

# How primary school teachers experience education policy change in South Africa

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## Abstract

*South Africa has been in a process of far-reaching restructuring and is still witnessing a plethora of many policies initiating and seeking educational change. Education policy for educational change only becomes reality once it is implemented at the micro-level, or at the classroom level. Teachers indeed are the key role players in this implementation phase and are, more often than not, the silent voices in the process, ignored and often discounted at this stage of educational change. How they experience and understand the policy change or how the human side of policy change is contextualised, remains in South Africa a problem to be explored and explained in educational research. From an interpretive perspective, this article explains how teachers experience education policy change and how this might effect policy implementation.*

## Introduction and problem statement

How do teachers experience and understand education policy change? This paper hopes to answer this question and aims to highlight new, deeper and more complex understandings of teachers' roles as interpreters and enactors of education policy change. Policy-makers at national levels usually produce policy and schools and teachers remain in the background. Although teacher unions may represent them at policy level, teachers' voices are seldom heard. The emphasis is clearly on education policy production (*cf. Bowe et al., 1992, 6*) and to a lesser extent on the implementation of policy, which are mainly seen as two separate processes.

Despite the growing literature on educational change and policy change, relatively little has

been done on the experiences of primary school teachers and policy change in the context of developing countries such as South Africa. Literature that is available on teachers' experiences of policy change relates mostly to educational contexts where schools are well resourced, teachers are highly qualified, and teacher-student ratios are low. Contrary to such enriched educational contexts, it appears reasonable to assume that teachers' experiences and understandings of policy change in a developing context would be influenced and constructed by the contexts in which they work. Also in this regard, Reay (1998, 194) cites Ball (1994) "... the teacher is increasingly an absent presence in the discourses of education policy, an object rather than a subject of discourse". Sikes (1992, 36f) supports this view, that teachers have to implement policies, even though in the current educational Zeitgeist they are unlikely to have been involved in their formulation. They are required to change themselves and what they do, to meet specifications laid down by policy makers who neither know them or the contexts in which they work. Perhaps the time has come to involve teachers, who are called upon to participate fully in the education policy change process.

From an interpretive or qualitative perspective of inquiry, the main question guided this investigation: How do primary school teachers experience education policy in South Africa. I have conducted semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and used open-ended questionnaires. Furthermore I analysed the data, used computer aided qualitative data software, Atlas.ti and worked inductively, interpreting data with related literature.

## **The role of teachers and education policy change**

The role of teachers can no longer be overlooked, for policy change will not have the desired effect if they are not accompanied by a supportive process intended to strengthen the role of teachers. This realisation that teachers are imperative as implementers of 'new' policy, in order to reform, restructure or transform schools and classrooms, calls for a focus on teachers who are often seen as either impervious or unaffected, or as resistant to the education policy change. This notion reflects certain reservations about stances that place teachers solely or largely in the role of 'implementers' of policy, or policy change, discounting what Bowe *et al.* (1992, 119) call different 'interpretational stances', implicating an active role on the part of the teacher.

Implementation of policy poses many demands on teachers in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, which does not take place without interpretation or recreation of policy. These interpreted versions of policy are created from personal, subjective frame of references. Bowe *et al.* (1992, 22) elaborate on this:

Practitioners do not confront policy texts as naïve readers, they come from histories, with experience, with values and purposes of their own, and they have vested interests in the meaning of policy. Policies will be interpreted differently as the histories, experiences, values, purposes and interests which make up the arena differ. The simple point is that policy writers cannot control the meanings of their texts. Part of their texts will be rejected, selected out, ignored, deliberately misunderstood, responses may be frivolous etc.

This implies that policy writers cannot control or impose the meanings of their texts. On the contrary, texts or parts of the texts may be rejected, selected, ignored, misunderstood; in short, they are interpreted from a subjective frame of thinking. In itself, teachers' "... responses will be the outcome of contested interpretations" (Bowe *et al.*, 1992, 23), or reinvented, contrary to forceful (*cf.* Lewis and Tsuchida, 1997, 324, 313) and bullied (*cf.* Hargreaves, 1991, 251) stances of policy change.

Furthermore, policy initiatives inherently contain internal contradictions and tensions. The underlying assumptions of policy, the social and historic context and the degree to which policy is congruent, compatible or not, with teachers' existing beliefs, commitments and practices, may influence the policy process, both in the context of policy text production as well as the context of policy practice or effect.

Put differently, over and above the public discourse, the legislation and communication of policies for educational change, depend on what teachers 'think' and do, their personal disposition and feelings concerning change or policies proposing change. The manner they mediate and act on policy for educational change proposals impacts the eventual effects. According to Fullan (1982, 120) an understanding of the subjective world of those involved in a change process is a necessary precondition. The subjective way (*ibid.*) in which teachers mediate meaning through assumptions and perceptions, and act with regard to educational change has an impact on the possibilities of realising the educational ideals represented by policy as initiation to educational change. This implies that teachers play an active role in the education policy change process. They construct their own frame of thinking and their meaning. In this context Bruner (1996,19ff) argues that "... the 'world' we inhabit is a constructed one. As such reality is made or created and not found." And likewise Fullan with Stiegelbauer (1991, 43) cited by Corson (1995, 158) clarifies this issue: "The real crunch comes in the relationship between these new programs or policies and the thousands of subjective realities embedded in people's individual and organizational contexts and their personal histories."

## **Methodology**

I have worked in an interpretive paradigm, which implies that selected aims are to construct understanding epistemologically and ontologically in a trustworthy and authentic manner. To stay true to the approach I assume that realities are varied, and that how one knows reality, differs greatly. This inquiry into education policy change from the perspectives of teachers' experiences and understanding assumes my acceptance of different assumptions, perceptions, and multiple realities (*cf.* Mouton, 1996, 34). Put differently, educational policy is filtered and selected from often those parts that 'fit' to teachers' personal perspectives and intuition. This suggests that pre-existing knowledge, attitudes and behaviour impact the responses, meaning and the implementation of education policy. It is therefore not surprising that the realities of education policy change will also be diversely constructed.

I chose a basic or generic (*cf.* Hart, 1998, 46) qualitative study, collected qualitative data

through in-depth, non-directive, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and open-ended questionnaires. Responses were described and analysed using computer-aided qualitative data software, Atlas.ti. Furthermore, I followed a network sampling-type of strategy (Merriam, 1998), asking teachers to refer me to other teachers who would be willing to participate in my research. This worked well, since access into schools was not always easy.

My research started as a pilot study, the M-School Project, where I conducted several focus group discussions with a group of nine teachers. These teachers were from a less privileged community, with an under resourced educational context. There I established that knowledge about education policy change was rather limited. After these preliminary findings, I then extended my research to a Catholic Primary School, where I interviewed three teachers. Next, I interviewed another two teachers from an Afrikaans school. To gather some more data, I distributed open-ended questionnaires to Baccalaureus Educationis (hereafter BEd) students both from the University of Pretoria and from the University of Natal.

## Interviews

I used in-depth non-directive, semi-structured interviews and was guided by the work of Kvale (1996), and Silverman (2000). These interviews took place during the period of February 1999 to July 1999, and were conducted at my home and at the respondents' homes, at their personal choice. Each interview-'conversation' was audio taped one-on-one, throughout, and then transcribed verbatim. Before the interview, teachers completed a brief questionnaire, on which basic biographical information was recorded as well as a declaration of consent. The interviews were guided by an initial question, "what are your experiences and understandings of education policy change"? Each teacher had the freedom to set about this question in her own way and I only directed the conversation when respondents drifted away from the relevant topic. The transcribed interviews and the questionnaires were labelled as primary documents (PD), available in Atlas.ti, which are numbered files and saved in "ScientificSoftware\ Atlasti\Textbank\PhD\ Education Policy Change". The following five teachers were interviewed individually; their profiles are illustrated below.

**Table 1: Teacher profiles**

	<b>Qualification</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Gender</b>
P1	B.Prim ED(SP)	10 years	female
P2	THOD, FDE	14 years	female
P3	T.T.H.D.BA BA (HONS) MEd. t.b.c.	23 years	female
P4	BA, HED, FDE	12 years	female
P5	BA, HED, POD, BEd t.b.c.	24 years	female

## Questionnaires

In addition to the interviews with teachers, open-ended questionnaires were used to collect data from a wider group of teachers. Twenty-four BEd teacher students, enrolled at the University of Pretoria and twenty-eight BEd teacher students enrolled at the University of

Natal responded to my questionnaire. The responses together with the interview data, were analysed as a complete unit, visibly in the 'hermeneutic unit', Atlas.ti.

**Open-ended questionnaires:**

- \* What are your views AND feelings regarding the future of education in South Africa; in general and in your personal, particular case?
- \* Of which education policy change are you aware?
- \* How were you informed of the policy change?
- \* What is your opinion of education policy change?
- \* What does policy mean to you?
- \* How do you experience education policy change?
- \* How do you feel about education policy change?
- \* How do teachers adapt to policy change?
- \* How does education policy change effect the teaching morale?
- \* To what extent, or how could you as a teacher impact or influence education policy change, both positively and/or negatively?
- \* How does education policy change influence your teaching activities in the classroom?

## **Data reduction and analysis**

Authors such as Tesch (1990), Dey (1993), Miles and Huberman (1994) and Silverman (1997, 2000) informed my qualitative data analysis. The raw data from interviews and questionnaires proved a tremendous volume, which had to be processed, analysed and of course reduced to manageable proportions. Once the audio interview recordings were transcribed into text, the reduction and analysis began. In essence, I read the transcriptions, whilst listening again, edited where necessary, and loaded text into the Atlas.ti computer software. This data was then classified, a process that involved breaking up data into bits and bringing it together again in a new way. This was a process of organising and assigning data to categories or classes and identifying formal connections between them (Dey, 1993, 275ff). I worked with seven primary documents, highlighted some 541 quotations, which yielded 684 codes, which I grouped into 16 families.

Although I do not claim a grounded theory inquiry, the process of identifying codes and categories, certainly embody elements of a grounded theory approach, where I aspired to stay as close as possible to the data, i.e. shaping an 'emic' character of the inquiry (cf. Henning, 2000a, 2000b; Merriam, 1998, 6-7). I worked with a large amount of unstructured textual data, and was faced with what Kelle (1995, 1-17) describes as serious data management problems, which cannot easily be solved by the use of standard database systems. That is why I opted for Atlas.ti 'The Knowledge Workbench' (Muhr, 1994, 1997a, 1997b), which offered the support I needed, facilitating activities involved in text analysis and interpretation, particularly selecting, coding, annotating and comparing noteworthy segments.

## Discussion of findings

The inquiry revealed four major themes with a variety of sub-themes. These can be distinguished as the emotional and affective domain of education policy change, issues relating to discipline and control, teachers views on their professionalism in this changing context, and lastly issues pertaining the new curriculum and Outcomes-Based Education (OBE). For the purpose of the article, I focus only on how teachers experience education policy change as curriculum change. The question, how do teachers experience education policy change was put to them in these broad terms. Teachers then had the option to choose which policy to discuss. Their focus was mostly on the curriculum policy change, which evidently had an immense influence on their teaching practice.

As stated in the introduction, the post-apartheid government adopted a variety of policies to restructure and transform the legacy of apartheid, of which OBE and Curriculum 2005 (C2005) are part of. Nevertheless, C2005 was not implemented onto a blank slate, instead in a context of multiple social disparities and various educational contexts. People expected and hoped that this national curriculum, which at the core of the education process, would promise to overthrow the legacy of apartheid. The idealistic and promising principles such like co-operation, critical thinking, social responsibility and lifelong learning would empower most individuals to partake in all aspects of society. For while these were some intended wishes, the reality of implementing C2005 was yet to be witnessed. Not only was C2005 imposed top-down, just like the apartheid curriculum (*cf.* Christie, 199, 283), but also insufficient teacher support, development and outcomes based on pedagogy preparation was seriously lacking, offering only "emergency training and materials" (*ibid.*). Academics expressed their deep concern and reservations (*cf.* Jansen, 1997, 1999, 2000) and critiqued C2005 as being obscure, "jargon ridden and generally inaccessible in its discourse" (Christie, 1999, 283).

## Teachers' experiences of curriculum policy change

Policy documents, such as COTEP 1998, called for active participation in curriculum development, such as interpreting and designing learning programmes and materials. However, teachers hardly view themselves as curriculum shapers, since often they are not seen as professionals or they do not see themselves as professionals. Although my inquiry revealed that some teachers described themselves as efficient, committed and good for the profession, more often than not though "we do not get basic respect as a profession" (P2, 2, 135, 826-827).

This non-participation in the shaping of the curriculum, impedes and hampers teachers' enthusiasm. One teacher (P2) for instance was requested to participate in the development of curriculum policy change, realising though that that was only to be a feigned process. She and her colleagues were really disappointed in the unprofessional manner in which this process was conducted and how they felt deceived: "We were led to believe it would influence policy changes with the view to the curriculum" P 2 (2, 5, 24-26). She continues

describing how the National Qualifications Framework had been designed in its final draft although they were told that they would have some input:

The qualifications framework was already written in blood and we were told beforehand that we would have inputs into that ... (2, 10, 57-66). But the point was we had already been notified that these documents that we have been told we were going to be a part of, had already been written. So that was when I sort of backed off and did not become involved any more ... (2, 12, 71-77).<sup>3</sup>

Not only did teachers distrust in the integrity of education policy change, but also they then dissociated themselves from the implementation phases. Furthermore, the political transformation that drives the education policy change, appear to have little, if any impact to what happens in the classroom:

... 90% of what is going on in education is politically motivated, it becomes so difficult, because changes, everybody knows changes must be gradual and ... who has ever studied education, knows that you have no impact on the little guy in the classroom whatsoever P2 (2, 3,4 190-196).

Another teacher P5 (5, 33/34, 520-541) presents another political perspective, arguing that curriculum is very much a prescription and a mandate for implementation:

Met ander woorde jy kan nie in jou eie politieke oortuiging kan jy nie in jou onderwys situasie waarin jy is kan jy dit nie op die voorgrond plaas nie. Jy moet heeltemal op die agtergrond omdat jy 'n diens lewer. Ja en jy moet in jou gemeenskap diens lewer en dit is mense met verskillende politieke oortuigings. Die van hulle wat redelik ontvanklik is vir die verandering en wat miskien nie so 'n verregse politieke uitkyk het nie, is dit makliker om die verandering te absorbeer as die ouens wat miskien 'n bietjie meer verregs is. Hulle het baie meer rigiede dinge waarin hulle glo en ek dink dit is vir hulle moeiliker om sekere dinge te aanvaar ..want omdat dit 'n gegewe is, dit is basies soos 'n wet wat deurgevoer word, so daar is nie 'n uitsondering, dit is iets wat glad nie kan, jy moet dit doen (P5, 5, 4,7 1023-1036).

## **Teachers' experiences of Outcomes-based Education workshops**

Despite the fact that education authorities offered workshops and courses, there were various problems in this regard. Teachers talked about how information arrived late at the schools and how trainers were ill-equipped to conduct these training workshops:

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<sup>3</sup> **Author's note:** Interview data (indented) is verbatim, and not edited.

... where there are meetings on policy changes we always get it two weeks after the meeting has taken place, which is extremely frustrating (P1, 1, 2, 29-32)... basically we have been made aware of at this stage, is this whole OBE type education. But very little information coming through to us. If we do not have contact with other schools then there is no information ... (P1, 1, 4 33-36).

P1 (1, 6, 48-49) attended one workshop as a representative of her school, for the new curriculum and then was instructed to workshop it with the staff back at her school, irrespective of her competence and knowledge, assuming that one workshop would prepare her fully to conduct subsequent workshops.

According to P2 (2, 46, 259-264) many under-qualified teachers need guidance in this new approach in education:

... so many people ... because they are certifying all the way down, you know qualifications are no longer provisos, so you are getting certified with a standard 8, now what guidance do those people have ...

P4 (4, 25, 364-369) also holds that there are problems with under-qualified staff and with those who continue in their old ways of teaching, despite their attendance at the workshops:

So they feel safe in that environment of, and they might be willing to try new things provided that they have been provided with the knowledge in an absolutely step-by-step way.

P4 (4, 7, 378-390) continues, some teachers are in need of particular and specific guidance with regards to the new ways of teaching and will maybe implement these new strategies if they secure enough to do so:

And I think that makes up a very small group of people, people who want to find out very quickly how to do the job and they are perfectly happy to stick to it. They will change, permitted that the new set of rules is spelt out very clearly, but if there is any input from their side that they have to go and explore and look for new ways and come up with new ideas and even challenge themselves.

I am saying this coming from a background where I worked in the private sector for many years, teachers work in such a protected environment and I see very little, if any, taking responsibility for mistakes that they might make (P4, 4, 28, 392-399).

Further training and issues pertaining to professional development, certainly does not mean throwing out the baby with the bathwater as P 2 (2, 56, 316-320) illustrates: "I do feel that it is a pity that we do not learn from the past and other people's experience ..." She adds that teachers need to be re-educated (2, 88, 515-510). Training, particularly in facilitation skills needs to be introduced, including listening and responding skills. Awareness needs to be created amongst teachers that further training is imperative:

I also think that 90% of teachers suffer from inertia. You know how many teachers do upgrade? You know there is no way that you can get a qualification in 1976 that is going to keep you abreast of the times in 1999 (P2, 2, 151, 946-950).

What concerns me is that some teachers might not have the experience or the drive, you know because teaching takes an incredible amount of energy ... (P3, 3, 15, 81-85) ... you make it (policy change) work, but there are teachers that cannot make it work, you know they do not know how... (P3, 3, 19, 121-1213).

Teachers are told they are facilitators, however,

... which teacher has really been taught to facilitate. We have not been taught to do that ... (P3, 3, 46, 409-412) ... If every person could do a course in facilitation, it would just make it so much easier and then you understand what you are actually doing (P3, 3, 48, 444-446).

Further training opportunities should be created, not in recess times or in the afternoons, but a proper relief system should be implemented facilitating continuous teaching with as little absenteeism:

But there should be this process in that you actually have relief teachers on a regular basis that in that grade 3 group or something, once every two years off goes Joe Soap for a month and to come back and share with the other two or three or four ... (P2, 2, 55, 990-997... Afternoons, that is another thing. You know you have got to go after a whole day of teaching you have got to go and sit there in the heat and they babble on about ... You go to different schools you know. We have had at N.H. ... If you asked me what, how I would tackle this I would say: right each school has to send X amount of teachers and we are going to workshop it for a whole week. You come from 08:00 till 15:00 and we are going to work with this practically. You are going to work out your lessons. (P3, 3, 37, 275-287... However sometimes invitations to further training events arrive too late and teacher loose out on some learning opportunities ... We often get invited to meetings too late, it comes two days after the meeting has been and then they tell us there was a meeting there (P3, 3, 3, 20-23).

Workshops and training courses offered only once without any follow-up event are not sufficient and the information does become distorted:

... say for example 100 people get trained and it has got to go to half a million that information gets distorted every time it gets passed on, because who trains the people that gave us the course? Now we were told right now you know what this is all about, after one course, you know what this is all about, now you go back to your teachers and you train them. Okay so now this is my whole interpretation, my own interpretation okay, you have got the notes and things like that and you could

stick to that, but so now I think fables out again and from there on it ... (P3, 3, 61, 681-692).

The workshops, which have been attended, were not up to standard and course facilitators also lacked the skills they were supposed to teach:

And then I must say that courses that I have attended where we were introduced to the OBE situation, we just found that the people who conducted the courses, really it was of a very poor standard ... (P4, 4,11,114-112).

Other teachers have become reluctant to participate in workshops:

... I have noticed that teachers, if your heart is not in teaching then you are definitely not going to walk that extra mile to get yourself knowledgeable and to bring the knowledge to the classroom and to try and equip your children with the necessary skills (P4, 4, 17, 274-295)

This willingness or unwillingness impacts on the 'openness' to policy change:

So it is going to leave a very small core group and I think if you can divide them again into those that are really committed to making this work and to open themselves to training and to new ideas and things like that, you will also have the group that will never be open to that and they will just go on regardless of policy change or whatever ... (P4, 4, 20, 306-316) ... my experience is that teachers, especially in a primary school environment, develop very little personal growth. I have been teaching at the same school for 12 years now and I have seen very little progression in my colleagues. I see regression unfortunately in many of them. It seems as though they are more threatened, more scared, want to be more protected and stuff like that in stead of going out facing the world (P4, 4, 39, 523-537).

It appears according to P4 (4, 41, 564-578) that further training and education adds to the well being of the teacher and builds up their self-concept, which in turn facilitates an openness towards change, probably because their 'character' is not attacked:

... in the 12 years that I have been with my school very few of my colleagues have involved themselves in further studies. In other words and I am of the opinion that a qualification obtained 20 and 30 years ago, I mean without any upgrading of any sorts, can really not be very relevant, especially in the changes that we are facing today.

P5 (5, 35, 576-597) also endorses the importance of continuing and further study:

Soos byvoorbeeld by tersiêre inrigtings, ja ek dink tog dit maak jou wakker, dit dwing jou om nuwe inligting wat ook aktuele inligting bevat en daaroor te dink en daaroor te redeneer. Waar as 'n mens jou basies net blootstel teen 'n daaglikse onderwysprogram, jy is so geprogrammeer deur dit wat jy in die klaskamer doen

jy jou buitemuurse program dat ek dink die ouens is in die aande so dood moeg dat hulle kry skaars tyd om byvoorbeeld nuus te kyk, om 'n bietjie wyer te lees of wat ook al. So as jy nie onderworpe is aan 'n sekere ding of 'n kursus waarvoor jy ingeskryf is nie, waarmee jy gedwing word om inligting te absorbeer, om inligting jou eie te maak nie, om met 'n wyer konteks inligting te doen te kry nie, dan dink ek is daar 'n mate van, kan dit beteken 'n ou begin stagneer.

The responsibility for further training lies with the individual teacher. The department offers little training:

Daar het nog nie opleiding van die departement se kant af gekom nie, so ek sou wou sien dat 'n mens vir hulle voordat hulle angs of sulke goed belewe dat 'n mens op 'n manier dalk dink en dit het ek nou gesien met hierdie didaktiese pedagogie waar 'n mens te doen gehad het met basiese filosofieë en teorieë waar ek gesê het as ek hierdie ding daar volgens personeel op hierdie manier kon oordra dan gaan dit vir hulle dalk makliker wees as die grondslag fase wat dit miskien op 'n ander manier moes gehoor het. Dat 'n mens dit uit 'n ander invalshoek, uit 'n ander perspektief vir hulle kan sê, bietjie meer, ek wil amper sê op hulle gevoel speel en in terme van dit is 'n manier hoe ons dit vir onself kan makliker maak, hoe ons in die proses kan groei, hoe dit vir ons kan verrykend wees. So ek sou dit graag wou doen byvoorbeeld met die senior personeel. (P5, 5, 43, 792-813)

In sum, these findings can be substantiated with a study conducted in the Eastern Cape by Elkonin and Foxcroft (1998), who found that training in OBE was quite disastrous. Neither did teachers actually get what they needed, nor where their questions responded. This introduces the ensuing section regarding teachers' need for support.

## **Teachers' need for support**

The study by Elkonin and Foxcroft (1998) revealed that lack of appropriate resources and lack of materials surely worsen the possibilities of sound implementation in the classrooms. New policies cannot promise the intended outcomes, provided appropriate teaching and learning materials efficiently support them. Furthermore, structural changes in education, as well as reviews in the composition of curricular, will not have the desired effect if they are not supplemented with integrated policies intended to empower the role of teachers. On the contrary P2 (2, 45, 252-259) contends that:

I actually believe that it widens the gap, because your better teachers, you know your superior teachers can have an absolute ball, which means your independent school teachers, your teachers that are better qualified, that have better experience, know about lateral thinking, ... they know where to hold on to the syllabus, and when to not.

Some teachers may not need a great deal of support, and actually become quite creative:

... en daar sien ek ook ouens wat 'n bietjie meer kreatief is, wat gewoon is om dinge nie net op een manier te doen nie, hulle het 'n verskeidenheid fasette wat hulle byvoorbeeld 'n les aanpak. (P5, 5, 456-61)

Other teachers prefer more structure and guidance and some are even rigid in their approach, and thus need greater support:

Die onderwysers is nog maar lief om vas te hou aan 'n struktuur. (P5, 5, 27, 357-359) Ja hulle is baie rigid, hulle probeer nie verskillende tendense en dinge en eintlik as 'n mens mooi daarvoor dink maak dit vir jouself ook die lewe baie makliker en ek dink dit maak die saak vir die onderwys baie meer bevredigend dat jy kan sê hoor hier ek kan dit op hierdie manier, maar daardie manier werk ook. Vir myself is dit verrykend, dit word nie vervelig (P5, 5, 31, 472-481... Jy weet wat vir my bekommerd maak is by ons skool dink ek het ons die kundiges, maar in terme van die entoesiasme in terme van die visie vorentoe, weet ek nie of hulle by ons ander kultuur wat nou besig is om te leer en te groei, as ek nou die twee teen mekaar moet stel sal ek sê miskien is die entoesiasme in daardie opsig dalk 'n bietjie sterker en die kundigheid minder. Hierdie kant is ons kundigheid wat sterk is, entoesiasme dalk 'n bietjie minder. So ons sal moet pasop dat 'n mens nie met jou entoesiasme wat minder word dalk langs die pad nie meer groei nie, maar stagneer en dat die ander wat goed is dat hulle op kom. Maar verstaan jy hulle sal moet pasop, nie net hierdie beeld van ons is kundig, ons weet alles (P5, 5, 39, 701:719).

To sum up, whatever the needs, government will have to address the issues pertaining to curriculum implementation and the follow-up support (*cf.* also Chisholm, 2000).

## **Teachers' concerns relating to standards and assessment in Outcomes-based Assessment**

In this inquiry, some teachers expressed deep concerns about Outcomes Based Assessment (OBA) and their perceived lowering of academic standards. P4 (4, 6, 257-263) expressed her concerns that relate to the lowering standards and naïve expectations of policy change:

I think that for white people in this country it is a grave concern, because we are very unsure, because I think we are not as gullible as other racial groups who might be thinking that this is going to open up new worlds. We rather see it and interpret it in terms of perhaps the standard that is going to be lowered.

Not only will standards be lowered, but also maintaining them may prove difficult:

Reasoning and stuff like that, I cannot see that we can maintain the standards that we used to because we are battling just to maintain standards in our own schools under basically good conditions (P4, 4, 16, 252-263).

These perceived lowering of standards, and 'all will pass' belief, are perturbing:

... and each child is on a different level and it does not matter if this child only knows one thing about water and the other child knows five things, they are both a pass. (P1, 1,8, 54-58).

P3 (3, 24, 142-147) also explains that teaching mathematics necessarily incorporates drilling exercises and cannot solely be experienced, as is the perception ... Another thing that really worries me, I mean we have been, I was a product of where they threw the drilling of maths out and we had to experiment and I know that a whole lot of my generation could not spell, we do not know our tables because of the system that we had (P3, 3, 52, 526-531).

On a more positive note, P3 (3, 44, 382-383) says:

And the other thing that I regarded as a very positive thing was that they are going to do in OBE, that they are going to do away with just assessing a child on his academic performance, that other variants of skills and of achievements are also going to be included in assessment and also in teaching subjects that they are going to extend in some way or another (P4, 4, 3, 35-46).

## **Teachers' understanding of group work and C2005**

Group work forms part of the new curriculum approach. This inquiry revealed diverse views on when, how and where group should be conducted. Older staff find the 'noisy' classroom difficult to deal with. For instance, although P1 (1, 17, 50-53) perceives group work to be meaningful, the learner in her opinion as an individual still remains important:

... here are certain things that group work should be involved and all that, but the individual is still important and they have moved away totally from individuals so that your stronger child is now carrying your weaker child .

Group work is usually done where some brainstorming is done, either before or after some new work, but seldom in the middle of something, (P1, 1, 40, 236-243). Group work is suitable for research activities, which can be fruitfully implemented by all. There are however also some difficulties:

But it is difficult because it is noisy, other teachers do not like the noise next door to you, which makes it difficult. A lot of your older staff think you are playing, in your class you are too casual, you know you have got to find a medium ... (P1, 1, 45, 249-253).

Not only do teachers have difficulty in using others' ideas, but learners too do not always

wish to share their work in a group. Bright children are merely copied and the lazier child gets away with doing little, provided the teacher timely identifies such problems. But often teachers are not trained in the processes and dynamics of group work (P3, 3, 17, 105-106).

So often that is why you do not bring about teamwork in schools and things like that, because teachers do not want to borrow other people's methods because they believe in their own (P2, 2, 40, 215-219).

The danger in that, if you do everything you have got in group work, is you get your little weak child that sits back and he does nothing (P3, 3, 9, 37-39) ... That is what worries me about the group work is that they are not strong enough to actually pull a child like that into a group, not at eight year old level (P3, 3, 12, 59-62).

Other perceptions with regards to team of group work relate to feelings of domination, and secondary roles in the group (P2, 2, 97, 571-573). P3 (3, 43, 364-370) mentions that although group work is particularly important within the context of the adult working life, where people should be able to work together, in the classroom context it does present some problems:

I have spoken to some and their biggest problem with this whole thing is the discipline, the incredible amount of noise, because it is group work. (P3, 3, 57, 610-614)

Another disturbing finding relates to diagnosing problems in the classroom, particularly where some bright children have merely been copied during group work and problems do not emerge (P2, 2, 103, 642-647). The effect during group work may be that bright children set the pace and leave the others behind:

So then the bright are setting the pace and you are not picking up remedial problems and things like that or you may not be picking it up (P2, 2-10, 5 647-650).

That is why I say to you I can see that we are going to educate ... but it really worries me because I think we are going to have kids that are going through a whole system and they have learnt nothing (P3, 3, 51, 520-524).

In sum, Curriculum 2005 is an enormous ambitious task, which aims amongst many other things according to Coombe (1997, 1-2) to eliminate rote learning and to promote critical thinking and innovative teaching. While many critiqued the principles of outcomes-based education, it was policy makers' thinking that a move away from authoritarian teaching approaches of the past was necessary. Prof Asmal in this regard pronounced that there is an "... overwhelming support for Outcomes-Based Education" evidently from the review report (Chisholm, 2000), which confirmed that this approach is to be continued. Inasmuch as this may be politically legitimate, C2005 unfortunately does not resolve the many adversities on the micro level, evident from the empirical data. These pragmatic issues are

pertinent to the national contextual dynamics, in-service training, understanding of official policy documents, and a general need for support.

## Concluding comments

In this article I argued that education policy focuses mainly on policy production and not on the teachers, who implement policy. Teachers are the 'silent' recipients of policy, and yet the cardinal players in the education policy change process. I have concentrated on teachers' experiences of curriculum change and have richly described how they experience the new curriculum, the workshops, their need for support, their concerns about standards and assessment and lastly their understanding of group work.

To sum up, from an ontological and epistemological perspective, realities are many, and knowledge is constructed also in education policy. These perspectives impact and inform the education 'reality' and guide this inquiry into education policy change. Evidence from inquiry clearly reveals that the education policy change is no simple process, as texts are re-constructed and re-created based on experiences and interpretations of interpretations. Meanings of texts are seldom unequivocal or apparent, and for this reason, it becomes infeasible or difficult to predict the effects of policy. That is why policy makers need to take cognisance of how teachers experience and understand policy change. If policy makers in South Africa propose successful education policy change, it is essential to elicit the underlying assumptions, experiences, social and historic context, the degree to which, these are congruent or not with teachers' beliefs, experiences, commitments and educational practices.

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