

## Editorial introduction

### Questioning fidelity in policy making: Research stories across fields of educational inquiry

JONATHAN D. JANSEN



*JONATHAN D. JANSEN is Dean of the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria. (UP) and Editor of Perspectives in Education. Prior to his joining the University of Pretoria, he was Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the University of Durban-Westville and Director of the Centre for Educational Research, Evaluation and Policy (CEREP). His recent research on the politics of policy implementation appears in the book entitled Policy Implementation (UCT Press, 2001) with Yusuf Sayed.*

---

There are few states in the postcolonial world that has developed more education policies than South Africa. In the short period since the Mandela Administration of 1994, there has been a policy for everything from early childhood development to language-in-education to school finance to higher education. Laws have been made, amended and re-made to give legal authority to formal policy. Discussion Documents have been followed by Green Papers that have been followed by White Papers, all of which described by the ubiquitous term – 'frameworks' – for education and training after apartheid. The production of formal policies was matched by a profound capacity for consumption of policies by ordinary citizens and educational practitioners with the unyielding faith that 'policies are good for you'. Gradually, however, educational researchers are starting to question the fidelity logic assumed to exist between declaring policy and achieving it in everyday practice. In doing so, South Africans are beginning to realise what has been long accepted wisdom in policy experiences elsewhere – that policies not only have a logic and politics different from practice, but that pursuing a perfect match is both a waste of implementation time and a misdirection of intellectual energies. In this exciting collection of articles for the third issue of *Perspectives in Education* in 2001, the explicit and sometimes implied arguments provide useful starting points for a questioning of the policy-practice relationship whether this is in the world of research policy (Pienaar and her colleagues), or library policy (Dick) or training policy (Smit and Liebenberg-Siebrits) or education policy (Smit).

In the first article, printed for its currency in the South African academy, Magdal Pienaar and her colleagues at the National Research Foundation make the case for a research evaluation policy that, they claim, has had positive impacts on research practice in the natural sciences, engineering and technology in South Africa. But this innovation that 'rates' scientists in order to decide on areas of research investment immediately encountered the implementation dilemma of the equity-excellence trade-off. Investing in 'excellence', narrowly defined, meant investing in white researchers whose standing cannot be extricated from a history of institutional privilege. How can a system predicated on excellence,

therefore, be adapted to "... bring in black researchers from the margins" (their words)? The current debate on transferring this system to education and the humanities might, if implemented, deepen this divide between white and black researchers especially when use is made of conventional criteria for judging access, e.g., publications in accredited journals rather than the production of black masters and doctoral students. As research policy specialists with many years of experience, Pienaar and her colleagues are sensitive to this dilemma of changing research practice and production in an unequal society.

The second article is a profound theoretical analysis of the concept 'qualification' that takes the argument beyond the problem of implementation in order to ask unsettling epistemological questions about the purposes of qualifications. A qualification, the authors argue, is more than a representation of competence and skills; it is also a mechanism for allocating status and power within a free market discourse. Berkhout (South Africa) and her colleague (Wielemans) from the Catholic University in Leuven conclude that "... there is a limit to the flexibility of human beings' ability to adapt and continuously mutate according to the performativity demands of the free market". In a memorable turn of phrase, they call for *a codification of scepticism* as part of the responsibility of universities in responding to the qualifications debate. Once again, what a policy on qualification promises and what is achieved in practice is brought under the spotlight of a rare piece of scholarly writing in South Africa on 'qualifications'.

The third article by Francine de Clerq of the University of the Witwatersrand continues a line of inquiry that she has established as one of the most promising young policy researchers in Southern Africa. That is, critical studies of the policy-practice relationship through the work of provincial bureaucracies of education. Her 'inside story' of policymaking provides unusual insights into how the provincial bureaucracy negotiates policy in the context of relentless external and internal pressures on the process and, in consequence, fails to deal with the 'deep weaknesses' in systems capacity for transforming education. Her conclusion is riveting: "The recent introduction of a performance-based strategic management approach does not confront the major provincial weaknesses at mediating policy overload and building more mature human resources and capacity to release its potential for improving performance."

The fourth article by Des Monk from the University of Central Lancashire (Preston, United Kingdom) undertakes a deeper analysis of the reasons for institutions (and individuals) pursuing open or distance learning in recent times. Monk examines both 'push' and 'pull' factors for the pursuit of open and distance learning, and provides useful comparative insights between the United Kingdom and South Africa. For all the rhetoric about flexibility of labour, enhanced competitiveness and increased access, distance education has a dark side (the pun is intended): it is not clear in the context of flexible timeframes when students actually drop-out, and whether they will in fact ever complete the programmes in which they remain registered. This is a particularly disturbing observation in South Africa where 'automatic deductions' from salaries for distance education students secures the finances, but perhaps not the learning required – and this question is usefully problematised in the conclusion offered by Monk from the UK experience.

The fifth article by Brigitte Smit from the University of Pretoria offers a powerful summary of her doctoral dissertation work on how primary school teachers experience education policy change in South Africa. What distinguishes this study is the depth and sophistication with which she applies computer-aided, qualitative data analysis to a mass of information

unearthed through interviews with primary school teachers. The research reported represents as much a set of insights into the ambiguities of policy reforms in the minds and works of teachers, as it is a model for doing qualitative research under conditions of transition. There remains a need, Smit argues, to reconcile politically legitimate policies with the everyday struggles and meanings that teachers assign to policy in their classrooms.

The sixth article by Archie Dick from UNISA is a fascinating study of the professionalisation of South African librarianship through the historical positions of one of its most influential practitioners, P.C. Coetzee. This article is not only a superb analytical narrative about the history of librarianship; it is also a useful tracking of what was regarded as the scientific discourse and the way in which it 'blocked out' alternative ways of interpreting culture, identity and the profession itself. As Dick concedes, this is also a story of the intellectual's complicity in building apartheid through the institution of library science. The value of this article is that it demonstrates contemporary dilemmas in transforming the disciplines when their roots lie in a long history of conservative ideologies among which only the most offensive, external manifestations have been redressed. In many ways, the epistemological and ideological roots of the disciplines remain unshaken. The Dick article is one step forward in also exposing the roots of librarianship to 'deep change'.

The seventh article by Hettie van der Merwe of Vista University is an experiment designed to test the liberal (or otherwise) standpoints of our readership on language policy and practice in the journal. For a long time, *Perspectives in Education* has professed a multi-lingual character and commitment to its authors and readership. No one has tested this commitment, until the article from van der Merwe was submitted in *three* languages. Van der Merwe offers an exposition of postmodernism in higher education – an exposition which gains intellectual value and application as she moves between Afrikaans, English and Sepedi (which she also speaks fluently).

The eighth article by Smit and Liebenberg-Siebrits from the University of Stellenbosch is a meticulous account of a specific mechanism (the Life Space Crisis Intervention Strategy) for preparing teachers to deal with behavioural and emotional problems in classrooms populated by children from severely disadvantaged communities. The value of this study lies in the integration of training and research on a classroom intervention. Despite its initial successes, the authors are also conscious of the cultural and social limitations of this intervention strategy given the depth of the problems encountered by the teachers and the lack of a support system for dealing with such problems.

The ninth article by Tienie Vermeulen from Potchefstroom University investigates the viability of the new bilingual policy for education in South Africa given the practice of single, dual and parallel-medium schools in South Africa. He shows how language practices in schools, such as code-switching, both advance and corrupt official language policy and concludes that the development of all African languages is a prerequisite for language equity and quality in the classroom.

The tenth article by Eloff and Ebersohn from the University of Pretoria reflects on a collaboration with the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) on what the authors call "an asset-based approach" to early intervention. This strategy stands in contrast to a "needs-based approach" which, they argue, targets deficit understandings of the client community. Using a transdisciplinary approach, the authors make a compelling argument based on

research for rethinking the role of professionals and, indeed, the profession itself, in serving young children.

The final article in this series comes from Professor Michael Kahn, Advisor to the Minister of Education on Science, Mathematics and Technology Education. Professor Kahn, in his typically incisive analysis of education policy, draws out the planning implications of the status of science and mathematics performance in South African schools. He raises original questions, such as the meaning of A-grade performances on standard grade for university studies; and the performance of the science and mathematics system against the considerable infrastructure and skills base available in South Africa relative to the rest of the Southern African Development Community.

This set of contributions is diverse by institution, gender and international profile. The Journal remains concerned, however, about the contributions of black scholars and I conclude this Editorial with yet another invitation to emerging and established researchers to see *Perspectives in Education* (PIE) as a vehicle for both testing new theoretical ideas and exposing recent empirical work in education.