

HAVE WE GOT A POLICY FOR YOU!

A REJOINDER TO CHISHOLM'S 'POLICY AND CRITIQUE IN SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH'

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Introduction

Chisholm (1992) makes a number of useful points with regard to education policy research in a recent paper (*Transformation*, 18), not least in reinstating an earlier critical tradition in South African educational studies as a legitimate contribution to policy formulation. Indeed, her remarks are a timely reminder of the continuing need for critique which, as Foucault points out:

...doesn't have to be the premise of a deduction which concludes: this is then what needs to be done. It should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is... It isn't a stage in programming. It is a challenge directed to what is (Foucault, 1981, cited in Smart, 1983:135-6).

While wishing to underscore this argument, my rejoinder nonetheless takes up problems raised by Chisholm regarding policy planning in the education sector. She conceptualises these constraints as twofold: firstly, broadly political, not least the authority and legitimacy of any party or movement to implement its policies; secondly, narrower education and research related. It is to the latter that I wish to respond, in particular the issue of access and the alleged paucity of research in and on South African schools. Arising from this, I then develop an argument for taking seriously the possibility of teachers as researchers of classroom and school life as one way to ground policy formulation in the contextual realities of specific educational settings.

Rehearsing Chisholm's analysis of problems in developing education policies

As Chisholm points out, a key education related constraint is the continued existence of apartheid departments of education, while further difficulties in conducting research turn on access to information both from these education authorities and from schools. The point here, although not explicit in Chisholm's paper, is that policy makers need to be sensitive to the contextual realities of

classrooms, and to the motivation and capacity of ordinary teachers and their pupils if they are to develop policies with a reasonable chance of success. In short, to have a knowledge base for educational change.

But, if Chisholm is correct, very little research exists on South African schools. Indeed, she states emphatically that 'quantitative and qualitative research probing problems at this level [ie schools] with any sophistication is virtually non-existent' (1992:158). Certainly it is the case, for example, that not a single volume of the 12 NEPI reports focuses exclusively on Primary or Secondary education. And on a recent visit, Kenneth King (1993), a respected figure in comparative education and policy studies, remarked that very little South African educational research appears to be focused on schools, despite constant reminders of their deplorable conditions.

Why this major silence? Chisholm's explanation invokes the lack of access to education departments, and schools 'still sunk within the defensive postures of the 1970s and 1980s' (1992:158) and thus hostile to the presence of educational researchers. It seems that such 'extraordinary hurdles' stand in the way that postgraduate students have given up in the face of bureaucratic (and no doubt teacher) intransigence. Research access is further complicated by class, gender, race and university of origin, making it problematic for white researchers to enter black schools and vice versa, while women researchers face further problems of possible sexual harassment.

Reviewing access and the insufficiency of research on and in schools

While I would not want to underrate the troublesome dilemmas generated for researchers by such factors, I nonetheless wish to take issue with Chisholm. My disagreement is grounded in the assertions that access, while difficult, is not impossible, and that educational research has been done on and in schools, even if of uneven quality. In addressing these points I raise two questions to focus the argument:

- why might teachers fail to welcome educational researchers?
- what is the role of teachers as researchers in their own classrooms and schools?

My claims are buttressed by reference to local examples of qualitative research: three higher degree theses (Leibowitz, 1989 and 1992; Simons, 1986; Walker, 1991); and one school related project, the Mathematics Education Project (MEP) based at the University of Cape Town (Breen and Coombe, 1992). I need to emphasise that this is only a very limited sampling of what has been done by higher degree students and educational projects in schools. As such, they serve

to illustrate my argument and to suggest possibilities in existing and future research.

Another point needs mentioning before proceeding further: the policy process, not least who is included and who excluded, is indeed a political matter demanding political action, as Chisholm notes. Nonetheless this process requires educational content. The research cited here has been the work of individuals, individually rewarded, and lays no claims to being the outcome either of collective and organised political action, nor of perfectly realised participatory research processes. Yet it is not the less relevant to the policy debates for all that, if for no other reason than that it incorporates marginalised subjects and voices (teachers and students in township schools), and grounds educational change in research-based knowledge.

Access to schools: why might teachers not welcome educational researchers?

Hostility to educational researchers may well arise from a number of reasons, only some of which have been identified by Chisholm. In my own study (Walker, 1991), teachers I worked with in township primary schools certainly raised the issue of race² and university location. As one teacher remarked in an interview with a black researcher in the same project :

Politically I feel there was a big element of distrust that was within me. Personally I wouldn't trust a white, be it a man or a woman, who comes around and ask me questions about education because this system [bantu education] was introduced to us by them and they know how horrible it is and you can't improve on something that was bad from the beginning. So at the same time when one was asked about education, one is aware, one has got to look at the background one is coming from. The mere fact that she was from UCT, UCT itself couldn't allow black students in their School of Education, but then later they did (interview 27/9/88).

But another teacher provided a different explanation of teacher reticence:

Whenever we try to bring in something new, you're labelled, you know, that's the problem we're having. Hence most of the teachers don't want to get themselves exposed to some people from outside in trying to help improve the situation (interview 29/9/88).

Teacher hostility might also arise from the way in which educational researchers are introduced to the school. For example, Diphofa (1993), a black researcher in black schools, encountered some difficulty where the teachers had neither been consulted nor informed about the purpose of his research by the school principals who had granted him initial access.

Further resistance may be located in teachers' lack of exposure to educational research, resulting in only the vaguest notions of what might be the point of it all. Teachers, as I discovered (see Walker, 1991), struggle even to see themselves as curriculum developers in a context where the dominant teaching culture has been shaped not only by a strongly framed subject-centred curriculum (Bernstein, 1971), but also by authoritarian education relations, by experience of political oppression, all underscored by the dreadfully poor quality of intellectual training at schools and colleges.

While admitting to some guesswork on my part in developing this point, nonetheless it may be that teachers in township schools also see little to benefit them in educational research. International experience suggests teacher resistance to educational research emanating from universities, research which teachers perceive of little use or relevance in terms of their own everyday working lives (see, for example, Hustler, Cassidy and Cuff, 1986). Why then cooperate with educational researchers whose presence causes a disturbance and whose questions and interviews are likely to take up valuable time in an already crowded school day? Moreover, how many educational researchers return the knowledge they generate to the teachers and schools?

In the end, it may be that relations of power now and in the future may well exclude teachers from participation in policy making. But this is different from pathologising teachers and schools for their reluctance to entertain educational researchers.

The point is that access is of course an issue, though rather less insurmountable, and somewhat more nuanced, than Chisholm suggests. Despite some of the problems outlined above, I nonetheless spent three years working in township schools on a teacher development project which was also a research project. Nor is mine the only such experience. Fieldworkers in the Teacher Action Research Project, in MEP, and in NGOs such as the READ project, enter a wide range of schools for their development work. Even if these fieldworkers themselves choose not to translate this into academic research, project reports and other documents, not to mention the fieldworkers themselves, are all a source of rich and textured data on schools.

Provided, of course, that policy researchers pay due attention to the ethics of their own research process, for the issue is also more than only one of access, and should include greater reflexivity about the research process itself. Patai (1991), for example, argues that, even given a researcher's commitment to democratic and feminist practices, research situations are shaped by the inequalities and hierarchies of an unethical world. While not arguing that researchers should await perfect research methods before embarking on their research, she nonetheless suggests the need for ongoing discussion about ap-

appropriate research methods. Given the urgency of change and the pressures for policy delivery presently existing, such discussion is arguably honoured at the level of rhetoric rather than actual policy research practice.

What goes on in schools?

Nor are we completely ignorant of what goes on in schools. Colyn (1992), for example, has written about her work with mathematics teachers over three years in some of the poorest township schools in Greater Cape Town. I draw on this specific example for two reasons: the much cited statistic regarding the pitifully small number of DET students who pass matriculation mathematics each year (about 500); together with the currently popular debates regarding the need for science and technology policies that promote economic development. What might all this mean for policies regarding mathematics education in schools? What actually happens in these classrooms, and how might our understanding of this contribute to such policies? What Colyn's work signals, I believe, is that a failure to understand how teacher capacity and motivation and pupil achievement have been constructed in the dominant educational discourse and through discursive practices may well result in unrealistic and unworkable policies.

Take, for example, extracts from her description of a mathematics lesson with a class of 59 std 3 children, where even with pupils absent the classroom is so full that there is no clear pathway to the back of the classroom. The lesson begins:

She [the teacher] feels the urgency. A thirty minute period and so much to do. She starts her explanation in English. She then translates it into Xhosa as she is not certain that the learners have followed in English. As usual more than half of the Maths lesson becomes an English lesson. The learners are asked to repeat nearly every phrase the teacher uses. Their replies are voiced rhythmically and automatically. She asks a few questions, discovering that only a few children have even followed half of what she has been explaining.

The lesson continues:

Ms M glances at her watch. Time is running out so she sets the learners three problems based on the lesson. While the learners are busy with problems, she goes around to desks and starts to sign the work the learners are doing. There is no hope of thoroughly marking 59 books. Even if she had time to notice that Nosipho now in standard 3 at the age of fourteen has still no idea what the difference is between multiplication and division - so 4×2 is the same to her as 4 divided by 2 - what could she realistically do about it? There are 59 learners in the class and many of them do not know the very basics of mathematics. Bongwiwe, the top maths achiever

in the class, has completed her work and starts to trace out the letters of her name on the back cover of her book. She yawns as she idly colours the letters (Colyn, 1992:96-97).

Nor will new curriculum policies necessarily shift persistent patterns of teaching without careful attention to in-service teacher development. For example, the following style of drill and repetition in this std 3 lesson, presented by a teacher with whom I worked, is typical of DET schools:

Teacher: And when did this [the wedding] take place? When did this take place? Mind the past tense of take. When did this take place? This took, when did this, yes?

Pupil: This took place last week.

Teacher: Class.

Pupils: This took place last week.

Teacher: This happened last week, this happened last week.

Class: Last week.

Teacher: When did this happen class?

Class: This happened last week.

Teacher: When did this happen?

Class: It happened last week.

Teacher: Very good. It happened last week. Why was everybody there? Why was everybody there? Yes?

Pupil: Everybody was there because it was the wedding of the year.

Teacher: Class?

Class: Everybody was there because it was the wedding of the year.

Teacher: Class?

Class: Everybody was there because it was the wedding of the year.

Teacher: Because it was the wedding of the year (Transcript of reading lesson, New Crossroads school, 7 August 1989).

These accounts are not meant to pathologise learners or teachers for either failure or incompetence. Both teachers and pupils struggle to teach and to learn in hopelessly under-resourced schools and in impoverished communities often lacking the basic necessities for a reasonable standard of living. Rather, they serve to provide glimpses of the contextual realities for policy makers.

A fascinating ethnographic study of two Soweto secondary school history classes by Simons (1986) illuminates the educational setting, and teaching and learning processes within it. Moreover, this study 'maps backwards' to understand what goes on in teacher colleges as a way of understanding why these teachers teach the way they do. Simons' discussions with staff and students of one Soweto college suggested the absence of any critical exchange of ideas,

while a review of internally and externally set examination papers confirmed the dominance of dictated notes and rote reproduction of 'knowledge'. Clearly policies which go beyond simply exchanging one syllabus for another will be needed to shift deeply entrenched patterns of teaching and learning in this and other teachers' colleges.

A further example of research, this time conducted by a teacher, is that of Leibowitz (1990 and 1992) whose work opens a window onto the world of teacher and pupils in a multilingual school. As Leibowitz emphasises there is a clear need for research on multilingual education in South Africa to inform decisions and development:

In emerging multilingual, non-racial South African schools, questions such as teacher support or admission criteria are being dealt with by schools in an ad hoc manner, or not at all. Educationalists need to document and assess these responses, so that policy can be formulated which benefits pupils (Leibowitz, 1992:3).

Her own research involved a classroom-based study over one year, focussing on the learning experiences of a std 9 class of which she was the English teacher. Her data included participant observation, fieldnotes and interviews, and exam and test results. Her investigations raised questions around students' previous learning experiences, their individual difficulties, and her own teaching methodology, and the social dynamics of the classroom, all with a view to informing whole school policy. Her research allows us access to student voices, for example speaking out on what it means for black pupils to attend a private non-racial school:

One of the problems in going to a non-racial school is that when you are in the location you meet your friends, maybe who still go to a black school. When you meet them you feel guilty as if you have betrayed them in some way or by going to a non-racial school. Some people start calling you a white person even though you are not. When the black schools strike, the other people look at you in a funny way because you go to school (quoted in Leibowitz, 1992:10).

The point is that research such as Leibowitz's helps us understand what happens in schools, how pupils experience schooling, how teachers might respond and change, and what sort of policies are needed to improve the quality of schooling.

Teachers as researchers

Leibowitz's work highlights the possibilities of research in teachers' work, not least because it resolves access difficulties, although not absolving teachers as researchers from developing appropriate and reflexive research processes. The

idea of the teacher as a researcher of classroom and school life is not a new one. Unfortunately, it has tended to be given rather short shrift in the educational research discourse in South Africa - witness for example, Appel's (1991) unhelpful review of the first local attempt to provide an accessible account of how teachers might proceed with action research projects (Davidoff and Van den Berg, 1990). Appel sneeringly dismisses action research as 'a facet of "politically-correct" instruction', as mere 'technique', concluding that action research is 'theoretically... very small beer' (1991:105). Nor is there apparent recognition in Chisholm's paper of the amount of research, albeit of varying quality, conducted by postgraduate students in masters programmes across the country. At UWC, for example, most of the action research projects focus on processes of educational change - valuable knowledge indeed for policy makers.

This is not to say that teachers should only be doing action research. Far from it, although there are compelling arguments for action research both as a means to improve the quality of practice in our schools, and as a democratic research process. What other possibilities might there be? One might be genuine research partnerships between teachers and university-based researchers. An early example of this is the work of Smith and Geoffrey (1968) in which university lecturer Smith spent as much time as possible sitting in the back of Geoffrey's primary school classroom as an observer, while Geoffrey compiled fieldnotes whenever he could. In this way full-time researchers would be supporting the teacher's work while also developing a public knowledge base of what happens in schools and classrooms, and how this might be improved. All this has implications for policy formulation.

At the same time, teacher research need not be conceptualised as being bounded by classroom walls, as Lawn (1989) points out. He reminds us that teachers are cultural, social and political actors:

Obviously the classroom was the place to start and the place to continue research, but it is not the only place. The skills of a teacher are expressed within the classroom, but they are often created or defined outside it (Lawn, 1989:155).

Teacher research would be of 'practical' use, though not necessarily classroom-based, but also not 'practical' as meaning not 'theoretical'. Used in the latter sense, notes Lawn, practical is often used to deny teachers a place in the theorizing about their work, a situation not unfamiliar to those of us concerned to broaden the educational research discourse to include teachers. Rather, Lawn says, practical means 'useful in changing the conditions described' (1989:156).

Thus teacher research might explore a range of questions, including life histories and contemporary biographies, union organisation in the school, issues around school management, ethnographies of schools and classrooms, studies

of the teacher labour process, of pupil and teacher motivation, of relationships between schools and parent communities, and critical accounts of the curriculum itself. The possibilities are endless and exciting. The responsibility for those of us working in universities (including policy researchers) turns on what role we might play in establishing the conditions that support such research, rather than only lamenting its absence, or criticising its quality.

Educational research traditions, whether qualitative or quantitative are admittedly still underdeveloped under conditions of apartheid education and protracted international isolation, as Chisholm notes. Of course there remains the problem of what research is available in the public domain. Nonetheless, this hardly seems a valid excuse for professional researchers trained to unearth information from primary sources. Still, I would support Chisholm's complaints about the weak educational research information network in South Africa. Perhaps the time has come, then, to consider establishing a national educational research association, as well as comprehensive databases of all educational research unpublished as well as published to inform policy development for educational renewal and transformation.

Meanwhile we can all pay greater attention to accessing existing research, and to strategies within our own universities to support the development and dissemination of high quality and ethical teacher research. Otherwise we run the risk of contributing, even if unwittingly, to perpetuating a tradition of formulating policy out of sight and hearing of the recipients. As Chisholm rightly emphasises: 'without proper attention to process, specific policies are highly likely to be worth little more than the paper they are written on' (1992:157).

NOTES

1. This title is borrowed with a slight adaptation from Maria C Lugones and Elizabeth V Spelman's (1983) critique of white women's theorizing about all women's oppression: 'Have we got a theory for you! Feminist theory, cultural imperialism, and the demand for the women's voice' (*Women's Studies International Forum*).
2. While not able to develop this point here, nonetheless it is worth reading Miles (1989:5ff) on the question of whether only blacks should conduct research in black schools, and only whites in white education. Briefly, his argument turns on problematising the concept of an 'essential' white or black identity, and the idea that there is one single truth about racism which only 'blacks' can know.

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