POLICY AND CRITIQUE IN SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Linda Chisholm

What is Education Policy?

To the question, 'What is educational policy?', Stephen J. Ball responds that although policy is clearly a matter of the 'authoritative allocation of values. . . statements of prescriptive intent,' values do not float free of their social context (Ball: 1990, p. 3). While education policy cannot be divorced from interests, conflict, domination or justice, it is also 'not simply a direct response to dominant interests', and is best understood 'as responding to a complex and heterogeneous configuration of elements' (Ibid). In his discussion of struggles around a new national curriculum in the U.K, Ball shows how struggles over school knowledge are shaped by a range of political, industrial and bureaucratic interests, each articulating different educational ideologies. Policy formation and formulation is demonstrated to be no simple, unilinear process. It is the outcome of various complex struggles occurring at different levels: the economic, political and ideological, none of these being reducible to one another.

If Ball distances himself from a perspective which sees policy formulation as the natural expression of uncontested values, his is also not an instrumentalist approach. A critical concept for him, which he uses alongside a structuralist method of analysis, is that of discourse:

> Implicit in the question of the restructuring of education, then, is the question of how the state exercises and imposes its power in part through the *production* of 'truth' and 'knowledge' about education....(There is a) need to separate debates about education from policies, from changes in schools. The debate about education is often constructed at some distance from the process it purports to describe. It has, however, through policies, a real effect upon the educational system itself....(Ibid., p. 17).

He goes on:

> I am not trying here to present policy as a thing, as something that happens and then is over and fixed. Rather, I am working primarily with the idea of policy as a discourse, a construct of possibilities and impossibilities tied to knowledge and practice. Control of the discourse and thus of its possibilities is essentially in and between arenas of formation and implementation (Ibid, p. 185).

Useful distinctions are made here between the policy debate, policy formulation, implementation and actual change in schools. Each is a complex and conflictual process - an issue that South African educationists, from their study of the formulation and implementation of Bantu Education understand too well.

This understanding has shaped their own response to the present context in

important ways. In order to understand how, it is necessary to look briefly at and periodise different schools of thought amongst educational researchers in the 1970s and 1980s. Approaches to policy are implicit rather than explicit. Making explicit the policy approaches of much earlier work would seem to be a vital task in the current context. Here only a small fraction of the research that has implications for policy formulation can be covered. The purpose is primarily to demonstrate the lessons about policy that have been learnt by educational researchers in the past decade.

More recently, there has been a rapid advancement of writing around policy issues: writing which informs, writing which actively and boldly formulates, writing which critiques. In many cases it predates 1990. The people's education movement itself not only gave birth to education policy research units; it clearly articulated a broad policy framework for education (Sisulu: 1986; Molobi: 1988; Levin: 1991). More recent policy statements include general policy formulations such as those by COSATU (1991), Nkomo (1990, pp. 291-325) and Alexander (1989; 1990) and more specific proposals in areas such as, for example, language, curriculum policy and teachers (see Alexander: 1989; Gardiner: 1990; Jansen: 1990; Walker: 1991; King and van den Bergh: 1991); illiteracy (Matabane: 1990; Learn and Teach/ELP/SACHED: 1991); pre-primary education (Taylor: 1989); science education (Mehl: 1990) and financing of education (Donaldson: 1991; Pillay: 1989), which will not be explored here. A great deal of research generated by NEPI researchers in 1992 will also not be covered here. Here only those works representing major approaches of the 1970s and 1980s will be discussed.

Despite a great deal of writing and thinking in education around policy, there still appears to be a problem, as conceived by this Symposium, of *formulation*. If there does not appear to be a problem of presentation of alternatives in education, whether these be in the form of NECC and ANC education resolutions or in the form of academic writing, then the problem must lie elsewhere. In the sphere of education the problem would seem to lie mainly in the current relations of power: the relationship of democratic structures to state power; and the internal power dynamics within the democratic movement itself. The latter issue raises questions of authorisation and legitimacy. Who or what structures or processes have the power, in the final analysis, to authorise particular policy directions or formulations?

Policy Approaches in South African Educational Research

Since the 1930s there have been three major sources of educational policy research; the government, universities, private sector and agencies associated with the democratic movement. The use of educational research to support national policy was begun by E.G. Malherbe in the 1930s through the South African Council for Educational and Social Research, the forerunner of the HSRC. Initial concern was with devising methods for changing the class location of 'poor whites' through improved access to education of different kinds. Research in the HSRC was first displaced and then restructured with the advent of the National Party to government. Educational research conducted by the HSRC has undergone various shifts since

then. Under the leadership of Johann Garbers in the 1980s, it remained largely positivist, psychological and descriptive in orientation, but in addition became both more bureaucratic and pragmatic.

The HSRC's de Lange report of 1981, using academics from established Afrikaans-speaking universities, influential individuals in the teaching and educational fraternity and HSRC, helped to shift the public discourse of education from Christian National concerns to manpower planning issues. The greater openness of government in very recent years has been reflected in the greater openness by the HSRC to employ, participate in and use the work of progressive researchers (Kallaway: 1991). The research that supported the recent production of the Department of National Education's *Education Renewal Strategy* (1991) was not only extensive, drawing on German, British and American government thinking, policy and planning in areas such as the local management of schools, national curriculum and system of technical and vocational education and training. It was also grounded in research methodologies used by, amongst others, UNESCO.

Different approaches have existed to policy in South African universities. As long as Afrikaans-speaking universities supplied the state apparatus with its bureaucrats, their research has been what Kallaway would describe as 'internal to the policy-making process itself.'(Kallaway: 1984). The now-infamous school of thought in Afrikaans-speaking universities' education departments, Fundamental Pedagogics (Enslin: 1991), did not generate research around very much, including policy issues. Instead, research institutes such as the Research Institute for Education Planning at the University of the Orange Free State arose in the wake of 1976 to provide the demographic and other statistical information required for policy and planning. The Department of National Education was created in 1984 as a consequence of recommendations by the de Lange report to deal with aspects of general policy affecting all departments. Once Garbers had moved there from the HSRC, the DNE also began to generate its own information-gathering procedures. Being poor off-shoots of the dominant Afrikaans-speaking universities, education research at black universities has until the mid-1980s been virtually non-existent.

Policy research in English-speaking universities was a little more developed, possibly because of the closer relationship before the advent of the National Party to power of white English-speaking liberals to state power. As the 1961 *Education Panel Reports* suggest, these universities have tied their educational research interests closer to an economic than a political or nationalist project. Research ties with the private sector and its think-tanks have thus also been closer than those with the state. There is a great deal of traffic, for example, between researchers trained in English-speaking universities, the South African Institute of Race Relations and Urban Foundation. It can be expected that the relationship between erstwhile black universities, established under the 1969 Extension of Universities Act, will also be closer to state and national interests than the Big Four: University of Cape Town, University of the Witwatersrand, University of Natal and Rhodes University.

Until very recently, the private sector has relied on English-speaking universities, the SAIRR, the Urban Foundation and its own in-house information gathering

networks to provide information for charting their educational programmes and policies. Within the past two years, they have given much greater support to educational policy research agencies relatively autonomous both from themselves as well as from the universities. These include the newly created Urban Foundation Education Systems and Policy Unit (EDUPOL), Education Foundation and Private Sector Education Council. A network of education policy formulation agencies to support private sector interests appears to exist between these bodies, the IDT, Development Bank and World Bank.

The English-speaking universities have, however, dominated educational research both quantitatively and qualitatively. Radical education research, begun in the mid-1970s, developed in two main directions. The first, which found expression through the writings of Morrow, Enslin, and others, sought to challenge the school of thought which dominated educational studies in all Afrikaans-speaking universities including the 'black' universities and UNISA, South Africa's largest institution providing distance education. The claims of Fundamental Pedagogics to being a science, as well as its Christian National Education philosophical underpinnings, were questioned and rejected (see Enslin: 1984; 1990; Morrow: 1990). Alongside of this critique, in tandem with and often emerging directly out of the educational struggles spawned by the students' uprising of 1976, came another. Young scholars, drawing their theoretical inspiration from the work of neo-Marxists such as Louis Althusser and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, began to confront the dominance of both the conservative-nationalist and liberal schools as expressed in the writings critiqueing Fundamental Pedagogics. (Chisholm and Sole: 1981; Chisholm: 1984; Cross: 1986) They did so through research, in the early eighties, into the nature of state policy and reform, the history of education, the conditions necessary for educational change and democratic transformation as well as a critique of the new reformist state strategy in education developed by the de Lange Commission of Inquiry which reported in 1981. In the process, new insights and approaches to policy developed as distinct from those employed by those closer to the process of policy-making.

A division did emerge reflecting wider social divisions, between white intellectuals and black activists. Much of the writing and intellectual work continued to be conducted by whites, while much of the organisational work was undertaken by blacks. (Evans: 1990; see also Gwala: 1988).

In a context where the relationship between means and ends and between theory and practice was constantly discussed and debated, the dominance of white intellectuals in educational research, despite the so-called legacy of Bantu Education, was clearly untenable. As struggles in education themselves began to take on new forms in the mid-1980s, this issue itself began to be taken up more directly both theoretically and practically.

By the late 1980s despite continued obstacles and constraints on the production of black researchers, black scholars and thinkers had re-emerged in the educational terrain. The scholarship and perspectives of Saleem Badat, Michael Cross, Nozipho Diseko, Ivan Evans, Jonathan Godden, Jonathan Jansen, George Mashamba, Bill

Nasson, Mokubung Nkomo, Blade Nzimande and Yusaf Sayed have been central to the revitalisation of educational research in this country. If the gender component of this group is somewhat underrepresented, then the number of women amongst white educational researchers is matched or paralleled by the paucity of research on gender and education issues.

The work of the early 1980s also raised the question of the role of education in reproducing class and social inequality, rather than simply being either the expression of individual intent or a means of individual upward or downward mobility. Such analyses were very much a product of their time: the need, in the context of mass struggles against apartheid in the early eighties, to expose the interrelated nature of class, racial and educational oppression. Their implications for policy in South Africa were the suggestion that education policy was of a piece with wider economic, political and social policy; any reconceptualisation would have to start from the assumption that educational reconstruction needs to be re-thought alongside and not in isolation from, for example, industrial, land, labour, health and housing policies.

The contextual approach, such as that embodied in the above work, thus includes both an instrumentalist and 'complex contextual' face. Despite the criticisms of instrumentalist and 'reproduction' approaches which emerged in the late 1980s (see Hyslop: 1987; Unterhalter et al: 1991), perspectives which see policy as being the direct, unmediated expression of class and/or national interest, also still have popular appeal. A recent critique of the state's Education Renewal Strategy in *Learning Nation* (Nov/Dec 1991), for example, argues that the Education Renewal Strategy is an expression of dominant class interests for social control and reproduction of social inequality.

Two influential concepts, increasingly used in the later 1980s to nuance above discussions, were those of discourse and mediation (Schaffer: 1984; 1991; Cross and Chisholm: 1991). Reconstructive policy formulation and redress cannot be made simple and depends to a large degree on work and cultural contexts of implementation. These, amongst other things, mediate the impact of education policies. Whereas Bundy (1987) and Hyslop (1988/9) have explored the impact of apartheid social policy on youth unemployment, Glaser (1988/9), Bonner (1988) and Cross (1991) have drawn attention to aspects of the social and cultural configuration of unemployed youth, recently rediscovered as the 'lost generation'. Much of this work has been vital in sketching the historical and contemporary dimensions, and character of youth unemployment and culture; it provides a basis and necessary resource for policy formulation to address the conditions of out-of-school youth. Although this work is suggestive of questions concerning the mediation of policy by social and cultural, political and economic institutions, and will surely be built on, much more does also need to be done, particularly in relation to the civil service.

Much of the work of the 1980s consciously drew on comparative models as examples either to be emulated or avoided. The historical and comparative experiences and pitfalls of modernisation, human capital and manpower planning approaches, now naively espoused by many, were carefully documented and revealed.

(For example Nasson: 1990; Muller: 1984; Nkomo and Mokatsi: 1990; Botha: 1991). The experience of education in post-independence Africa was studied and reflected on in courses in all of the English-speaking universities' Faculties of Education. Problems and issues began to be raised which would have to be taken into account in a future process of policy formulation for the real transformation of education.

The concept of development, for example, was problematised in the light of new theoretical approaches attempting to come to grips with the limits of such a problematic naively used. In addition, comparative research was rooted in the understanding that while South Africa did not constitute a unique case, there were specific features which did not allow replicability of particular national 'models'.

The one clear lesson learnt from the evidence of the impact of new educational policy in societies, amongst others, such as Cuba, Tanzania and Zimbabwe was that the reconstruction of education alone cannot carry the full burden of the reconstruction of an economy and society; the unavoidable conclusion remains that educational reform can play a positive redistributive role largely in conditions of cataclysmic social rupture, but is not a crucial independent variable in the transfer of resources of the poorest (Nasson: 1990; Reynolds: 1990; Jansen: 1990; Botha: 1990). While the solution to this conclusion is clearly not to wash one's hands of policy and not strive for educational transformation, since 'that might be to deny the possible fulfilment of human capabilities and human needs' (Nasson: 1990, p. 104), it is also not to see education as an eternally malleable vehicle for the realisation and expression of all social hopes. It is, of course, precisely in education that such hopes are placed in moments of social change. One of the reasons for placing hope in education when solutions are known to lie in the economic sphere is that the educational space is also a symbolic one, at its heart concerned with change and development. The economy, by contrast, is far more intractable.

The lessons that researchers are now required to learn are lessons about how to do it; how to realise hopes and ambitions; how to restructure and reinvent possibility. What is required by the context is a language of possibility, against the language of powerlessness and defeat. The language which has drawled into the discourse, as a compromise against that of limitation, failure and impossibility has been that of 'realism.' The 'new realism', as Ball would suggest, is however 'a construct of possibility and impossibility'; it may well become an ideological mechanism through which dramatic change is averted - to this extent it also creates problems for policy formulation, a rationale for keeping things much the same as they are. Against the injunctions of the 'new realism', powerfully backed up by the international context and sophisticated computer-modelling approaches enabling policy predictions to the nth degree, new registers of hope and possibility alive and sensitive to complexity and nuance, making new sense of difficult terrain, are still urgently sought.

Problems and issues have thus been raised in relation to future policy which must, in part, account for at least some of the judicious caution currently being exercised on the part of educationists in response to the demand for new policy blueprints.

Some of the lessons learnt and residing in the rich 'critical' tradition of the left of the 1980s we will, at our peril, ignore in addressing ourselves, through policy, to the urgent educational needs confronting us. Characterising this rich literature as simply being 'critique' and of no value can be seen as a discursive strategy whose impulse is to misunderstand the particular historical needs that this literature served, as well as to negate that which we have to draw on. This discourse deconstructs and reconstitutes critical social policy research as conducted in South Africa as consensual processes ignorant of the complexity and contradictory constitution and effects of such policy. The new context will surely open up new areas for research, the probing of old questions with new tools. These would include different aspects of policy, some of which would inform policy formulation, some of which would provide the theoretical development necessary for maintaining strong independent intellectual traditions in South Africa.

Highly conscious of current international New Right trends in education, and past failed strategies in education, the reasons for the failure of the 'modernist' impulse in societies undergoing rapid social change, the contradictions between policy intentions and outcomes, and the modest role that intellectuals should claim in the policy formulation process in relation to mass organisations, it is not surprising that education policy researchers clustered around NEPI have insisted that their task is not the formulation of policy, but the clarification of policy options. The task of policy choice, it is argued, is the task of political movements.

Although education, therefore, does not stand empty before history, and the work that has to date been done in the 'critical' tradition offers far more than the rhetorical posturing than is implied, it is also true that investigation into the concrete ways and means of achieving the educational goals spelt out by proponents of People' s Education in the late 1980s (see Molobi: 1988; Sisulu: 1986) have not, until very recently, begun to be explored by researchers. In as much as the nature of all research is context bound, education policy research in South Africa has recently undergone something of a renaissance.

New developments in educational research after 1990 were prefigured in the late 1980s but grew in strength in the more open political terrain after February 2 1990. Policy research and analysis came to be seen as an important priority in the context of people's education, in the nexus between the university and the popular education movement. In the latter half of 1987, in response to the slender intellectual frame on which alternatives could be built, universities and the NECC established Education Policy Units at Johannesburg, Durban and the Western Cape. They were preceded slightly earlier by the establishment of Research in Education in South Africa (RESA) under Harold Wolpe at Essex in England. They represented an entirely new movement in South African educational research, finding their parallels in similar structures in Latin America and the United States (Cariola: 1991; McCarthy: 1990). While RESA, with its much longer experience and stable support system was able to train a powerful cadre of young black educationists whose mark is yet to be made on South African education, the Education Policy Units at Durban, UWC and the University of the Witwatersrand, struggled towards a definition of their role. While

at this level, however. Indeed, quantitative and qualitative research probing problems at this level with any sophistication is virtually non-existent. What are the problems in this sphere? First, the relevant education departments, who control access to departmental information and schools are still sunk within the defensive postures of the 1970s and 1980s, and are generally hostile to investigation of problems at school and administration level. Extraordinary hurdles have to be cleared before such access is permitted; many postgraduate students, for example, have given up in the face of denial of access to information, misleading information about the existence of material, and other such difficulties being put in their way. It will take more than an intrepid researcher to penetrate beyond these bureaucratic obstacles.

Secondly, and related to this, access to information and schools is still largely dependent on class, race, gender and university-of-origin. Investigation of conditions in black schools controlled by white principals could be made very difficult for black researchers. Women researchers often face problems of sexual harassment. Possibilities for white researchers to enter black schools and black researchers to enter white schools are also circumscribed by material conditions of racism and class prejudice.

Thirdly, where researchers may gain access to schools, information of a documentary kind may be non-existent. The administration sections of many schools have been destroyed in the last decade. With this has gone records for use by researchers.

Other, lesser problems affecting the quality of research include the weakness of information networks about what is being produced amongst educationists, and weakness of quantitative and qualitative research and analytical traditions investigating concrete conditions in the schools, as well as isolation from international debates. It is salutary to note how the theoretical traditions that have shaped South African educational research have echoed those at the metropolitan centre long after they made their appearance there. The new context has, however, imposed a full research agenda to explore and re-evaluate the historical and contemporary contexts, forms and practices of policy formulation and implementation.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that policy formulation has, for reasons of internal organisational weakness combined with a commitment to learning from mistakes made by others, projected researchers into the pivotal role of being responsible for policy formulation. Thus the demand has been made for a shift of emphasis in their work from critique to reconstruction. The paper argues that this is a misrepresentation of both the historical and contemporary value of the critical tradition in education for policy as well as the intellectual approach to be taken towards questions of policy and reconstruction. Reconceptualising the role of educational researchers and intellectuals would need to take this into account.

The paper also argued that explanations for problems in policy formulation in education should not be exaggerated; that policy formulations do exist. Difficulties and weaknesses lie less in this sphere than in relations of power between the democratic forces and the state and within the democratic alliance as a whole.

Problems at policy level reflect the manner in which the 'historic compromise' in South Africa is impacting on all levels of society, as well as the class nature of the transition currently taking place.

In the final analysis, however, this knowledge of either the contradictions of the policy process or the current balance of forces cannot immobilise us: all it can do is arm us with caution and renewed commitment to democratic process as much as product. We have to engage in researching the impact and consequences of particular policies as well as policy options that will lead to a more just educational dispensation in the full knowledge that the impact of our work may have outcomes drastically opposed to our intentions. We should enter into policy formulation and debate fully aware that we make history as much as we operate within its constraints; that social forces larger and more powerful than the individual or conglomeration of researchers will, in the end, determine the form and shape of South Africa's educational history.

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