**Question 1**

**Introduction**

Effective teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase depend mainly on aligning learning and assessment processes. At this stage, learners are acquiring the foundation of literacy skills, and it is the role of the assessments to contribute to learning instead of disruption, so it is very important that teachers prepare good assessments. This task analyses or explores the concept of alignment, issues unique to the South African education context, evaluation of school-based experience and practices noted in the classroom, and the practical solutions that can be recommended to increase alignment in the process of Foundation Phase Education.

**Understanding Alignment**

Alignment in education is when learning results or outcomes, approach to teaching, and method of assessment are consistent **(Anderson, 2002).** Alignment is the organised relationship among learning outcomes, teaching approaches, and assessment techniques **(Biggs & Tang, 2011)**. Also, alignment in the foundation phase helps to ensure that what is taught is what is being assessed, and learners are well-supported and precisely measured.

Furthermore, alignment is required as it maintains the focus on learning aims, avoids unfair evaluation, and fosters effective competencies **(Biggs & Tang, 2011)**. It is essential to have such coherence in order to give clear learning routes and proper feedback concerning learner progress. Misalignment can lead to vagueness, loss of learner motivation, and inaccurate reporting achievement, and also in the absence of alignment, learners can be assessed on content that they have not meaningfully interacted with, which leads to frustration and an incorrect portrayal of their abilities.

Existing research verifies that alignment ensures enhanced academic achievement and supports formative feedback loops, and also ensures that teaching remains purposeful and focused **(Grobler et al., 2020; Engelbrecht et al., 2022; Du Plessis, 2023)**.

**Challenges in the South African Context**

As **Heese (2021)** arques, curriculum-based assessments present major challenge to many teachers of the foundation phase because of lacking content knowledge and ineffective initial teacher education. According to personal experience of teaching practice, additional challenges such as time constraints and administrative overload reduce the possibility of meaningful informal assessment. Also, according to **Spaull (2019)**, the majority of foundation phase educators cannot give assessment that is aligned to the curriculum due to context knowledge deficits and a lack of sufficient initial teacher education.

South Africa faces enormous difficulties in ensuring teaching and assessment alignment. Class overcrowding, inadequate access to quality teaching materials, and time constraints brought about by curriculum overload habitually result in assessments not being related to daily teaching (Spaull, 2019). Foundation Phase teachers are also undertrained in continuous assessment practices, and this existing research studies **(Venkat & Spaull, 2015; Spaull & Pretorious, 2019)** indicate that there is a continuing gap in the pedagogical content knowledge on the level of mathematics and literacy.

In my personal teaching experience, I found that despite the best intentions of teachers, it was difficult to perform consistent and meaningful assessment because of burdens of administrative responsibilities and the large number of learners that teachers had to deal within a given time. The majority of teachers relied too heavily on summative end-of-term assessments rather than formative assessments that guide instruction.

**School-Based Discussion and Analysis**

Discussion with teachers in the Foundation Phase at my placement school, I discovered that teachers recognise the necessity of alignment, however a number of barriers were identified. Teachers observed that they usually feel coerced into teaching towards the test and particularly at formal assessment moments. One teacher stated, “We try to align our teaching, but the system pushes us towards results rather than reflection.”

During critical analysis, it was found that as much as teachers believe in alignment, they are often not provided with enough time and support to ensure implementation on a regular basis, this indicates that support and further utilitarian preparation are required. This lack of opportunities for professional development also hinders alignment in a significant way. This inability to link policy with practice means that alignment remains more theory than practice in the majority of South African classrooms.

**Observation of Informal Assessment in Practice**

**Grade Observed: Grade 3**

In the Grade 3 English First Additional Language classroom where I did my observations, informal assessment was applied actively in the day-to-day learning activities of the **four core skills areas**. In the case of listening and speaking, the teacher incorporated the morning routine and stories discussions as the means of evaluating the oral language of learners. Learners were encouraged to share their thoughts, respond to questions, and narrate incidents, allowing the teacher to measure vocabulary use, understanding, and sentence construction in a non-formal interactive environment.

For reading and phonics, students took turns to read from leveled readers during small group reading. The teacher listened for fluency, pronunciation, and decoding ability, and gave immediate corrective feedback. These reading classes allowed for individual attention and relaxed progress monitoring. For writing and handwriting, students kept everyday journals where they copied short texts based on instructions.

The instructor roamed the room to offer verbal comments and focused on sentence structure spelling, and punctuation as soon as possible. Handwriting was monitored through copywork exercises, where the instructor guided students to develop letter formation and spacing. Lastly, Language use and thinking were assessed while learners did group work and retelling stories. Learners were prompted to defend responses, discuss characters’ actions, or predict a story’s ending, such that the instructor could observe their understanding of grammar, vocabulary, and critical thinking.

Generally, there was alignment among instruction and assessment in listening, speaking, and reading activities where assessment strategies followed the instructional content and were cohesively integrated into the learning process. In the case of writing, though the learners wrote often, follow up actions like reversion or one-on-one conferencing were not frequent. Therefore, some examples of learners reflecting and revising in response to feedback were lost. This suggests that informal assessment was generally well done, but more deliberate methods could be used in writing to strengthen the linkage between instruction and assessment.

**Solutions for the Future**

If I were appointed as Minister of Education, I would prioritise a series of strategic interventions to tighten the alignment between learning and assessment in the Foundation Phase. Firstly, I would create rigorous teacher development programs that provide teachers with hands-on competencies to conduct formative assessments closely mapped to curriculum objectives. These practices sessions would seek to integrate assessment into everyday teaching practice and not as a segregated or anxiety-laden activity.

Secondly, I would seek to reduce the administrative load on teachers so that they have more time available for good planning, observation, and learner support. To help teachers further, I would have streamlined systems of assessment tracking that allow for the linking of everyday teaching to specific learning goals and easier tracking of student progress.

Mentoring schemes would also be established, allowing experienced teachers to help and work together with others toward developing integrated and experiential assessment techniques. Lastly, I would encourage the implementation of thematic and integrated approaches to teaching, which naturally facilitate alignment through content, skill, and assessment task integration.

**Conclusion**

Teaching and assessment alignment is crucial within the Foundation Phase so that learners can be supported and evaluated in a way that reflects their learning journey. While South African teachers know of its value, systemic problems such as insufficient funding, time factors, and absence of training on its implementation hinder this from taking place. Classsroom observations and teacher discourse report a cry for specific assistance, professional development, and reasonable expectations. By means of teacher-focused, action-oriented interventions, alignment can be more than a policy goal, but an in-classroom reality that enables the learning of every Foundation Phase student.

**Question 3**

**Reflective Essay on Differentiation and Grade Appropriateness**