CHAPTER ONE

The Implementation of Assessment Policy in South African Schools

Introduction and Overview

The policies we required …are firmly in place. The task we will all face during the next decade ahead will be to ensure vigorous <u>implementation</u> of these policies…[1]

<u>Introduction</u>

In December 1998 the national Department of Education released a new assessment policy that was modelled on its flagship curriculum, called Curriculum 2005. The new curriculum had been released in 1996 for phased-in implementation in the schooling sector comprising Grades R (5-6 year olds) to 9 (14-15 year olds). At the time of this study (2002), both the new curriculum policy and the new assessment policy were in operation in all grades except Grade 6.

The new assessment policy expected teachers to alter their assessment practices in fundamental ways. For example, teachers were expected to use clearly defined outcomes as the basis for evaluating student work, to define clearly what students are to learn, to make the purposes of assessment clear, and to use multiple assessment tools, techniques and methods -- such as self-assessment, journals, peer assessment and projects. In addition, teachers were required to simultaneously introduce continuous and authentic assessment, and to ensure that assessment was objective, valid, manageable and sensitive to gender, race and disability (Department of Education, 1998). This new method of assessment departed radically from the assessment regime under the *apartheid* education system, one that relied heavily on tests and examinations as final judgments on student performance.

The purpose of the new assessment policy comported with the progressive orientation of other educational policies issued by the first democratic government of South

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[1] From the State of the Nation Address of the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, Houses of Parliament, Cape Town, 6 February 2004, emphasis added.

Africa, namely "to uproot old practices, beliefs, values about the social order and to replace them with new ways of conducting national business" (Manganyi, 2001:28). It is within this new policy context that this research study is located, the purpose of which is to examine teacher understandings and beliefs about the new assessment policy, to explore how they implement/do not implement this policy in their classrooms, and to explain the continuities and discontinuities between the new assessment policy and the assessment practices. The research is situated in the tradition of policy implementation studies, and broadly seeks to understand the relationship between policy and practice in the context of assessment reform.

Rationale

I was drawn to this study by multiple rationales. First, was my interest and experience as a policy maker required to oversee and support the implementation of educational policies in public schools. In this context I found myself responding to the challenge posed by Allington (2000:17), who charged that: "it is surprising how little attention policy makers seem to have paid to the implementation process". Second, the Ministerial Review Committee on Curriculum 2005[2] (Chisholm, 2000), reported a lack of alignment between the curriculum policy and the assessment policy, and that there had been a lack of clarity with regard to assessment requirements. This Review Team did not, however, conduct a detailed study of the new assessment policy. Research conducted by the Centre for Education Policy Development, Evaluation and Management (CEPD) (see CEPD, 2000, 2001, 2002) also reported that teachers struggled with issues of assessment, although these studies did not conduct sustained investigation into assessment policy and implementation. This lack of empirical work on assessment policy reform and implementation in the South African context further motivated this inquiry.

A further motivation for conducting this research was that the school improvement movement had not paid sufficient attention to the issue of assessment policy or practice. For example, an eminent proponent of school improvement, Hopkins

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[2] In 1999, the second democratic Minister of Education of South Africa had commissioned the review of the new curriculum for schooling, named Curriculum 2005 that had been introduced in 1997 by the first democratic government of South Africa.

(2002:2) argues that "real" improvement is achieved by modifying classroom practice and by adapting the organizational or management arrangements within the school to support teaching and learning. No mention is made of assessment. This lack of a concentrated focus on assessment in the policy research literature led me to select the policy on assessment for further study because assessment has provided the impetus for major educational reform efforts worldwide (see Black and William, 1998a, 1998b; Harlen et al., 1998; Pryor and Akwesi, 1998; Rothman, 1995; Taylor and Vinjevold, 1999).

The literature on policy implementation points to an intractable problem – the distance or gap between policy intentions and policy outcomes. Policy implementation scholars offered competing theories explaining the dissonance between education policy and teachers' classroom practice. However, the limitation of these accounts in much of the literature is in the assumption that change is achieved when the surface features of change are observable or measurable, for example, improvements in test scores or changes in teacher behaviours. I argue that such perspectives are inadequate because surface measures of change cannot probe for the depth or test the sustainability of change since only external performance is being assessed and not changes in beliefs, emotions, attitudes, values and, of course, knowledge and skills across contexts. This gap in the literature also fuelled my interest in this study to seek a different theoretical frame for understanding the relationship between the new assessment policy and its implementation/non-implementation by classroom teachers. I also wished to add and contribute to the theoretical basket of explanations for understanding policy implementation, especially in developing country contexts. The study proposes an alternative conceptual framework for understanding and explaining policy implementation/non-implementation by classroom teachers.

The crucial importance of policy implementation is highlighted in the quotation provided at the beginning of this chapter, made by the President of South Africa. But this does not mean that policies will necessarily be implemented because of political statements, however important they may be. Policy implementation, a process of realizing policy goals in practice, is not as simple as it may seemingly appear in the

presidential quotation. With such political directives Maina and Muliro (2001) in Ward et al (2003:135) argue that:

> These 'grand scheme' announcements …carry with them the weight of political imperative. However, as <u>ex cathedra</u> directives they are rarely linked to any real tangible output…

I agree that the implementation of policies is important, but its success at the level of practice has been less than favourable. And as I have indicated various theories exist that explain the problems relating to policy implementation. I add to this body of theoretical explanations.

The Conceptual Framework for the study

The study represents a theoretical experiment designed to explain policy implementation/non-implementation using the construct of <u>deep change</u>. The conceptual framework on deep change recognises different kinds of change such as non-change, superficial change, temporary or unsustainable change, mechanical change, incremental change and deep change. Deploying this conceptual framework, the study argues that for the successful implementation of the new assessment policy teachers need to change deeply. Following the logic of the conceptual framework, the study contends that deep change results when the theory of education underpinning the policy is strong, and accompanied by an equally strong theory of change. Arising from the conceptual framework the study posits three propositions, namely:

Proposition One: *Teachers may not have a deep, sophisticated understanding of a new assessment policy, even if there is evidence of strong rhetorical commitment to this policy.*

Proposition Two: *Teachers may not be able to reconcile their own assessment beliefs and capacities with the stated goals of a new assessment policy.*

Proposition Three: *Teachers may find that traditional assessment practices (that is, examinations and testing) hold greater efficacy in the classrooms than the alternatives required by a new assessment policy.*

The study subjects these propositions to empirical and theoretical verification using the data from the two case study reports, the conceptual framework on 'deep change'

and the new requirements as signalled in the new assessment policy of the South African government.

The Methodological Plan of the Study

A qualitative, descriptive and exploratory case study approach was utilized for this study. The approach was informed by the three research questions that guided the study, namely:

1. *What are teacher understandings and beliefs with regard to new official assessment policy?*
2. *In the context of official policy, how do teachers practice assessment in their classrooms?*
3. *How can the continuities and discontinuities between official policy on assessment and teachers' assessment practice be explained?*

I chose the purposive sampling method in that only teachers who were willing and able to participate were included in the study. This sample included two secondary school teachers, each teaching Grade 8 Natural Science, from two different schools; one from a well-resourced urban school and another from an under-resourced township school. A variety of methods and tools were used to collect data for the study, including questionnaires, free-writing schedules, pre- and post-classroom observation interviews, non-participant classroom observations, assessment-related documents from the case study teachers, and records of the case study teachers and observed students. These methods and tools were subjected to peer-review as means of conferring rigour, credibility and confidence in the study. In addition, the research instruments were pilot tested with two teachers. The feedback received from peers as well as from the pilot process led to adjustments in both the broad research strategy and the specific research instruments.

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The two teachers were given a chance to comment on the contents of the transcripts. I prepared comprehensive reports after each classroom observation and these reports were also given to each teacher for comment. I utilized the process of methodological triangulation to further

strengthen the validity of my findings. I employed the assistance of a critical friend to externally review the completed case reports of each teacher as a further step in establishing validity of the research process. I tested each proposition by the analysis arising from comparing each case study report of the two teachers, within the conceptual framework on deep change as it applied to the new assessment policy.

Limitations of the study

The study identifies many shortcomings. As a researcher, I had been the primary instrument for the collection and analysis of the data in this case study; this leaves the possibility of researcher bias being introduced into the research study. Questions relating to ethics, reliability, lack of rigour and validity become relevant in such an instance. I responded by employing strategies described above, such as allowing the two teachers access to the transcribed interviews and reports on classroom observations, using methodological triangulation, and seeking a critical reader to evaluate the case reports.

Case studies provide little basis for making scientific generalisations. I made the purpose of the research study explicit, that is, to explore and interpret the findings in the particular contexts of investigation, that is, in relation to the two teachers being studied. The study can be "generalizable to theoretical propositions" (Yin, 1994: 10) but obviously not to all teachers and to all schools.

The policy itself is being taken as given, that is, it is not being conceptually critiqued, but the validity of policy intention in terms of its implementation was being investigated. It may seem that policy implementation is seen as being separate from the policy process. I make it explicit that I embrace an integrated view of policy, that policy implementation is part of the policy making process. But the focus of this study is on policy implementation.

This qualitative case study resulted in voluminous amounts of data that needed to be managed and secured properly. Slippage can be costly in terms of continuity essential for the coherence of the study. For each set of data from each teacher, I created a logical case study database that was safely and methodically stored but easily

retrievable. I also made manual and electronic copies of each case study database and stored them in three different places for safekeeping.

This study does not provide strategies on how to facilitate deep change among teachers. In other words, it lacks an agenda for action. I respond to this potential criticism by raising questions for ongoing policy research.

The significance of the study

The educational research literature on policy implementation is replete with evidence showing that most policy reform efforts that have sought to significantly alter the accepted patterns of schooling have emerged as shadows of their original intent. Many studies have attempted to account for this "paradox of change without difference" (Woodbury and Gess-Newsome: 2002: 763). However, such accounts tend to assume that change is achieved when the surface features of change are observable or measurable. This study argues that this perspective is inadequate because such measures of change cannot test for the depth and sustainability of change. This study provides a different theoretical analysis for understanding the relationship between the new assessment policy and its implementation/non-implementation by classroom teachers. In advancing a new theoretical perspective, I attempt to add new scholarly understandings and insights on the policy-practice dilemma in educational settings. The study also raises questions related to the depth and sustainability of educational policy reforms, with implications for theory, practice and (policy) research.

OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter One, this chapter**,** presented the research problem, namely, understanding the relationship between policy and practice. It also explains the rationale, the conceptual framework and the methodological plan for the study. The chapter explains how validity had been established in the research process, as well as identified limitations in the study and how this was addressed. The chapter highlights the significance of the study in terms of offering a broader theoretical framework for

understanding the relationship between policy and practice and its significance for both theory and further inquiry.

Chapter Two explores the literature on policy implementation in both developed and developing countries. The chapter found that many of the explanations offered for the gap between policy and practice were inadequate in that they assumed that change is achieved when the surface features of change are observable. The chapter suggests and articulates a new theoretical framework that may more adequately account for the deep changes expected of teachers for the successful implementation of new policies.

Chapter Three presents a broader theoretical framework, referred to as 'deep change' to understand and explain the relationship between policy and practice. The chapter distinguishes amongst different kinds of change such as non-change, superficial change, temporary or unsustainable change, mechanical change and <u>deep change</u>. This framework suggests that for the successful implementation of a new assessment policy, teachers need to change deeply. It also suggests factors that could lead to deep changes in teachers. The chapter advances three propositions on change which is tested in this study. How the framework on deep change is used to test the propositions is also described in this chapter.

Chapter Four describes the research design and methodology chosen to explore the three critical research questions in the study. A qualitative, descriptive and exploratory case study approach was utilized. Two teachers represented the sample, each teaching Grade 8 Natural Science, one from a well-resourced urban school, and another from an under-resourced township school. A variety of methods and tools were used to collect data for the study including questionnaires, free writing schedules, pre- and post-classroom observation interviews, non-participant classroom observations, assessment related documents from the case study teachers, and records of the case study teachers and observed students. This methodology resulted in the compilation of case study reports for each teacher.

In **Chapters Five and Six** I describe each teacher's personal and professional profiles as well as descriptions of the schools and the observed classes. I report on each teacher's understandings and beliefs about the new assessment policy and how each

teacher practised assessment in the classroom. The chapters also begin to analyse and interpret the data against the propositions made. I engage in this preliminary analysis as a foundation to Chapter Eight of this dissertation.

Chapter Seven compares the two teachers' understandings and beliefs about the new assessment policy against the backdrop of their assessment practices. The cross-case analysis raises fundamental conceptual and procedural questions emerging from the observation of convergence and divergence between the two teachers' understandings and beliefs about the assessment policy and their assessment practices. These questions set an agenda for Chapter Eight of this study.

In **Chapter Eight**, the final chapter of the study, I provide possible explanations for the observed assessment practices of each of the two teachers. This is in response to the third research question of the study: *How can the continuities and discontinuities between official policy on assessment and teachers' assessment practice be explained?* I present the argument or thesis of the study and its implications for further research and enquiry. My argument is situated against the rationale of the study described in Chapter One, the literature review explored in Chapter Two and the conceptual framework developed in Chapter Three. In testing the propositions I suggest that the teachers in the study had a surface understanding of the new assessment policy, and that they were unable to reconcile their own assessment beliefs and capacities with the stated goals of the new assessment policy. I suggest that teachers need to change deeply in order to realise new policy objectives. And in order to facilitate such changes I argue that policymakers need to construct policies underpinned by a strong theory of education and driven by an equally strong theory of change.

In the next chapter I review the literature on policy implementation.