

# 3

## The Conceptual Framework

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

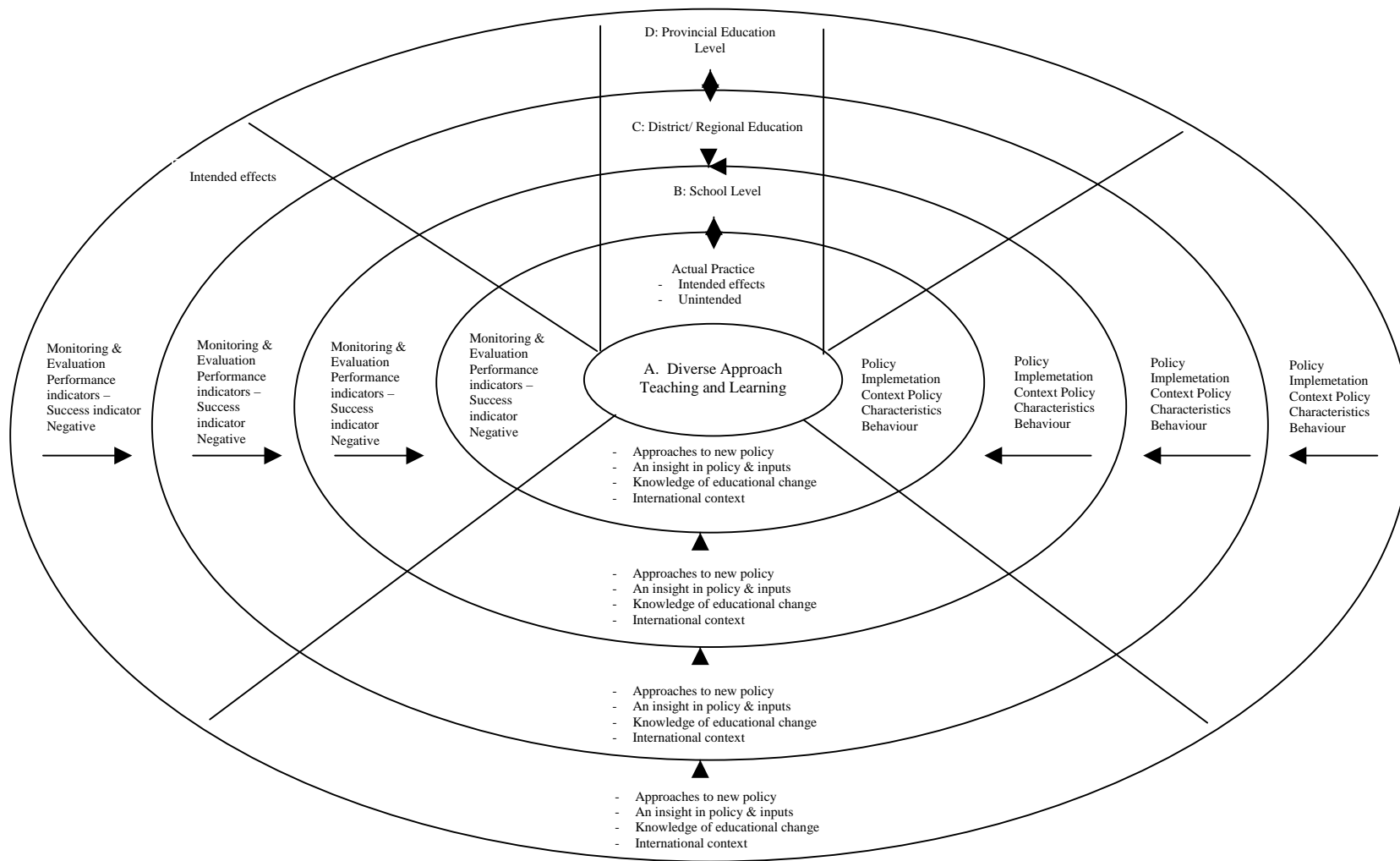
In this study I use “systems theory” as the conceptual framework to both structure and explain the course of the NNSSF policy from national to local levels of the education “systems”. I choose systems theory because of the following factors:

Systems theory views the organisation both as a whole and part of a larger environment, hence the individual levels of the education system are looked at in the tracing of the NNSSF policy movement from the centre to the school levels, and it stresses the importance of maximum functionality of each level of the system in order to have the desired effects.

System theory further implies that the success of a policy hinges on coherent and systematic linkages between the different elements, levels or components of any education system. In this study, there should be a “tight coupling” of national and provincial to district and to school level components of the system, if there is any hope of achieving success. A school funding policy travels in a decentralized system, through the track of these key components of the education system down to the school where its success or failure can be determined.

System theory can therefore assist to explain the policy breakdown, slippage or failure as a malfunctioning in any of these system components can. Lyell and Leroy (1975:34) support the point further that “major function of system theory is to integrate and explain the relationship that exists in the system”. This resonates well with the facilitative diagram as depicted in Figure 3.1. It also falls properly within the envisaged conceptual framework developed for this study.

**FIGURE 3.1: THE RATIONAL PATHWAY IN WHICH POLICY IS ASSUMED TO BE TRAVELLING FROM THE DoE TO THE SCHOOLS**



*Figure 31. As Policy travels from one level to the other it comes across some factors which cause it to breakdown thus producing unintended effects. To minimise this a holistic and integrated approach is required.*

### 3.2 DEVELOPMENT OF A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In order to address the two critical research questions above, it has become absolutely necessary to apply an appropriate conceptual framework to respond fully to four critical tasks, namely: to facilitate a brief synthesis of the review of literature (i.e., chapter two); to give this qualitative inquiry form and shape by guiding the development of data collection instruments as well as the data collection processes in chapter four (research design and methodology); to facilitate the organization and data analysis process (chapter five and six); And finally, the interface between theory and practice in chapter seven i.e., theorising policy implementation.

I have therefore chosen a socio-political framework as a lens for this study because:

*Policy is not so much implemented (as planned) as it is re-invented at each level of the system. What ultimately happens in schools and classrooms is less related to the intentions of policy makers than to leadership and motivations that operate in local context (Darling-Hammond, 1998:647-648).*

The choice and use of the socio-political conceptual framework is informed by several factors. Four are worth mentioning: *Firstly*, policies in general are not only socially orientated, they are also the products of a political system such as parliament. *Secondly*, redistributive and distributive policies in particular like the NNSSF policy are not confined to the allocation of limited resources only. They also involve a contested field which has power (whether formal or informal) or influence to allocate resources. The argument is that implementation as a process is connected to the literature that concentrates on the expression of power, authority, influence and competition at contextual level (Anderson, 1994:18; Hargreaves, 1998:748). This means that the announcement of a new policy does not immediately result in the disappearance of vested personal interests. Such interests are likely to surface during the implementation. *Thirdly*, the socio-political framework gives a recognition the presence of power and fear in the process of educational change. For example, people often refuse to share resources equitably; even those who claim to be liberal often display this behavioural tendency. This puzzling behaviour easily finds support and explanation in the argument that “*even if the cultural and local contexts have been taken care of, even if teachers were allowed to understand and construct their own meanings*” in the end, educational change also includes emotional, political and social elements (Hargreaves, 1998:282). On the basis of this

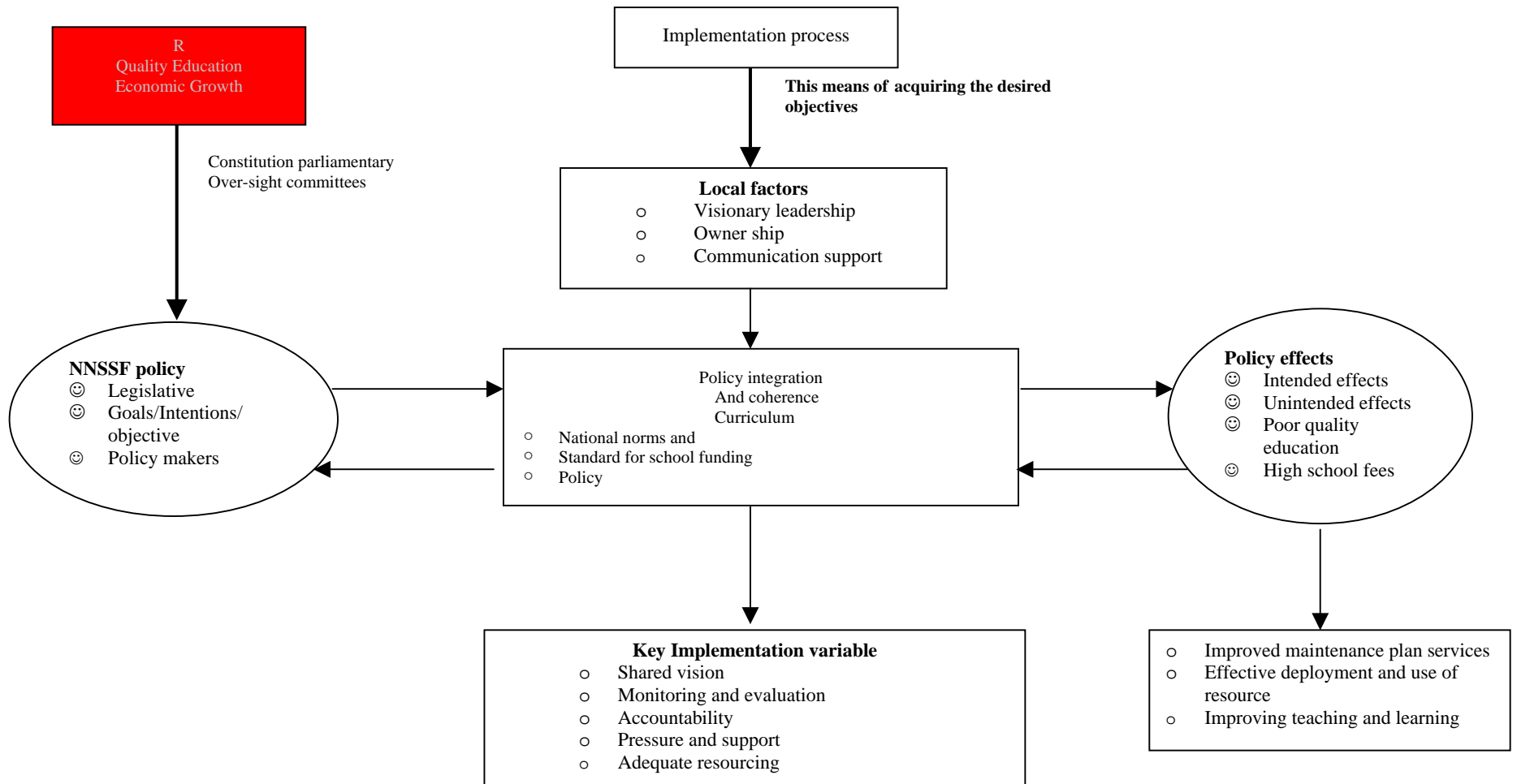
argument, for example, certain groups have used the SASA 1996 to prevent the government from putting a ceiling on the charge of high school fees and denied certain population groups' access to schools. The notorious case of Vryburg High School, where black learners were denied admission by the white school governing body (NWED, 2000a:16) is a case in point. In this regard the powers of schools' governing bodies are cited as issues, which do not allow "interference" of the state in the public school system. Despite this argument, often associated with the conservative white population, the State in South Africa still remains the main employer of teachers who are rendering service in public schools. This goes to show how power politics manifests itself at the implementation level.

The use of the socio-political framework is also meant to explain the realization or non-realization of equity in education in the South African context. Most importantly, that education is not only public news but also political. It is often seen as a gatekeeper of opportunities, values and knowledge if not handled appropriately it can lead to the development of conflict. Therefore, the existence of a conflict or contestation for resources is understandable. The employment of the socio-political conceptual framework also assumes that devolving power to schools under the pretext of self-management and democratic participation is not sufficient to ensure the attainment of equity in diverse forms. The implication is that successful implementation of the equity-driven policies requires a broad and holistic approach, a view which is supported by Nieto (1998:242) who says:

*A social-political context takes into account the larger societal and political forces in a particular society and the impact they may have on student learning. A socio-political context consists of issues of power and includes decisions of structure inequality based on stratification due to race, social class, gender, ethical and other differences.*

In grappling with the usefulness and relevance of the socio-political conceptual framework for this inquiry, it is important to state up front that the framework is not generic, based on a single, elegant and coherent framework and a well-tested theory. And it is not applied rigidly, hence the use of the "systems" theory which is all embracing. In brief the socio-political conceptual framework guiding this inquiry is a combination of two main perspectives: System dynamic as delineated and used by Morris (1996:427-447), and system discourse as described by Wane & Isseke (2000:3). The socio-political framework construction is illustrated in Figure 3.2 below.

**FIGURE 3.2: THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ILLUSTRATION**



The implementation of the NNSF can be viewed as larger scale or “third-order change” because it seeks to alter the basic ways schools as organizations function. This means that it aims at the qualitative change of the school as a whole (Clemente, 1992). Other perspectives which recognize the non-neutrality of policy implementation and the use of power at the zones of implementation are also connected to the socio-political framework.

Welner (2001:234) argues that “*the “zone” framework illustrates the reality that an untold number of forces constantly shape and re-shape a reforms context. When a reform idea first enters a site, it takes its place on top of layers and layers of history.*” This dimension of the zone of mediation at the implementation stage appears to add power to the socio-political framework since the recognition of a myriad of factors is taken into account.

Since the NNSF policy emerged from the DoE down to the school system through both the provincial and regional levels, (Figure 3.1) that attempts to portray the pathway along which policy is assumed to travel. In this regard, the overall expectation of the equity-driven policy is that its implementation at school level will ultimately lead to the equitable distribution of the limited resources to the needy schools, subsequent improvement and as well as quality provision of education

This line of argument is underpinned by Coleman and Bush’s (1993:2) belief that a “shift is not confined to grant maintained (self-managing) schools. Rather it reflects the belief that organizations are more effective if they are controlled and managed at institutional levels”. This assumption appears to be the driving force behind most of the educational decentralization efforts in the developed and developing democracies. In this connection Figure 3.1 illustrates the educational system as a whole, which is made-up of several levels or sub-systems. Figure 3.1 seeks to demonstrate the linear and top-down orientated policy implementation process within the framework of the decentralization mode of delivering public education.

On the other hand the systemic dynamic perspective is concerned with the understanding that the interconnections, feedback and dynamics of complex systems like schools, educational

districts and regional levels (Morris, 1996:429) are essential for school effectiveness. This suggests how important is the question of feedback in organisations.

However, Morecroft and Sterman (1994:141) recognize that people have great difficulty in dealing effectively with environments of even moderate complexity.

The central concept that system dynamists use to understand the system structure is the idea of a two-way feedback (Meadows & Robinson (1985:34). The idea of a feedback looks useful in tracking down the effects of school finance equity policy up to the school level. Of crucial importance is that system dynamics offer reasons why the feedback loop associated with the rational model of organization has failed (Morris, 1996:429). This implies that system dynamics perspective goes beyond the known limitations of the rational choice theory, which is linear, scientific and objective (Anderson, 1998:14) in nature.

System discourse<sup>17</sup> is a discursive framework that illustrates the functions and relationships of the substances that structure the education system (Wane, 2000:3). It shows the systematic power, imbalances, as well as barriers that are embedded within the various sub-systems of the larger society. My contention is that this model when combined with the system dynamics would pinpoint the impediment and tension within the education system especially at school level.

A system perspective holds that schools and districts use reforms to reinforce their equilibrium as institutionalized organizations. This suggests that the institutions are more comfortable with the status quo. They block formal feedback (distort it) to decision makers in order to perpetuate the *status quo* (Morris, 1996:427). In this perspective, practitioners do not give policy makers and analysts reliable feedback that can assist in the policy design and further refinement of the policy implementation. For example, the failure of redeployment of teachers despite “official” claims of success is a case in point (Pampallis & Motala, 2001:46). This practice seems to happen during the course of external evaluation. Institution may therefore

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<sup>17</sup> System discourse (zone of mediation): illustrates the functions and the relationships among key layers of the system discourse.

perceive external evaluation as a threat to their “autonomy” or comfort zones. In this regard systems perspective can go a long way to explain policy constraints and resistance.

This research programme goes beyond the rational model of reform in applying a systems perspective<sup>18</sup> Cuban (1990:5) argues that the rational model has not fared well in practice, and that the realities of the school environment do not conform well to rationalistic assumptions. Since the functional feedback process is crucial to the success of the educational reform, issues of power, inter-connectedness and a working understanding of the dynamics of the organization provided by a systems dynamic perspective within the framework of “systems” theory will assist in determining the actual breakdown of the equity driven policy as it travels from one level to the other.

It can, therefore, be argued that when schools have developed an internal capacity to provide undistorted feedback about the effects of a policy, earlier intervention may lead to systemic reform process or policy review.

The two identified perspectives seem to be well connected to the political bargaining perspective that recognizes policymaking as a pluralistic process that represents the distribution and exercise of power, authority and influence among actors with competing preferences (Welner, 2001:41). It is my considered view that such authority, power and influence often extend to the stage of policy translation, thus diluting the implementation process, in a way producing the unintended consequences or slippage.

This analytic framework has been successfully applied in a previous study research for the linking of school finance reforms and equity.

Hirth (1966:468-479) For example, has discovered that instead of disconnected reform initiatives prevalent in the 1980s, the 1990s is the beginning of a new era of educational reforms that strive for co-ordination, integration, and cohesion around a clear set of outcomes. Within the framework of systemic reform, it is essential that policies leading the efforts be co-

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<sup>18</sup> System dynamic: is concerned with understanding the inter-connections, feedback and dynamics of a complex system like school and educational district. It puts emphasis on two-way feedback process.



ordinated with school finance reforms that foster equity. This approach is useful since I view equity policy as more than the mere allocation of resources. It has to be operationalised at all fronts to yield the desired results.

The use of a conceptual framework that combines two perspectives differs from the nominative practices of using a single model to facilitate inquiry. In the sense that it does accommodate a variety of perspectives. Various scholars employed single framework such as managerial efficiency, pragmatism and entrepreneur (Knight, 1994:27; Thompson *et al.*, 1994:148) to facilitate the implementation of school financial management. Although some progress was made through the use of these frameworks, one of the major criticisms against them is their inability to give recognition to contextual realities and too much emphasis on rational planning. The truth is that you can only plan for what you can see (Knight, 1994:29), therefore a contingent, flexible plan that can address unanticipated developments becomes absolute necessity.

In the light of the above argument consideration to use a socio-political conceptual framework that employs two perspectives has been informed by two factors. *Firstly* there is perhaps no single answer to problems. A multiplicity of approaches can be utilized to look at a particular problem. In practice two or more conceptual frameworks can be considered in implementing a programme. *Secondly* the combined use of both system dynamic and system discourse which often entails what is called the zone of mediation complement each other by adding the power of critical examination to the inquiry. This is very important to empirical studies especially in the period of post-modernism. *Thirdly* the use of several models or perspectives in the socio-political conceptual framework has been used with success in developed countries like the United States of America. For example, Geary (1992:5) successfully used the conceptual framework that combines the political system models, designed by Easton (1975:75), and the political bargaining model described by Allison (1971) to guide her research on the policy-making process resulting in the fiscal policy for special education in the State of Utah, the United States of America. Although the conceptual framework for this inquiry slightly differs from the one developed by Geary (1992:142), the cross cutting themes on both models range from the exercise of power, authority and recognition to environmental factors.

Of significant importance to this inquiry is the fact that the framework in use is employed to guide the policy implementation process in a developing country, which has a different context to the ones in developed countries.

### 3.3 CHAPTER SYNTHESIS

Chapter three of this research study mainly describes how the collected data was analysed by developing a new socio-political conceptual framework. The proposed framework is firmly located within the systems theory as the underlying framework. Since this is a qualitative study, it has become absolutely necessary to include an illustration of how the policy is assumed to be travelling from the DoE (i.e., centre) to the school level via both the provincial and regional structures. This is briefly captured in Figure 3.1. Furthermore, Figure 3.2 is an illustration that demonstrate the importance of the policy implementation process by highlighting key variables in the policy process such as: Legislative goals, policy integration and both the intended and the unintended effects of the policy. Finally, the propositions developed are regarded as key in pulling key variable together in order to address the broad goals of policy.

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