenges, recognise values and attitudes and to demonstrate the ability to recommend possible solutions and strategies.
		COMPETENCES The learner:
6	80 – 100% Outstanding	• demonstrates competence in all the elements of the assessment standards for this outcome, *and in addition*: • predicts, anticipates and provides strategies to address issues and challenges from a local to continental scale • demonstrates the ability to use scientific or technological knowledge and skills to manage and solve standard problems
5	60 – 79% Meritorious	• applies skills and knowledge to a range of phenomena, issues and challenges at a local and continental scale • examines values and attitudes held by individuals and groups associated with processes, spatial patterns, and human-environment interactions on a local and continental scale
4	50 – 59% Satisfactory	• applies skills and knowledge consistently to a range of phenomena, issues and challenges at a local and continental scale • examines the consequences of actions resulting from values and attitudes held by individuals and groups which influence processes, spatial patterns, and human-environment interactions on a local and continental scale
3	40 – 49% Adequate	• applies skills and knowledge to a range of phenomena, issues and challenges at a local and continental scale • examines the consequences of actions resulting from values and attitudes held by individuals and groups which influence processes, spatial patterns, and human-environment interactions on a local and continental scale
2	30 – 39% Partial	• applies skills and knowledge to a range of phenomena, issues and challenges at a local and global scale • identifies different values and attitudes held by individuals and groups associated with processes, spatial patterns, and human-environment interactions on a local and global scale, however still needing limited support to do this
1	0 – 29% Inadequate	• applies some skills and limited knowledge to a range of phenomena and issues at a local scale • with support identifies values and attitudes held by individuals and groups associated with processes, spatial patterns, and human-environment interactions on a local scale

In terms of the FET specifically, subject competences have been developed to describe the grade expectations of what learners must know and be able to achieve to assist teachers with benchmarking the achievement of the LOs. Six levels of competence have been described for each subject for each grade in the FET. The intention is that these descriptions will assist and support teachers and learners in the assessment process by indicating clearly the achievement of the learner in terms of the learning outcomes. The levels of competence, which are intended to indicate progression in a grade, are based on the scale of achievement for the NCS Grades 10–12 (Department of Education, 2003b:26). Table 3 illustrates the six levels of competence in terms of the three Geography learning outcomes for Grade 11.

An analysis of these competency statements for one grade reveals that the Grade 11 Geography teacher is required to work with 18 levels in total as s/he assesses the progression of the learners in terms of the three LOs. Taking into account the problems indicated above, it is evident that determining the learners' progression in a grade, let alone across the band, will become a complex process, especially if the following are taken into account:

- Most Geography teachers in South African schools were trained in the pre-OBE era in which summative assessment and rote learning were prevalent. The majority of Geography teachers' preservice training was done in resource-poor institutions. Therefore one could assume that many teachers currently teaching in high schools do not have either the subject or pedagogical knowledge to required to teach/mediate geographical concepts and processes. This situation is further exacerbated by a dependence on textbooks that cater mainly for the requirements of the current senior certificate examination.
- Many academics at higher education institutions in South Africa are sceptical about the merits of outcomes-based education (Jansen, 1998; Le Grange, 2000). The pre-service education programmes offered by higher education institutions therefore may not involve a thorough process of mediating the principles of OBE teaching, but may merely serve to introduce the new curriculum to students.
- The large class sizes in most South African schools and teachers' reticence to appropriate new teaching methodologies has proved to be a major stumbling block in implementing outcomes-based teaching, learning, and assessment.
- Many teachers are unclear about what is expected of them in the OBE framework and sceptical about a shift from traditional methods of assessment, such as a move from exclusive reliance on 'pen and paper' tests and examinations, to more authentic assessment, which includes portfolios, projects, practical assignments (Le Grange & Reddy, 1998).
- The senior certificate end-of-year summative assessment has dominated the FET band up until now. Ways may have to be found of shifting to approaches that are formative, with the aim of supporting all learners in attaining the required standards. This would include valid feedback and feedforward, multiple opportunities to do tasks as well as the use of a range of assessment techniques to allow all learners the opportunity to demonstrate achieved competences. This means that thorough training programmes and support documentation which mediate the divide between policy documents and teaching realities will be needed.
- The quality of Geography teaching and learning in the FET band will depend on teachers' ability to support learners to progress in terms of core geographical concepts and skills across the band. If the only signifier of continuity and progression is the subject competence descriptions, then in our view the implementation of the NCS for Geography faces major problems.

Continuity and progression in the NCS for Geography

According to Bennets (2002:83) continuity and progression are widely recognised as desirable qualities within the curriculum. The principles of continuity and progression within education are important to curriculum design, planning, teaching and assessment, for, as learners mature intellectually, the geography curriculum they study should take account of their development. Owen and Ryan (2001:51) note that continuity and progression are often talked about in the same breath, but they are different features of planning: the presence of the one does not necessarily indicate the presence of the other.

The terms 'continuity' and 'progression' are complementary, but distinguishing between the two is key to the arguments we present in this article.

Continuity

Bennetts (2002:83) notes that the idea of continuity "suggests the persistence of significant features of geographical education as [learners] move through the school system". Owen and Ryan (2001:51) list five features in terms of which continuity in long-term planning may be

evident: content, types of learning activity, common assumptions about the nature of the subject, geographical skills, and use of certain resources. These features are evident in Geography education in the "new" South African GET and FET outcomes-based curricula in the following ways:

- Content: As part of addressing the Knowledge and Understanding learning outcome, concepts of people and place, people and resources and people and the environment with their appropriate content foci run through each of the 10 years of the GET band. In the FET the same concepts are integrated as part of processes and spatial patterns as well as human-environment interactions. However, one fundamental difference between the two bands is the fact that in the GET reference is made to certain content selections as discussed earlier. In the FET, initially as part of the brief to writing groups, content prescriptions were kept out of the assessment standards, so the emphasis fell instead on the conceptual development expected of learners in different contexts in a particular grade. Other countries in the world using an OBE system, such as the USA, England and Canada, ensure continuity by writing specific content knowledge into their assessment standards (Butt, 2002:70). This is an area where Geography teaching and assessment in South Africa may experience problems as the onus for content selection will fall on the teacher and more likely surrogates such as textbook authors. Where standards are designed to ensure uniformity and continuity in the education system, individual interpretations and curriculum development initiatives based on these standards could jeopardise parity in the quality of Geography teaching, learning and assessment.
- Types of learning activity: In both the GET and FET activities, such as fieldwork, the integration of ICT and authentic learning is promoted. Apart from working individually, learners throughout the two bands are also encouraged to engage in group contexts for achievement of different learning and assessment activities.
- Common assumptions about the nature of the subject: From Grade R to Grade 12, the following Geography competences run through the whole schooling system:
  - Inquiry skills to investigate key concepts and processes in Geography;
  - Knowledge and understanding of interrelationships between people, resources and the environment; and
  - Critical analysis of issues on a local, national and global scale.

  These competences which constitute the learning outcomes for Geography ensure a broad measure of continuity in the subject.
- Geographical skills: Working with sources of different kinds is promoted in the construction of geographical knowledge. Across the two bands inquiry skills like asking questions, collecting, organising, analysing, synthesising and communicating information are encouraged at the appropriate grade level.
- Use of certain resources: Maps (including topographical and orthophoto maps) are the basic tools of the geography learner as they collect, organise and analyse spatial information. Although the use of ICT is promoted in the GET, it becomes compulsory in the FET as the use of, for example, Geographical Information Systems (GIS) is part of the LO 1 and its associated assessment standards.

Progression

According to Bennetts (2002:83), "the idea of progression, on the other hand, focuses on how pupils' learning advances. It can be applied both to the design of a curriculum, in particular to how the structure of the content and sequence of learning activities are intended to facilitate advances in learning, and to the gradual gains in knowledge, understanding, skills and competencies which pupils actually achieve". Butt (2002:69), however, argues that if the curriculum is to have a strong sense of continuity, it should ensure that particular aspects of a learner's prior learning in Geography are built upon in the next course of study. In addition, he warns that without progression, there may be no advances in learning as learners may merely continue to learn the same things in different grades.

If the Geography NCS for FET Schools is analysed in terms of the definition and assumptions about progression, the following critical questions come to the fore:

- Can progression in the development of learners' thinking be mapped across the band in terms of each of the assessment standards which constitute a learning outcome? In most cases learners' cognitive development does not develop in a linear way. This means that assessment using the current assessment standards will not be easy. Although it may be possible to assess competence in a particular skill in the context of progressive development, assessing development in knowledge and understanding, for instance of the relationship between humans and the environment, is a much more complex matter.
- Will the arrangement of assessment standards per grade not lead to a "ticking-off mentality" by teachers as they teach the subject? Evidence gained from our personal experiences in working with Geography teachers indicates that this possibility could arise. The differences between the six competence levels within and across grades are too narrow to show clear-cut progression (see Table 3). Teachers could focus mainly on whether a learner attained the expected AS and not on determining how well he/she achieved them (how learning has advanced). Should this happen, it could lead to a repetition of activities at the same level throughout the year without ensuring progression to the next level or going back to a previous level in order to support those who are not yet on the required level. What might be needed is for teachers to use the assessments of individual learners' learning to match new tasks to their capabilities in order to enable them to make progress.

  The NCS attempts to define what Geography learners in Grades 10 to 12 (FET band) will learn. This Geography "studies physical and human processes and spatial patterns on Earth in an integrated way over space and time. It examines the spatial distribution of people and their activities, physical and human-made features, ecosystems and interactions between humans, and between humans and the environment in a dynamic context" (Department of Education, 2003a:9). Through the development and use of enquiry and geographical skills and techniques, learners are provided with the necessary support to develop knowledge and understanding which make it possible to investigate processes and spatial patterns as well as human-environment interactions. True to the nature of Geography, opportunities should be offered to learners to apply their newly acquired competences by making informed judgements about changing environments and contexts, thinking critically and creatively about what it means to live sustainably and recognising how values, attitudes as well as indigenous knowledge systems influence the issues and challenges in a rapidly changing world. These three aspects mentioned above form the key learning strands or outcomes of Geography in which progression should be embedded.
- What constitutes progression in Geography? Can we learn from the English education system that experienced similar challenges during the transition to and implementation of their National Curriculum? According to Butt (2002:70), quoting a report from His Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), progression in geographical education should gradually:
  - Extend the geographical content to include different places, processes, patterns, activities, etc. (e.g. increasing the breadth of study);
  - Increase the complexity, demands and abstraction within the geographical information provided in line with the learners' growing intellectual maturity (e.g. increasing the depth of study);

- Introduce geographical studies of larger areas, moving from the local to the global (e.g. increasing the spatial scale of study);
- Introduce a wider range of geographical techniques and enquiry strategies (e.g. increasing the development of skills within study);
- Increase the opportunities for affective education (own and others' beliefs, values and attitudes) and the study of social, economic, political and environmental issues (e.g. increasing the affective dimensions of study).

This clarification of aspects through which progression should be planned may address a key shortcoming in the current curriculum policy for geographical education. Although reference is made to progression in the content section of the Geography NCS with respect to different scales on which certain geographical topics might be covered (Grade 10 has a mainly global focus, Grade 11 a mainly continental focus, and Grade 12 mainly a national focus), there still are the other areas where progression is not addressed. It is important for teachers to know what learning outcomes learners should attain in Geography (progression in learning outcomes), but it is more important to be clear about the principles which structure curriculum planning, teaching and eventually assessment (progression in attainment). Both the former and latter should be incorporated when planning over the short, medium, and long term.

It is unrealistic to expect teachers to become curriculum developers/designers without giving them additional support and time to engage with the NCS and to enable them to plan progression effectively. Teachers have been trained within traditional content-based education systems and are now expected to be able to use the outcomes, assessment standards and a broad content framework to devise their own learning activities and to make judgements on learner achievement and advancement.

- Given the use of assessment standards that aim to map progression, should we not be following the English system that has fewer level descriptors than grades so that progression is viewed in the context of a whole band?

In order to assist with benchmarking progress in achievement of the Geography Learning Outcomes across the FET band (schools), a scale comprising six levels of achievement has been formulated (Department of Education, 2003a:53). For each of these levels, subject competence descriptions have been developed. Therefore, there are technically 18 levels of competence descriptions for the FET band since each grade has six achievement levels. In using the 18 levels across the FET band teachers may find it difficult to distinguish between the different levels because most competence descriptions differ only in terms of the action word(s) used in the assessment standards and the scale (context) that is being focused on. It might therefore be necessary to introduce a support framework that is less complex so as to enable teachers to monitor progression across grades more easily.

Given the teaching realities already alluded to in this article, Geography teachers may need to be encouraged to work with the learning outcomes and assessment standards across the entire band, building on the GET Grade 9 assessment standards and linking them to the National Qualifications Framework level 5, which is the entry level for the Higher Education and Training (HET) band. Our proposal is to adopt an 8-level system in which the 'bottom' level represents the Grade 9 minimum requirement and the 'top' level represents the minimum requirement for NQF level 5. The current levels for each grade will be overlaid progressively from Grade 10 to Grade 12. This idea is illustrated in Table 4, indicating the 8 levels for the band in the left column. If the competence statements for each of the grades in Table 3 are analysed, it becomes clear that for example level 3 in Grade 10 describes the same competence pegged at level 2 for Grade 11 and so also for level 1 of Grade 12, and so on.

Table 4 Overlapping levels of achievement and associated competence descriptions

Levels	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
8			**6** (8)
7		**6** (7)	**5** (7)
6	**6** (6)	**5** (6)	**4** (6)
5	**5** (5)	**4** (5)	**3** (5)
4	**4** (4)	**3** (4)	**2** (4)
3	**3** (3)	**2** (3)	**1** (3)
2	**2** (2)	**1** (2)	
1	**1** (1)		

6 (6): **competence description** (achievement level)

Concluding remarks

The NCS attempts to strengthen both continuity and progression in the Geography curriculum in the FET band. Taking into account the arguments and analysis raised in this article, it appears to be a mixed blessing. Some aspects of continuity and progression have been clarified and can be used by teachers, whilst other aspects need to be worked on to ensure an improved assessment framework, because assessment starts with planning; it is not separate from the teaching process. Our argument is that the curriculum documents, whilst being sound in their approach to Geography teaching and learning, have too little substance to support teachers within the South African context:

- On a basic level, teachers need guidance in translating the assessment standards into classroom activities and in using them to track and support progression.
- Teachers need practical guidance on how to organise teaching and learning so that learners are able to demonstrate applied competence.
- Teachers need to have practical experience of how to assess — what is valid evidence of achievement and how this is assessed, and how to plot this on the continuum of progression.

Note

1 Many of the insights shared in this section come from the involvement and experiences of one of the authors as convenor of the writing team responsible for compiling the NCS for Geography.

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