Chapter Five

SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE INQUIRY
A Nuanced Understanding of Education Policy Change

5.1   Introduction

In the previous chapter, I conducted an analysis of four major themes representing the understanding and experience of education policy change of some primary school teachers. The themes were constructed from an inductive analysis using Atlas.ti and interpreted against various theoretical standpoints.

Against the background of education policy change in South Africa in recent years, I now explore emergent relationships between the thematic categories deployed in this study. I suggest what I consider as its significance and indicate some implications for education policy change. I discuss some implications of qualitative inquiry for education policy development and identify key limitations of this inquiry. I conclude by posing new questions and lines of inquiry which could constitute the "next steps" in an ongoing process of inquiry (Wolcott, 1990:50-61).

Framed by an interpretive inquiry, this study examined the policy experiences of primary school teachers in South Africa. The key question that guided this inquiry was:

How do teachers experience education policy change in South Africa?

A selection of subsidiary questions were constructed during the emerging inquiry:

- How do teachers understand policy change in the classroom situation?
- To what extent are teachers aware of the policy changes being proposed?
- Do teachers believe that policy change affects their classroom practice?
- How do teachers feel about education policy change?
- Why do teachers resist the policy change process?

5.2 Exploring thematic relationships and their meanings for education policy change

Teachers in this inquiry had similar experiences and expectations regarding the process of education policy change. Their personal experiences formed the basis of the four major themes that emerged, namely:

- teachers' emotional responses to education policy change,
- teachers' experiences of discipline and control,
- teachers' understanding of curriculum change, and
- teachers' views of their roles in relation to change.

Until now, the themes have been discussed as separate entities (see Chapter Four). In this chapter, thematic relationships are examined and discussed. Reflecting on the context of practice as discussed by Ball and Bowe (1992:22) and the foregoing analysis, I deduce that teachers are simultaneously the subjects of policy change in terms of subjectivity in understanding, and objects of policy change in terms of their role as implementors.

The first theme – teachers' emotional responses – dominated the inquiry as a major issue in education policy change, sometimes referred to as the subjective meaning of change (Fullan 1991, 1997 and 1998). Teachers' emotional responses and reactions show that policy is not simply received and applied; on the contrary, there are many obstacles to the process of

policy implementation. In this context, Bascia and Hargreaves (2000:12) use the term emotional labour, which is derived from a study by Hochschild (1983). People working in caring and serving professions need to manage their personal emotions in order to elicit desired emotional responses in others. Teachers may experience emotional labour either as exhilarating or as draining and exhausting depending on their work context, which may be either supportive or unsupportive. If teachers experience their emotional labour to be draining they will feel alienated and tired, which in turn will reflect in their work and in how they implement policy change.

Issues like lack of support, low morale, stress, and burnout magnify this. The real force of this negative emotional account, manifesting resistant and reluctant behaviour, is yet to be witnessed in practice. Nevertheless, the notion exists and will probably persist. Resistance to change due to a top-down mandate can imply non-participation of the teacher, purely because of dislike of the political motivation of policy change. Some may see policy as pure politics and others not, which shows that there is little common understanding of policy change. Emotional undercurrents of stress and frustration deterred those who wanted to engage in the change process. In addition, while some teachers knew where and why OBE was introduced and could rationalise that context, others reacted emotionally in that they felt their expertise discounted or minimised. This led to lack of ownership and responsibility, evidenced by the type of impersonal discourse in the third person that was often used by teachers.

My inquiry revealed that educational policy change creates considerable uncertainty and even ambiguity among teachers. This was evidenced in teachers' anxiety, professional isolation, and loss of connection and trust in the education system (see 4.2.9, 4.2.10, 4.5.3). If policy is serious about implementation, policy makers need to take cognisance of these teachers' emotional responses and dispositions towards educational change.

The experienced teachers, particularly those set in their ways or in the interpretation of their roles, felt particularly uneasy since what they had been doing was right for them, contrary to the new imposed and intended changes. Furthermore, establishing a balance between

allowing teachers to find their own way to implement a new curriculum and feelings of emotional abandonment appears critical in teacher support during times of new policy implementation.

While teachers are more often than not passionate about what they do and committed to their pupils, they often have difficulty with implementation. Participants in this research wondered if in fact they were implementing the policy as intended (see 4.4.1 and 4.4.3). Insufficient support and limited exposure to, for example, curriculum workshops left teachers feeling helpless and unprepared for the task at hand. Some quickly realised that they were not going to receive much-needed assistance, and experienced as futile workshopping of the new curriculum (see 4.4.2 and 4.4.4). The implementation of C2005 intensified teachers' workload, often overwhelming them. This is problematic, for on the one hand teachers have to implement the new curriculum and on the other hand they have little if any control over new aspects of their work.

The second theme related to teachers' experiences of discipline and control in the light of new education policies for curriculum and corporal punishment. How teachers dealt with discipline problems in their classrooms and in particular how they dealt with the abolition of corporal punishment led to some interesting findings. Some teachers found the new curriculum impeded classroom discipline in the sense that group work raised the noise levels in most classes. Older teachers in particular found this distressing. Others felt that the new curriculum offered a "loophole for laziness" of teachers in the sense that many would simply prepare less (see 4.3 1, 4.3.2, and 4.4.5). Other issues relating to classroom practice were expressed as problematic and contrary to the intentions of an outcomes-based curriculum. For example, it was felt that some pupils would cope better with the noise and the busyness in the classroom, which could lead to some pupils participating in classroom activities while others contributed very little (see 4.3.3). In addition, the abolition of corporal punishment left many teachers with no real understanding of alternative means of disciplining their learners.

The third theme – curriculum policy change and outcomes-based education – resonated closely with the second theme, and revealed teachers' inner struggles about coping with curriculum change. The emphasis was on how teachers understand and react to the effects of curriculum change. Some teachers attempted to make sense of OBE and C2005, others simply resisted the change process and continued in their old-fashioned ways – that is, in ways with which they were familiar (see 4.2.1, 4.2.2, and 4.2.7). This could easily be read as resistant behaviour by teachers in contesting new policy. Furthermore, the intensified workload and limited time to implement the new curriculum led to further frustration and emotional reactions. Discipline problems arose, since many were ill-prepared to deal with group work. Some experienced the noisy classroom as disturbing; particularly the older staff (see 4.2.2). If some teachers interpret the new curriculum as contributing to deteriorating classroom discipline, we can rightly assume that such policy will be rejected overtly, old practice resumed, and the status quo maintained.

The fourth theme – teachers' views of their professional roles and identities as a consequence of education policy change – relates closely to the emotional dimensions of change, which in turn impact teachers' professional views of "self" and others. It became clear that teachers' professional stances enhanced or inhibited their willingness to engage with curriculum change. In my opinion, low morale, stress, and frustration cloud the professional view of self. Feelings of isolation and little sense of belonging (see 4.4.4) certainly inhibit and prohibit sound curriculum policy implementation (see 4.2.1, 4.2.7 and 4.5.3). We could ask, are teachers in South Africa transformative intellectuals who take up the role of critically reflective researchers, as described by Claus (1999:5, citing Giroux, 1985)? Such teachers, Claus argues, are inquiry-oriented activists and involved in real democratic change. Such teachers can choose to change things, and do not have to follow the system. These teachers are extraordinary resources in our education system, which may inform policy change and its implementation. My inquiry, however, did not reveal such tendencies in teachers, which shows yet another tendency to resistance in the policy change process. Considering how little time teachers do have (see 4.2.6 and 4.4.4), it is likely that very little time would be spent in active and critical reflective research.

From this summary, it should be clear that although the themes can be identified separately, they are intrinsically interwoven and interdependent, and in their inter-relatedness offer some nuanced understanding for policy implementation. Policy implementation remains a complex issue, but may be facilitated if teachers understand policy text better, and experience policy change as a positive and enhancing process. Teachers should be supported to make the connection between theoretical and practical policy change.

5.3   Potential significance and educational implications for policy-practice

From the four themes which emerged from the inquiry, I have drawn the following tentative conclusion with respect to policy implementation. Policy text becomes policy practice at the level of policy implementation. Although I focus on the implementation level, I cannot ignore the theoretical or textual dimension of policy which signals policy change in practice. I have argued in Chapter Two that putting policy into practice, or implementing policy in the classroom, is not a linear or simple process. As stated earlier, this particular inquiry dealt with issues pertaining to "what happens on the ground" or "the educational dynamics on the ground" (cf. Chapter Two, section 2.5). Such "on the ground" issues were revealed in this inquiry. The results of the in-depth, non-directive interviews and open-ended questionnaires contribute to sensitise, inform, and stimulate education policy process debates. I further maintain that unless policy takes teachers' experiences into account, it may run the risk of unsuccessful or inadequate implementation. That is why qualitative inquiry, grounded at the micro level, can offer relevant knowledge to enhance policy implementation.

Firstly, the aim was to extend the knowledge base through a more complex and nuanced understanding of education policy change from teachers' perspectives in terms of their experiences. The experiences comprise a whole range of feelings and emotions that may influence educational practice. These human emotional dimensions are constructed, created and modified, and their meaning therefore plays an interactive and contested role in education policy change. This is supported by theory as expounded by Fullan (1991, 1997, 1998), Ball and Bowe (1992) and Ozga (2000). What has not been dealt with, however, is

what these emotional dimensions and constructed contestations consist of and involve, and how these nuanced sensibilities are situated in a particular South African context.

Secondly, I used an interpretive and qualitative framework to design my inquiry. Not many education policy inquiries in South Africa have been undertaken inductively and a microanalysis into policy change was appropriate, relevant and informing. Micro-level understanding of policy change could close the gap between policy as theoretical text and policy as practice, although such knowledge could remain at the theoretical level and not be implemented. I would argue, though, that more informed choices regarding policy change and policy implementation could be made if evidence of research from teachers' perspectives would be taken into account in the context of policy production.

Thirdly, I implemented new technological developments for qualitative data analysis. The computer software Atlas.ti facilitated an inductive and grounded theory approach for the data analysis and served to manage the enormous amount of raw data efficiently. Using Atlas.ti proved its worth, both on textual and conceptual levels as described in section 3.6.8. I was able to create some order out of the mass of transcripts as I worked with the detail, and yet the integrated whole of the project was always within reach, notably in the "hermeneutic unit" (HU) (see Addenda D, E, and F). The HU enhanced the analysis and allowed for immediate access.

Fourthly, in respect to methodological norms, through the methodological trail of evidence or the audit trail, I attempted to create a trustworthy inquiry, showing a transparent and reliable methodological process, and making some valid deductions from the analysis. For one, the interview data can be accessed either in the hard copy or on CD-ROM. This data can be analysed and interpreted by another researcher. Also, the coding and categories visible in the themes and sub-themes can also be scrutinised for consistency. The obvious problem with regards to coding, is that "every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (Silverman, 2000:147). Importantly, the data is easily accessible and it makes this inquiry transparent and open to further interrogation.

I also attempted to adhere to qualitative methodological norms (see Chapter Three, sections 3.4.1 and 3.4.2) of credibility, transferability and dependability as I questioned myself: Have I indeed presented correctly what the teacher shared? Are some of the identified issues relevant to similar case studies? Have I recorded what I heard accurately? Am I consistent in my listening? The answers to these questions lie in my competence and skill as a researcher. I cannot and do not claim to have been objective or unbiased. The mere fact that that I am a human suggests my subjectivity or sense of self as a woman, as a teacher and as a researcher. In my view, no interpretation of a presentation can really be objective. Furthermore, my experience of teaching could influence my coding scheme, and my knowledge of group relations theory (see Cilliers, 1997) could co-determine what I "see" and "read" in the raw data.

The mere fact that I present what teachers represent or recall in terms of their experiences in the interview discussion, contrary to a non-participant observation, could add to my subjective interpretations. In order to substantiate my claims, I used the literature in an iterative manner to present a sound argument. And lastly, I do not attempt to generalise by making future predictions. On the contrary, this qualitative inquiry is to construct and create new meaning and explain the nuanced understanding of teachers' experiences of education policy change.

5.4   Methodological implications for policy

Finch's (1986) work as referred to in Chapter Three is relevant to my discussion of methodological implications for policy. She argues that it appears that qualitative research plays a minor role in policy-oriented work, that it has an underused potential, and that it should be developed in relation to policy-oriented research. She describes some reasons for this. One is that qualitative research methods are seen as soft, subjective and tentative, while the dominant quantitative approaches are said to be hard, objective and rigorous (Finch, 1986:5). Another reason relates to how policy itself is judged. Policy makers may see research in instrumental terms, while researchers may investigate the intrinsic value of policy. This in itself reflects a difference in language, which implies a difference in interests

and values. Furthermore, she argues that research and policy are differently organised, notably in the time scale of research, which often is longer than policy makers are prepared to wait before coming to a decision (Finch, 1986:139). In addition, she writes that conceptually the worlds of the policy maker and the social scientist differ, and that this impacts on the focus and the approach to research and policy. The makers of social policy, including education policy, rely mostly on recommendations emanating from quantitative data analyses and neglect qualitative research (Finch, 1986:110).

I have referred to Crossley and Vulliamy (1995, 1997) in Chapters One (1.1.3) and Three (3.4.2). Their contribution regarding the value of qualitative research substantiates the significance of my methodology regarding its relevance for policy studies. They contend that:

> Qualitative research in education has a special potential in developing countries; for various historical and cultural reasons, education research in such countries has been dominated by positivist strategies. Many educational research questions in developing countries to which a quantitative research strategy has been applied when either a qualitative one or a combination of the two would have been more appropriate. … [Importantly,] the narrative style of qualitative research reports can also be more accessible to a wider range of potential readers; and in predominantly oral cultures the advantages of personal fieldwork, in-depth interviews and observation are most significant. … [However,] there remains a tendency in many developing countries for research and policy planning to be based on a system perspective that still neglects the realities of schooling in an everyday context.

Appropriately Stromquist (1999:VI), too, makes a strong appeal:

> Comparative education needs more qualitative and ethnographic studies that illuminate complex processes such as educational decision making in governmental bureaucracies … we hope to receive more studies that explore the processes of meaning-making in international and comparative education.

Crossley and Vulliamy (1995:5) also call for interpretive studies that document the processes of change at the school level, in the hope that findings will be more helpful to the improvement and further refinement of implementation strategies. The connection between

comparative education and qualitative research is accentuated by Vulliamy *et al.* (1997:101), as they quote Stenhouse (1979:9): "Comparative education will miss making an important contribution to the understanding of schooling if it does not participate in the current development of case study approaches to educational processes and educational institutions." They proceed, citing Welch (1993:11):

> Such approaches are peculiarly suited to the investigation of the manner in which curriculum policies are actually implemented in practice and need not be subject to the critique made of ethnomethodologists that micro-ethnographies ignore the way in which such slices of macro life are shaped by more macro structures and forces in society.

I concur with Crossley & Vulliamy (1995:6ff) who argue that while national education policy change influences teachers' work, particularly if it deals with curriculum policy change, there are some hidden contextual micro decision-making processes and dynamics which have been ignored. These hidden dimensions – such as teachers' emotional experiences and resistance to policy change – impact the manner in which national and local (here provincial) education policy change is (or is not) implemented at school and classroom level. In this context Stromquist (1999:IV) adds another crucial dimension to this debate, and implores:

> Research that shows the connections between individual educational lives and meso and macro levels of social actions, especially political and economic policies, is also crucial. Attention to local realities is imperative. At the same time, we need to show their dependence, and, at times, their influence, upon meso and macro conditions and institutions.

I wish to raise two final points about policy-related research for educational change in a country such as South Africa. First, the methodology of qualitative field research by local, experienced teachers could present findings that may be useful in policy discussions and for more sophisticated analyses. There is the question, though, of who could carry out such inquiries and who has the time to conduct such research (see also section 5.2). Furthermore, policy makers and policy researchers may acknowledge the wisdom and the expertise of teachers and build on that. Second, qualitative inquiry reveals nuanced understanding of

policy change. Such knowledge could lead to more focused and in-depth discussions of policy implementation.

5.5 Limitations of the inquiry

In this section, I wish to make explicit what I did not intend to accomplish and what the design of the study inherently will not allow. The limitations are those characteristics of design, methodology, and my role as researcher, which were discussed in detail in Chapter Three. These can be regarded as the parameters of the application of interpretations of the data, the constraints on generalisability and utility of findings that are the result of the design, or methods that establish internal and external validity. The most obvious limitations would relate to the ability to draw descriptive generalisations. This implies that my particular findings are not representative of all schools in South Africa, nor that my identified themes are typical of all teachers. Furthermore, I do not claim to have identified all the possible themes of teachers' experiences of education policy change.

5.6 Some concluding thoughts and possibilities for future research

I concede that this qualitative inquiry into education policy change may not offer quick-fix solutions to education policy implementation processes, or the education policy process *per se*. However, I believe that some comprehension of the vastness and complexity of these processes may facilitate a deeper, sophisticated and more complex understanding, enabling and supporting the education policy change process. Also, I hope to have added some comprehensible colour to the debate and to complement other studies on this topic. I showed how teachers' experiences may be affected by education policy change and how teachers affect policy.

Put differently, people, processes, practices, and policies evoke interwoven and complex dynamics in education, which cannot be viewed in a linear approach, as if once policy has been initiated it is implemented as intended. Unlike some preconceptions, education policy change is not primarily classroom change. On the contrary, education policy change cannot be fully captured or grasped without its heterogeneous contexts, processes, and dynamics.

Darling-Hammond (1998) (section 4.5.3) explains the relationship between policy and practice. She writes that

> constructivist relationships between research, policy and practice ... allows reciprocal learning to occur. Researchers cannot hand knowledge to policymakers to enact the new mandates anymore than policymakers can hand new practices to teachers to enact in classrooms. ...Trying to mandate what matters most, without building capacity for new practice, leads to certain failure. If we have learnt anything about [education policy] change it is that all the actors in the system need to develop first-hand deep understanding of new ideas and of the complex kinds of practice needed to carry them off (Darling-Hammond, 1998:664-665).

This brings me to the point of eliciting some new questions, clearly realising that any investigation raises more questions than answers. This inquiry could, of course, have taken another route, departing from a critical perspective, doing discourse analysis. Also, a longitudinal investigation using an action research approach could be designed, implementing an "instrument" and investigating the intervention and how change takes place. Ultimately, I would argue that the choice of methodology is determined by the research question, and as researchers we need clarity on "what" we wish to know and "how" we intend to find out.

Personally, I would make further inquiries into specific issues relating to group work and policy implementation, as well as competition and rivalry in a context of educational transformation, which emerged from this inquiry. I thought about the following questions arising from my inquiry.

- Why do the experiences of education policy change of older and younger staff differ and what does that mean for the educational practice?
- Why is group work in schools successful or unsuccessful?
- In the context of lifelong learning, how can teacher education address some of the emerging themes of this inquiry?

- How can the gap between policy and practice be "closed" in order to reach sound policy implementation?

Any investigation into educational matters should make see some practical suggestions. I suggest workshop and information sessions (cf. Fullan, 1998:227) that could facilitate policy implementation and where teachers could learn a great deal about education policy change, although policy makers may not be able to get teachers to act on new knowledge.

Teachers may be very successful in one situation, but fail dismally in another. It is important to note that it is virtually impossible to ever know enough to manoeuvre change in the next situation. While "policy change facilitation workshops" could offer some opportunities to deal experientially with policy change, the lack of change facilitators and consultants appears problematic (cf. Addenda G and K). Participation in such experiential workshops relates to what Fullan (1998:222-223) calls "starting with inner learning" – that is, the very first place to begin the change process is within ourselves. Here teachers could deal with their emotional reactions and resistance. Awareness regarding their inherent way of being may facilitate a deeper understanding of where their resistance is coming from. Some teachers merely resist a process because it is imposed from the top. Others have serious reservations precisely due to their years of teaching experience. Either way, these underlying dynamics need to be voiced and processed in a safe environment with well-qualified facilitators. Emotional reactions, seen in the low morale of teachers, cannot be wished away. Such an atmosphere inhibits the school climate that should enhance learning.

This study has informed us that teachers are part of the education system in terms of their social and historic context and their subjective realities. They construct, filter, mediate and shape their educational practice and certainly do not receive policy change as empty vessels or naïve readers. Carter and O'Neill (1995:85) argue that "policy developers need to recognise that policy cannot be simply handed over like a parcel in a cloakroom; there have to be procedures in place to ensure its safe delivery and translation into requisite action."

I would suggest that research focuses on the implementation of policy change and that appropriate methodological approaches be designed for such inquiries. Furthermore, education policy implementation is untidy, even messy, a process of mediation between competing interests, which can have unexpected outcomes. Research, according to Dyer (1999:47), should thus depart from focusing on how individuals relate to policy change.

In sum, the main question has been dealt with. Firstly, the experiences and understandings of selected primary school teachers have been analytically described, emphasising the contested and complex nature of education policy change. Secondly, the analysis showed how intended policy as text could be inhibited in its translation into effective educational practice, which is partly due to the variety of nuanced experiences, a lack of understanding, and resistance of teachers in the process of policy change implementation. This may allude to a probable gap between education policy and education practice. Thirdly, a nuanced understanding of teachers' experiences may contribute to the body of knowledge of education policy change, and some practical suggestions, in the form of workshops for teachers, could assist education managers and policy makers. Fourthly, I showed in this inquiry that from the ontological and epistemological perspective, teachers' realties are many and understandings are constructed. Needless to add that this is just as relevant for teachers as for policy makers. Different perspectives and diverse expectations all influence the change process, both in the production and implementation phases. I hope that this research will sensitise and inform education policy makers about the complexity of the educational practice which they seek to impact through policy change.

Lastly, I hope I have walked softly through this inquiry, not intruding into teachers' lives, but really learning from them – not manipulating them, but trying to give them the opportunity to "voice" themselves on this momentous education policy change. This has been a gratifying and a profound journey. I wish to express my sincere appreciation to these five special teachers who laboured with me in this inquiry, who shared so much of their time, insight and wisdom, without which I would not be able share the significance and richness of the data, bringing this dissertation to fruition. I hope that this work will raise some critical questions about the future of education policy change in South Africa.