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Editorial

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South Africa's transition to democracy took place at a time when the world's economies were almost all capitalist and neoliberal ideology was paramount and the dominant discourse. Governments generally started to restrict their financial contributions to education but higher productivity and greater quality were expected. Development choices made by the government in South Africa were influenced by these global conditions and affected education in various ways. An important factor was the decapitalisation of education (lower funding) and a more managerial approach to education processes with an emphasis on discourses of quality and efficiency.

Political and economic changes have considerably affected education systems worldwide and South Africa is no exception. New forms of hegemonies have been created with which to restructure the education field – its discourses, practices and institutional arrangements and principles of power, control and legitimation. Smyth and Shacklock (1998) highlight an aspect of educational reform that has become pervasive namely, "the emergence of an enterprise culture as rallying point for conservative educational reconstructionists". They argue that educational change generally is couched in the shift from Fordist to post Fordist forms of organisation and production, most notably the move to short production lines, niche marketing, teamwork and partnerships, flatter hierarchies, outsourcing and the construction and management of images and impressions.

Although these changes do not add real pressure on institutions (universities) to innovate they are creating a new reference framework where institutions will have to develop in the future (Mora and Villarreal, 2001). According to Mora and Villarreal (2001)

> the need to improve relations between universities and their social and economic environment is the cause of the most significant changes in the management, organization and power structures in universities nowadays.

Quality according to Smyth and Shacklock (1998) has been introduced as a canopy or umbrella term within which to officially warehouse a limited and

constrained set of interpretations about the conditions of education and schooling. This includes a set of prescriptions as to what ought to legitimately constitute the role of education, schooling and the work of teachers. McInnis (2001) adds that academics are increasingly expected to adopt and advance institutional goals. This involves a connection between rewards and performance, marked changes in the work roles, motives and values of academics and led to the establishment of entrepreneurial university cultures.

McInnis (2001) refers to as new horizons and new ways of doing business to all education professionals which is often described as a new work order based on human capital principles of development and performance. It is indeed interesting times in education and in educational research in particular. Shifts in education and education management have happened in South Africa at all levels for more than a decade now. Managerialism and perfomativity have surfaced at all levels and has impacted on the work of all education professionals. These include uneasy alliances between industry, university and government and a pervasive enterprise culture in all education institutions. These influences, however, seem to have become part of our practices in subtle and nuanced ways and often leave us as educationists paradoxically complicit to the aims while still critical of the processes. It is performativity that we wish to specifically focus on in this editorial so as to open up differently ways of viewing it.

McKenzie (2001, p.176) argues that performance will be to the 20th and 21st centuries what discipline was to the 18th and 19th centuries. He points out that performance might be viewed as a global formation of power and knowledge – "one that challenges us to perform – or else". For him, it extends and displaces the disciplinary power that Foucault analysed. He writes:

> Its politics are post-colonial rather than colonial, its infrastructures electronic as well as industrial, its economies dominated by services more than manufacturing. Factory labour and tradeoff commodities have obviously not disappeared: instead they have been overcoded by 'soft wares', forms of immaterial production found in communications, finance, healthcare, and social work (McKenzie 2003, quoted in Peters 2007, p.203)

McKenzie is of course referring to a particular notion of performance that Ball (2003, p.216) described as a technology, "a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions". As discussed earlier this notion of performativity has elicited much discussion in education literature over the past decade. However, there are other notions of performativity that may provide a more nuanced understanding of

performance *vis-a-vis* education and serve as basis for critical reflecting on the articles included in this volume of *Journal of Education*. In the area of gender studies, Judith Butler argues that gender is not an internal essence but is performed through sustained sets of acts (1990, p.xv) – identity is therefore performative.

Extending on this view, Fataar (2011) suggests that performativity must also be understood in light of subjective counter positionings that occur in performative settings. He suggests that analyses of performativities have to capture the constitutive or dialectical relationship between regulative or performative impact and agential processes of people and institutions inside settings. Here Gole's view that the "public sphere is not simply a pre-established arena: it is constituted and negotiated through performance" (2002, p.183) underscores a non-deterministic and creative analytical perspective. The notion of performance ought thus to be regarded as an analytical complement to performativity. Performance draws on Butler's (1990, p.40) construction of performativity in reference to acts of repetition that are socially validated and discursively established in everyday practices. Performance – based reflexivity refers to a situation where human beings "reflect back on themselves, their relations with others . . . and those socio-cultural components which make up their public selves" (Gole 2002, p.181). Their social practices are based on acute readings of the discursive delimitations in their environment.

Another distinction is worth emphasising: some sociologists of knowledge have also contrasted knowledge as *representation* with knowledge as *performance*. This concerns the way in which knowledge is represented, for example, in texts compared to the situated messiness of how it is performed in sites where people and skills interact (see Turnbull, 1997, Le Grange, 2007). Related to this notion of performativity is the work of John Law (2004) who argues that research method is performative, productive or creative. He writes:

> Method is not . . . a more or less successful set of procedures for reporting on a given reality. Rather it is performative. It helps to produce realities. It does not do so freely and at whim. There is a hinterland of realities, of manifest absences and Othernesses, resonances and patterns of one kind or another, already being enacted, and it cannot ignore these (p.143).

There is at least one other sense in which me might think of performativity, nicely captured in an interview conducted with Edwin Said (Said and Viswanathan, 2001). Said is asked by an interviewer whether he is not lighter in his music criticism than his literary criticism. He responds by saying that when he listens to a musical performance he is motivated by pleasure and that

to write a score-card after listening to a musical performance would be to debase it. He says that he chooses to listen to many performances and after some time something crystallises in the mind. There is something about the performance itself that cannot simply be captured by a review. We might wish to think about education performances such as teaching in this way – performances that cannot simply or easily be captured in our writings – the performance has to be experienced. Against this background it might be useful to (re)view the articles in this volume.

We kick off this volume with an incisive article by Michael Adendorff in which he provides key conceptual markers for a consideration of the intellectual terms of the debate into performativity and education. His article is an exploration of managerialist accountability regimes in light of discourses of performativity that pervades in higher education. His focus is particularly on the way such forms of accountability manifests in quality assurance practices. Adendorff traces the roots of managerialism in New Public Management discourses and neo-liberal ideology. He argues that quality assurance regimes are not neutral efforts to improve higher education, nor are they simply the unproblematic product of the growing power of management over academics. Rather, they rest on a value-laden, hegemonic world view of which many of the affected academics seem relatively unaware. The article concludes with a call to contest, and deepen the debate around, quality assurance in higher education.

Michael Le Cordeur's article provides a rich account of how performative dynamics and expectations play out in one school that was deemed to be low performing. This article discusses how a previously disadvantaged school turns around its learners' performance in literacy. Low levels of literacy in this school called for a change of attitude and strategy, which reached deep into the instructional practices of the teachers responsible for teaching reading. The article is a fascinating account of the interactive pedagogical dynamics that constituted the 'turnaround' strategy at the school. These were based on, among others, an interactive pedagogical developmental approach, concentration on improving the reading ability of learners, and teachers adopting a positive attitude towards the teaching of reading. The research for this article was conducted over many years and the results obtained from the intervention suggest that by adopting an interactive approach and the 'right' attitude to teaching, teachers can considerably contribute to improving the literacy levels of their struggling learners.

Annalene van Staden's article has an interesting take on performance. She documents the experiences of postgraduate support teaching students involved in a community service project. Rather than only viewing performance as an outcome expressed by quantitative indices she explores the qualitative dimensions of performance, that is, how students' engagement with learning-impaired learners contributes to their personal development, to their development of a repertoire of skills and their understanding of the complex social issues and needs of the South African community. Performance in this instance is not viewed as a private concern but is extended to students' performances in contributing to the public good – through a service-learning programme students become educated to become responsible/critical citizens.

Francine de Clercq's article has a fascinating view on performance, that is, how education policy studies have been performed in different ways after apartheid. She provides a critical review of a selection of post-1994 education policy studies in South Africa and proposes an alternative framework with which to study the evolution of education policy studies. She identifies four categories of education policy studies in South Africa: the analyses of symbolic unrealistic policy content, analyses that problematise policy content; analyses that focus on the policy implementation gap; analyses that examine how change occurs on the ground. She proposes a multiple-pronged understanding of policy powers, which she argues will have greater explanatory powers about why some policies end up being more enabling in some locations rather than in others.

In yet another interesting article Lungi Sosibo investigates academics' views of how student feedback is used for curriculum improvement. Her article gives some insights into the performative dimensions of both the evaluation processes of academics and academics' role in curriculum development and improvement. The study showed that there is a lack of uniformity in the frequency of the administration of the evaluations and that there is a mismatch between the curriculum features that the participants evaluated and those they actually improved. The results show that evaluations of academics are messy, incoherent, and inconsistent processes that also leads to fabrication involving, for example, manipulations of negative feedback by academics.

We invite you to read an interesting collection of articles that provides us with more nuanced understandings of 'education as performance'.

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Managerialism and performativity in higher education: where they come from, where they might be taking us, and whether we should be worried

Michael Adendorff

Abstract

Situating itself within the debate engendered by the 2006 Council for Higher Education colloquium 'Ten years of higher education under democracy', this article examines the sources of the twin phenomena of managerialist accountability regimes and performativity in higher education, as manifested particularly in quality assurance practices such as programme accreditation, institutional audits, and forms of performance management.

The roots of managerialism are traced in New Public Management and neo-liberal ideology, and the outworking of these theories in higher education quality assurance practices is explored. The article argues that quality assurance regimes are not neutral efforts to improve higher education, nor simply the unproblematic product of the growing power of management over academics. Rather they rest on a value-laden, hegemonic world view of which many of the affected academics seem relatively unaware. Foucault's notion of governmentality is enlisted to shed light on how neo-liberal ideology manifests itself in actual 'technologies' and practices of governing or 'steering from a distance', legitimised and maintained by 'mentalities' of marketisation. The article concludes with a call to contest, and deepen the debate around, quality assurance in higher education.

Introduction

This article attempts to engage with some relatively recent South African writings about quality assurance (QA) and other managerialist practices in higher education. It is also an attempt to begin to develop a theoretical framework for understanding QA and accountability regimes, and to begin to open up an enabling discursive space for the articulation of possible alternatives. It shares the Foucauldian aim of "grasp(ing) certain present realities, thus providing a more informed basis for practical choice and imagination" (Gordon, 1991, p.46).

The article takes as its starting point a high-level colloquium organised by the Council for Higher Education (CHE) and published in the CHE's *Kagisano*

Higher Education Discussion Series (Issue 4, Winter 2006). It does not seek to summarise the papers in this publication, but rather engages with some of the key points raised in them. It then attempts to take up the question implicit (or rather, expressed in different ways) in Prof Colin Bundy's keynote *Kagisano* paper: is it possible to de-couple the quality assurance (QA) system that has been established in South African higher education from its origins in New Public Management and other manifestations of neo-liberal ideology, "adopting this element of the international model, adapting that, and rejecting the other" (Bundy, 2006, p.18)? If its roots lie in the technical rationality of managerialism, can QA drive South African higher education firmly towards the transformative post-apartheid imperatives of equity and redress, and develop an ethos in which freedom is not seen primarily or exclusively as the freedom of the customer, investor or entrepreneur?

After discussing why it is important to pursue these questions, the article briefly explores some of the roots of the New Public Management phenomenon, especially in the theories associated with the Chicago School. It then goes on to explore the outworking of these theories, and of neo-liberal ideology, in higher education QA practices. The article provides evidence for the argument that quality assurance regimes are not neutral efforts to improve higher education, nor simply the unproblematic product of the growing power of management over academics. This argument is represented graphically using the metaphor of an iceberg, in which the visible manifestations of audit culture and quality assurance regimes rest on a particular world view that has become globally hegemonic and thus taken for granted, but by the same token is obscure (below the surface) to many of those participating.

In pursuance of an understanding of this 'deep structure', Foucault's notion of governmentality (as developed by scholars like Rose, Lemke and Dean) is enlisted to shed light on how neo-liberal ideology manifests itself in actual 'technologies' and practices of governing or steering from a distance, legitimised and maintained by 'mentalities' of marketisation: entrepreneurship, competition, responsibility for self-government, a customer orientation and so on.

The article concludes with a call to contest, and deepen the debate around, quality assurance, audits and performance management in higher education, questioning not only the forms but also the origins and rationale of these policies and practices. With a view to such contestation, some contradictions in these policies and practices are identified.

The terms of the debate: massification, marketisation, managerialism - and transformation

For anyone interested in such issues, the CHE's *Kagisano* (Issue 4, Winter 2006) is a remarkable publication. Firstly because it is significant that the CHE is prepared to publish such strong criticism of trends in which it plays a central role. Bundy's central piece, first presented at a CHE colloquium in 2004 and later published in *Perspectives in Education* (2005), is probably the strongest critique of managerialism and related trends in higher education written by a South African.[1] Secondly, because the debate that unfolds in the *Kagisano* pages crystallises issues that have been raised or partly articulated by a number of South African academics regarding these trends, as well as encapsulating many of the essential points of the international critique. Thirdly, the publication is noteworthy because in some academic quarters, these issues have been subjected to little scholarly debate. For these reasons, the *Kagisano* publication serves as a valuable 'way in' to the topic of this article.[2]

Basing his argument on his experience as Vice Chancellor and Deputy Vice Chancellor of prominent universities in both the United Kingdom and South Africa, as well as on the highly developed critical literature from beyond our borders on globalisation and the impact of neo-liberal ideology on higher education, Bundy argues in 'Global Patterns, Local Options?' that the post-apartheid reform of South African higher education has been shaped by neo-liberal reform strategies, essentially replicating the patterns of *massification*, *marketisation* and *managerialism* that have marked an 'epochal shift' in higher education globally, towards the performativity identified by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). Bundy is particularly critical of the advent of managerialism and the 'performance audit culture' under Thatcher in the UK, which have

> undermined collegial governance systems, changed power relations between state and higher

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1 Bundy was serving as the Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of London at the time.

2 Much recent debate has also focused on the effect which the corporatisation of universities, and its progeny, quality assurance and performance management, are having on academic freedom, institutional autonomy, or more broadly, democracy. As Du Toit has argued, university autonomy is not really the issue, as this lets *internal* institutional management 'off the hook' (see Bentley, Habib and Morrow, 2006). However, this aspect of the debates around the identity, governance and autonomy of higher education institutions in South Africa is beyond the scope of this article.

> education institutions, reduced institutional autonomy, corroded academic status, increased external surveillance, and introduced market principles of privatisation, competition, entrepreneurialism and performance-related funding into higher education (Singh, neatly summarising Bundy, 2006, p.64).

Recounting Britain's history of *massification*, Bundy points out that in the 1960s, post-war massification reflected the idea that education is a social good that should be equally available to all. The second wave of expanded access to higher education, however, was entirely different – part of Thatcher's rolling back of the Keynesian welfare state, in which universities became a resource for human capital development and the production of skills to benefit the economy.[3]

Regarding *marketisation*, Bundy notes that universities across the industrialised world have had to 'do more with less'. Importantly, this forces them to rely increasingly on 'user cost' recovery (tuition fees), third stream income including the commercialisation of intellectual property, and relentless competition for students, grants, contracts and esteem, seeking competitive advantage in market research, branding and image-management/public relations. All this has been promoted by a powerful discourse, derived from commerce, of 'productivity', 'customers', 'marketable skills', 'accountability' and 'audits'. Responsiveness has been thinned down to 'market responsiveness', and massification carries connotations of increased income (an expanded market) at least as much as it betokens expanded access to a social good.

External audits, with their 'torrents of data', and internal compliance have been, according to Bundy, the most important 'political technology' and visible manifestation of *managerialism* in higher education, legitimised by a "self-justificatory vocabulary of quality, … best practice and accountability" (Bundy, 2006, p.6). Simultaneously deregulating and more effectively regulating universities, governments steer higher education 'at a distance, through compliance with centrally set norms'. Quoting British academics (2006, p.7), Bundy describes the effect that this has:

> an 'ethos of beratement and surveillance' (Morley, 2003, p.160) is replicated locally. The logic of performativity penetrates the campus and corridors, creating a 'climate of unease and hyperactivity' (Shore and Wright, 1999, p.72).

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[3] This distinction is significant for a point that Seepe makes with regard to South Africa in the same collection (see below).

As a consequence, academia is characterised by 'less autonomy, less secure employment . . . and a corrosive loss of status and esteem'.

Turning his attention to South Africa, Bundy finds that key goals set out in the National Commission on Higher Education Report (NCHE, 1996) have proved elusive. According to him, increased access to higher education has not yet unequivocally produced greater equity, historically disadvantaged institutions have been further disadvantaged, and crass managerialism and interventionist mergers have substituted for transformatory governance (Bundy, 2006). However, Bundy notes that there has been "limited reflection in South Africa on the overall direction being taken by the sector, on the resemblances between local developments and those occurring elsewhere, or on the reasons for this isomorphism" (Bundy, 2006, p.10).

Bundy situates his argument firmly within the context of the fundamental tension recognised by the South African government, the CHE and many scholars, between the pursuit of equity and redress on one hand, and the pursuit of economic development towards global economic competitiveness on the other. He argues that "the dilemma of competing imperatives continued to be addressed rhetorically while in reality the scales tilted increasingly towards the global and away from the local field of force" (2006, p.16). Bundy links this to the South African government's adoption from 1996 of the neo-liberal macro-economic GEAR programme (Growth, Employment and Redistribution).

Bundy concludes by posing some questions for the future (not all of them quoted below):

> . . . is it possible to formulate policy selectively, adopting this element of the international model, adapting that, and rejecting the other? Or is there an overall policy package – ideologically coherent, internationally endorsed – that is for all practical purposes irresistible . . .a higher education equivalent of the Washington Consensus? . . . (2006, p.18)
>
> . . . (will) market-led 'reforms' see a reneging on fundamental equity goals? (2006, p.18)
>
> . . . will South African higher education become subject to the negative aspects associated with 'the audit culture' elsewhere? Is it possible to introduce . . . the HEQC, and the monitoring and evaluation measures inherent in the funding/planning nexus, without importing in addition a whole set of unintended consequences? (2006, pp.18–19)
>
> . . . can any monitoring and evaluative system operate *independently* of the underlying assumptions and policy objectives of the Treasury? (2006, p.19)
>
> . . . if massification, marketisation and managerialism have impacted significantly upon the academic profession elsewhere, will this happen in South Africa? (2006, p.19)

> Can the very real local issues of post-apartheid South Africa be translated into progressive policy outcomes, or will they be subject to the globalising tendencies of the post-industrial world? (2006, p.20)

Although Bundy's paper encompasses a wider scope than the impact of the HEQC, in the same *Kagisano* publication Lange and Singh both defend the role of this body. Both argue that quality assurance in post-apartheid South African higher education is driven by the national goals of transformation (individual and institutional) and quality education for all, rather than by a neo-liberal agenda of accountability and surveillance alone ("transformative accountability" rather than "managerialist accountability" – Singh, 2006, p.73). And both in effect agree that ongoing critique of the monitoring and regulatory system is necessary to keep the excesses of neo-liberalism at bay.

Counter to Bundy's central theme, Lange explores the *differences* between the changes in South African higher education and those in industrial societies, noting in particular that when writing about South African institutions, Bundy divorces them from their own history and denies their agency.

> It is as if change had taken place out of bureaucratic whim rather than as the result of a socio-political process in which higher education institutions played an active part. It often seems that we have forgotten that the massification of higher education was a response to broad political and social phenomena. We forget that there was a time when women, black people and working people could not study at universities (Lange, 2006, p.42).

Of course, Bundy himself makes the point that massification policies were pursued in the UK by successive governments for very different ends, one of which was egalitarian. In the same collection (2006, p.54) Seepe argues that

> Massification is a matter of national redress and an attempt to redress the historical injustice of the exclusion of the majority . . . (however) similar strategies applied in different contexts may produce different results.

Like Lange, Singh also strikes a note of agency, but looking to the future rather than the past when she points out that "actors within the education reform project (must) consciously and continuously struggle, in the spaces that they inhabit, to make the social justice issues . . . 'trump' other more ideologically powerful countervailing factors" (Singh, 2006, p.67).

Lange argues that when many other countries were grappling with the crisis of the left, and the death of grand narratives and of the subject under the influence of post-modernism, South Africa was 'living' a grand narrative developed through decades of political struggle. Legislation and policy alike

were consciously based on the Constitution and Bill of Rights, higher education policy included. However, when Lange deduces from this that "South African higher education policy was informed *not* by neo-liberalism but by social justice principles and the idea that it was possible to collectively embrace a political project" (Lange, 2006, p.44, italics mine), her reductionist argument fails to convince.

Responding to what she takes to be Bundy's underlying question: 'whether it is possible to achieve progressive ends using tools with conservative origins' (Lange, 2006, p.40), Lange contends that the implementation of policies intended to steer institutions towards transformation still needs to be *measured* so that the government can know how much change is in fact taking place.

> for whatever reasons the British government seeks this information (Bundy's 'torrents of data'), in the South African case it is the kind of information that policy makers cannot do without if they are to monitor progress and institute measures aimed at addressing the historical legacy of racial exclusion.

Singh too makes the point (2006, p.70) that the CHE's

> strategic choices had to do with interpreting, modifying and using the standard (quality assurance) methodologies in ways that took contextual legacies and challenges into account, especially the issue of access to good quality education for all as a transformative goal.

Finally, Lange argues that the monitoring system was informed by a contextual understanding of change, and of each institution in its own right rather than on specific system-based targets or benchmarks, or performance indicators that generate a response of tired compliance (2006, p.49).

In the *Kagisano* debate, a different tack is followed by Kotecha, whose response to the bleak picture of neo-liberal managerialism is to "go to the heart of the matter and ask meta-questions about the identity of the contemporary university, its functions and purposes especially within the context of Africa" (2006, p.22). She revisits classic notions of the modern university in Newman, von Humboldt and others – as a place for 'critical intellectual citizenship' (Readings, 1996), occupying a space that is as much psychological as it is physical, where knowledge is gained across disciplines via interaction with others. Kotecha turns the neo-liberal notion of the student as customer/consumer on its head with a telling quotation from Elton (2001) which reminds us that unlike schools, which deal largely with 'closed and settled bodies of knowledge', higher education always treats learning

> in terms of not yet completely solved problems, remaining at all times in a research mode (i.e. being engaged in an unceasing process of inquiry) . . . At the higher level, the teacher is *not there for the sake of the student; both* have their justification in the service of scholarship (Kotecha, 2006, p.29 – my italics).[4]

It is not possible here to do justice to the rich debate in the pages of the *Kagisano collection*. Bundy's paper, as the centrepiece, is essentially a warning. He paints a picture of the destructive potential of neo-liberal managerialism and the corporatisation and commodification of higher education, as experienced in the UK, Australia and New Zealand but essentially based on the same model that is to be found globally in societies seeking to modernise their social institutions. Although his theme concerns the implications of global models for South African higher education, he is rightly taken to task by Seepe for not attending to the existing body of African scholarship on the identity of the contemporary university (2006). His argument is also seen by Lange and Singh as reductionist and insufficiently nuanced in recognising the specificities and challenges of transformation in the South African context.[5]

Neo-liberal managerialism and performativity

Nevertheless Bundy's concluding questions still stand, all of them reflected in the question: If marketisation, managerialism and neo-liberal forms of massification have impacted so significantly upon the academic profession elsewhere, will this not happen in South Africa? Is it not naïve to think that South African higher education can escape the effects of the "darker depths of QA" (Singh and Lange, 2007, p.xiv), with its roots in New Public Management and neo-liberalism?

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4 This view is supported by Lomas (2007, p.42), whose research found that while senior management were supportive of the view that students should be regarded as customers, in general academic staff rejected this view on the grounds that higher education is not like other forms of service provision – a product or service that is sold to students.

5 All of these positions have echoes in the work of other scholars, in South Africa and other developing countries: for instance, Bundy's arguments resonate with Vale (2005), Le Grange (2009), Waghid (2004) and Lemaitre (2005); Seepe's with Mamdani (1999); Lange's and Singh's downplaying of the analytical significance of managerialism with that of Harley and Parker (2006); and their insistence on the HEQC's role having a strong transformational rationale with Badat (2008) and Soudien (2007), but with some support from both of these for Bundy's broad proposition concerning managerialism.

Even if we accept the position that quality assurance in South Africa is focused primarily on improvement, even transformation, and that monitoring need not mean "buying into the conceptualisation of the evaluative state" (Lange, 2006, p.51), the other trends described by Bundy are still undeniably there: massification, marketisation and managerialism, in a multiplicity of forms. Are we to believe that the machinery of quality assurance will remain untainted by all this, a bastion of improvement and transformation, when the daily experience of academics tells them otherwise? Off-the-record criticism of quality assurance, audits and accountability procedures in South Africa has chiefly taken the form of complaint rather than critique, but much of this common-sense complaint has point: are we measuring (and monitoring) the pig too much for it to get fat?

It is debatable how successfully the HEQC conveyed the impression to academics and senior management, in the crucial early rounds of programme accreditation and audit, that improvement and transformation were the first priorities in our universities (as for instance happened in the early stages of QA in Sweden – Danø and Stensaker, 2007; Harvey, 2007). Despite the emphasis in Lange and Singh on a transformation agenda, a scan of the CHE's *Criteria for Programme Accreditation*, *Criteria for Institutional Audits*, *Framework for Programme Accreditation* and *Framework for Institutional Audits*, as well as the various Powerpoint presentations used to introduce the system to institutions and academics, reveals virtually no reference to this agenda. The words 'equity' and 'redress' (or equivalent terms) do not appear in these documents, while the word 'transformation' appears only twice in the Foreword of each Framework document – amidst over 40 to 60 pages of procedures, criteria and requirements. The overwhelming impression gained from a reading of these induction documents is one of bureaucratic regulation and the need for compliance, rather than the "progressive and reflective thought and action" that Lange claims was the outcome of monitoring which the CHE espoused (2006, p.47).

There are a number of reasons why continuing work must be done in deconstructing the discourse of higher education quality assurance, audit and accountability in South Africa. Despite the concern with transformation, South Africa has adopted the broad OECD quality assurance model (Luckett, 2007) which has been analysed by numerous scholars (including Shore and Wright, 1999; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Besley and Peters, 2006) as being shaped by neo-liberal ideology and based on the principles of New Public Management, marketisation, the entrepreneurial subject, competition, transparency (read self-declaration and self-justification), and so on. A number of studies (mainly

European, British and Australian) have also revealingly analysed quality assurance, audit and accountability using post-structuralist and post-modernist concepts, key ones being the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, and Lyotard's conception of performativity.

Another reason for attempting to deconstruct the disciplinary regime of quality assurance, audits and accountability is that ideologies and discourses tend to perpetuate themselves once they have established hegemony, hence the danger expressed by Morley (2003, p.51): "quality parades as a universal truth and therefore continually extends its domain". Yet another, related, reason is that a pattern has already been established of accreditation criteria and their implicit benchmarks being predetermined externally by a central authority, leading to a certain ethos of dependency among many academics. Of course, a deconstructive analysis will also help us to think about possible future trajectories of the quality assurance regime in South Africa and internationally.

Figure 1 on page 33 is an attempt to depict in a coherent way how the above-mentioned key analytical concepts may be integrated into a theoretical framework to assist in understanding the structures that underlie current quality assurance, audit and accountability regimes in higher education. One disadvantage of such a representation is that the iceberg metaphor on which it is based does not convey a time dimension – the important point being that the internationally-adopted model of quality assurance, audit and accountability mechanisms did not simply present itself as an ideologically neutral 'good idea' for promoting the effectiveness of higher education and research – either internationally or in South Africa. Nor are these phenomena simply the unproblematic product of the growing power of management over academics. As Foucault has shown, such practices, and the rationalities by which they are made to seem 'normal' or inevitable, are not foundational truths, but the result of a mix of evolving ideas, strategies, contingent circumstances and calculations in response to circumstances on the part of those who exercise power (Christie, 2006).

New Public Management has emerged as a highly theorised 'technology of governance', an instance of what Foucault (2008) characterised as neo-liberal governmentality. The notion of governmentality, or 'governmental rationality', encompasses both government as an activity or practice (techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour, or 'regimes of practices'– Foucault, 1991), and the ways of thinking about how that activity might be carried on (literally, rationalities of government, which make these

same practices appear 'normal', in other words, as the only way they *could* be – 'regimes of truth').

Foucault saw neo-liberal governmentality as a form of governing in which, by governing the individual members of society (or rather by causing them to govern themselves), the governing of the whole population would largely take care of itself (Pongratz, 2006). It is, in fact, about governing 'all and each' internally, and became a possibility with the development of democratic states, in which it was no longer necessary (and with the advance of liberalism, no longer desirable) to govern by means of force or the threat of force, in other words, externally.

A key assumption of neo-liberalism is the applicability and superiority of market dynamics for *all* social transactions, and (unlike the distrust of governmental power in classical liberalism) a 'positive' role for the state in creating and maintaining the optimum conditions for markets to operate, including shaping the consciousness of individuals as enterprising and competitive entrepreneurs in their own interests ('*homo economicus*' – again, this departs from the classic liberal notion of the self-interested individual as a *natural* state) (Foucault, 2008).

One of the key *preoccupations* of modern governmentality is security, and the limitation of risk to within manageable bounds. Thus for example ill health, crime and the threat of litigation (and in higher education, student under-performance, and low teaching and research outputs, which in South Africa as in many other countries, have important financial, economic and social implications) are studied in statistical form to enable the risk of these to be brought within predictable and thus potentially controllable limits (Dean, 1999).

These concerns with risk management and reshaping identities and relationships in terms of market dynamics reflect the influence of neo-liberal economic and business theory on the regulation and operation of public sector institutions, particularly higher education. Indeed, as Althaus has pointed out (1997), the neo-liberal reform project has been conspicuous in its use of theory. Here the influence of the Chicago school (James Buchanan and his collaborators) has been great, arguing as it did for the introduction of market principles into the public sector, as well as for a government role in engineering the conditions for efficient economic production and the containment of risk and inefficiency. This is to be achieved by "extracting willing compliance" from individuals, through (for instance) systems that

measure performance according to externally imposed and internally reinforced targets (Olssen and Peters, 2005, pp.318–319).

Principal/Agency theory, one of the raft of theories that shape the neo-liberal structuring of the public sector, is largely responsible for many of the significant changes that have come about in higher education under 'New Public Management'. It construes all work relations as hierarchical, contractual relations between 'principals' and 'agents' (Besley and Peters, 2006). A principal is an agent for those higher up the command chain, which is seen as a series of clearly specified contracts, against which performance can be measured. A key concern is how to extract as much compliance and productivity as possible (read pre-specified work targets) from the agents 'below' one in a voluntary exchange based on dependency and clear-cut rewards or sanctions. The aim, of course, is that described by Lyotard as "the best possible input/output equation" – his basic definition of performativity (1979, p.46).

Principal/Agency theory has a number of distinct and important effects in organisations. One of the most important outcomes for the organisation of *academic* work is the tendency to install a contractual system based on clear goals, the detailed specification of roles and tasks, and comprehensive, reliable reporting (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Contractual obligation, along with targets, rewards and sanctions also comes to replace intrinsic motivation based on loyalty or commitment to one's profession, vocation, discipline or colleagues (the supplanting of 'covenant' by 'contract').

Various risk factors, for instance what is referred to as 'bounded rationality', have the potential to disrupt all such relations. One example is uncertainty and differential access to information on which decisions are based (which can give 'agents' an advantage over their 'principals'); another is 'opportunism' – 'agents' acting in their own self-interest rather than that of the organisation (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Such factors incur costs (often hidden but nevertheless quantifiable), which it is the purpose of Transaction Cost Economics to monitor, analyse, account for and minimise – essentially a pervasive risk containment system and efficiency mechanism (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Rendering performance 'transparent' and open to management in this way is also one of the important functions of performance appraisal. The submission of reports on almost every aspect of a faculty's or an individual's operations is required to supply the need for information (committed to writing) as an 'input' in strategic planning.

An aspect of neo-liberal 'reform' that is perhaps more recognisable than the application of the above theories to the public sector, is the marketisation and corporatisation of higher education. This brings with it the redefinition of students as 'consumers', or even 'customers', resonating with the neo-liberal notion of the 'entrepreneurial subject'. Individuals are encouraged through technologies of the market and technologies of the self (Rose, 1999, pp.76–87)[6] to see themselves as, and to become, enterprising, rational individuals who govern themselves in their own interests and thus require only limited direct governing or support by the state. The entrepreneurial subject is constantly encouraged to make an 'enterprise' of his or her life, in some senses running it like a business and maximising his or her own human capital.

This positioning of the student as 'customer' constructs him or her as sophisticated and self-entrepreneurial ('The customer knows what s/he wants') rather than as naïve ('We'll deliver something good on the basis of what we, the experts, know'). As increasing numbers of students have come to take on this identity, the relationships between academics and students in general have been affected, with students tending to become more assertive of their rights as 'consumers', and in some cases more instrumentalist in their approach to their studies.

The other side of the 'consumer' coin is that institutions are to see themselves as the 'providers' of services to these consumers (Strathern, 2000). Government 'purchases' these services on behalf of the consumers, and defines its own role as the underwriter of quality in terms of 'value for (taxpayers') money' and 'fitness for purpose'. How do these new relations and constructions 'position' the academic? As Ball has pointed out (2003), in order for academics not to be side-lined as 'out of date', it is now necessary to think of themselves, and even to talk about themselves, as 'providers', as educational entrepreneurs, as managers. This involves performativity in terms of *enactments* of oneself as identifying with these roles. Ball (2003) says that we are required to become adept at representing ourselves in terms of this new managerial vocabulary, and because the possibilities of resisting this are limited, we find ourselves enacting a form of 'ventriloquism', manipulated into speaking with voices not our own.

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6 This is a clear instance of neo-liberalism's acceptance of the need often to *engineer* the requisite conditions in individuals to promote the smooth functioning of the (market) economy.

It is, of course, in terms of the government's role as underwriter and guarantor of quality, and to protect the interests of consumers, that regular auditing is justified. As Strathern puts it (2000, p.2):

> The concept of audit has broken loose from its cultural moorings in finance and accounting; its own expanded presence gives it the power of a descriptor seemingly applicable to all kinds of reckonings, evaluations and measurements.

As Shore and Wright have noted (1999, p.559), "the discourse of audit has become a vehicle for changing the way people relate to the workplace, to authority, to each other and, most importantly, to themselves". Academics are required to learn to see themselves as 'resources' whose *performance* must be audited regularly. Shore and Wright also point out how this requirement of surveillance is legitimated in terms of 'empowerment' and 'self-actualisation', enabling individuals and institutions to monitor and 'enhance' their own performance according to targets and standards that they set for themselves.

The rhetoric in which the culture of audit is justified thus renders it unproblematic and uncontestable. However, this technology of self-enhancement requires the regular re-setting of targets ('there is always something that can be improved'). Thus academics, who generally subscribe to professional values and tend to be motivated by intrinsic, vocational rewards, are interpellated as being perpetually in deficit mode and in pursuit of an 'excellence' which is always elusive.

Relevant here is Foucault's paradigmatic use of Bentham's idea of the panopticon (Foucault, 1997), in which the inmates are never sure whether they are being observed or not, and thus become their own guardians. "By inducing a state of conscious and permanent visibility, the panopticon transforms the inmate into the instrument of his own subjugation, and thereby guarantees the automatic functioning of power" (Shore and Roberts, 1993, p.3).

The exposure of almost every aspect of academic work to simultaneous external surveillance and internal self-surveillance through accreditation exercises, audits and various forms of performance management is seemingly counterbalanced by the neo-liberal belief in self-regulation, which seem to imply academic freedom, professional accountability and institutional autonomy (Le Grange, 2009, p.113). Thus the HEQC requires processes of self-evaluation and peer review which can result in the award of self-accreditation status. However, as Le Grange points out, self-regulation and self-accreditation are misleading terms because

> these terms do not mean the relinquishment of state control, but the establishment of a new form of control – what Du Gay (1996) calls 'controlled de-control' or what Vidovich (2002) calls 'steering at a distance' – performativity remains the regulatory regime.

In addition, as Shore and Wright argue (1999, p.559):

> The . . . habitual grouping of 'audit' with words like 'efficiency', 'effectiveness', 'best practice' and 'value for money' disguises its hierarchical and paternalistic roots and plays down its coercive . . . implications.

Neo-liberal governmentality is about 'conducting the conduct' of populations through individual self-regulation ('steering from a distance') by means of 'technologies of the self', 'the technology of responsibilisation', 'technologies of the market' and so on, which define individuals as free subjects in particular circumscribed ways, encouraging them to be active in their own self-government, and in their own self-interests (Lemke, 2000). In their responses to the 'panopticism' reflected in the audit culture, we see how the technology of responsibilisation tends to engineer professionals (read 'academics') into internalising the 'identity' of their institution, and taking on the responsibility for its prosperity and right conduct, relieving the state or its regulatory arms of at least part of the responsibility for expending resources in this direction.

Ball argues (2003) that this panopticism, coupled with competition as an instrument of entrepreneurial self-management, tends to break down collegial solidarities based on common professional identity, constructing instead new forms of individualised affiliation to the institution, and 'community' based on corporate culture (essentially productivity) and identity.

Another important aspect of the neo-liberal project in higher education is to infuse the market principles of competition and entrepreneurship into every possible relationship – between institutions, departments and individuals – and into how individual subjects see themselves – in the interests of efficiency and 'productivity' gains. At one end of the hierarchy this has led to the appointment of Vice Chancellors (often from outside the institution) who in most instances function in much the same way as corporate CEOs (Bundy, 2006). Further down there are top management and 'Executive' Deans who are essentially strategic directors, expected to be loyal to the central institution rather than to faculties, departments or disciplines, and to encourage similar loyalty and identification with institutional ends among faculty. But this emphasis on efficiency and productivity may hold dangers for academic institutions whose 'outputs' are not merely 'products' or commodities, or even simply services. As Jonathan warns:

> . . . management slides into managerialism when managing is confused with leadership, and efficiency goals begin to threaten the purposes of the institution and the values and supporting freedoms of academics (2006, p.51).

What, apart from the obvious effects, and the self-reinforcing circle of consumer-centredness, audit, performativity, responsibilisation (and ultimately, de-professionalisation of academics), have been the more hidden consequences of the pervasive application of Principal/Agency Theory, marketisation, competitiveness and audits in higher education?

- Hierarchical line management chains of command based on specifications of job performance have tended to replace collegial or democratic governance and delegation (Olssen and Peters, 2005).

- Relations based on trust are increasingly replaced by contractual relations in which departments and individuals are constantly held to account on the basis of measurable outputs. This is, paradoxically, out of key with increasingly high-skills, post-Fordist economic development.

- Trust becomes a pre-requisite for the knowledge worker for, without it, risks will not be taken and, therefore, new ideas will remain unexpressed and hinder the development of competitiveness as well as processes of continuous improvement (Avis, 2003).

- Decentralised units within universities increasingly compete for funding that is often tied to targets or benchmarks which are centrally determined (Bundy, 2006). This does not always lead to improved 'productivity'.

- As performativity becomes an integral part of our working lives and identities, "management . . . becomes embedded in everything we do. Increasingly, we choose and judge our actions, and they are judged by others, on the basis of their contribution to organisational performance" (Ball, 2003, p.223).

- This deep identification with management combines with the sheer mechanics of performativity in preparing constant reports, accreditation portfolios and gathering supporting evidence to create a climate which may possibly elicit creative and innovative teaching in some instances, but is more likely to encourage safer, less risky and experimental approaches. In the end, spontaneity and innovation, which often involve hard work, are abandoned in favour of less risky, time- and energy-

consuming routine ideas.[7] The students, academics, and ultimately society are the losers in this equation.

- The increasing requirement of *pre*-specified course content militates against professional discretion and flexibility to respond to ongoing developments. As Olssen and Peters note (2005, p.325), "The essence of contractual models involves a *specification*, which is fundamentally at odds with the notion of professionalism" (italics in the original).

- Thus a key consequence of New Public Management has been the creeping *de-professionalisation* of the academy, through a loss of professional autonomy and through surveillance (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Amit, 2000; Shore and Wright, 1999).

- As Marginson argues from the Australian experience, competitiveness does not benefit 'consumers' equally:

> As competitiveness is ratcheted upwards, the seller's market is enhanced. The leading schools and universities have long waiting lists. These institutions choose the student-consumer, more than the student choosing them. They do not need to become cheaper, more (cost) efficient, or more responsive to gain support, and to expand would be to reduce their positional value (1997, p.7–8).

Returning to Bundy's key question of whether QA can drive South African higher education firmly towards the transformative imperatives of equity and redress, if its roots lie in the technical rationality of managerialism, or whether market-led 'reforms' will see a reneging on fundamental equity goals, an important pointer is identified by Waghid (2004, p.37):

> higher education policy discourse . . . has increasingly minimised its initial strong thrust towards equity and redress, and instead substantively emphasised the need for efficient human resource development. . . The achievement of equity and redress which had been so prominent in earlier higher education policy discourse, became secondary to the more primary objective of making higher education more responsive to attending to economic labour market imperatives and concomitant neoliberal requirements for skill and innovative knowledge workers and producers who, in the words of Bourdieu (1998, p.2), can ensure "an unprecedented mobility of capital".

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[7] This resonates with Lyotard: "any experimentation in discourse, institutions and values (with the inevitable 'disorders' it brings in the curriculum, student supervision and testing, and pedagogy – not to mention its socio-political repercussions) is regarded as having little or no operational value and is not given the slightest credence in the name of the seriousness of the system" (1979, p.50).

Concluding discussion

Just as there is a strong case to be made for academics in South Africa to become more vigilant and critical, even combative, recalling our role as public intellectuals, so too do we need to develop a more theoretically informed view of, and to deepen the debate around, the policies, discursive practices and governmental rationalities that regulate our work and our working lives. This requires us to examine our own practices, and the causal logic of the theories and discourses that underlie them, in cross-disciplinary ways, critically exploring the insights and liabilities of organisation development theory, economic theory, political theory, systems theory and epistemology.

For one thing, South African academics need to continue to push the agenda, as so many did during and immediately after the era of apartheid, of equity, justice and redress, no matter how it may be made to seem passé, or to jar with the prevailing discourse of universal entrepreneurship and responsibilisation. For another, we should be arguing vociferously against the abandonment of the idea of higher education as an institution for the pursuit of truth and questioning – in Lyotard's terms, where we ask 'Is it true?' rather than simply 'What use is it?', 'Is it saleable?' and 'Is it efficient?'

To maintain such arguments, academics in all fields need to position ourselves so as to better understand the factors which could affect the future trajectory of quality assurance and managerialism in South African higher education. The aim of this effort would not be to 'manage risk' in a managerialist sense, but to be alert to contradictions and dialectic 'chinks' in the ideological armour of hegemonic neo-liberalism, its vision of a world in which 'there is nothing that is not market', and in particular its steering of higher education. The following are but a sample of such contradictions and potential weaknesses in the latter:

- Verkleij and Westerheijden (2002), quoted in Luckett (2007, p.3), suggest that "all external quality assurance agencies experience diminishing returns, with easy wins for both accountability and improvement in the first round and increasing bureaucratisation, but also window dressing, in subsequent rounds".

- Academics may over time develop more overt forms of resistance to the constant requirements of performativity, particularly when these lead to what Ball calls 'fabrication' (2003), since these deeply undermine the scholarly respect for truth.

- As Luckett points out (2007), the adopted model of quality assurance evolved from *positivist* models of social science research, yet is *pragmatic* about the methods used to generate evidence and in its foundationalist reliance on empirical evidence (derived from direct or indirect observation) in assuring the meeting of predetermined criteria. Thus it is assumed that through empirical observation, evaluators can achieve acceptable levels of accuracy, objectivity and neutrality in their judgments. From the point of view of scientific research, this is dodgy on every count, and may well undermine how some academics come to see their own scientific work if this is how their work is officially assessed (Tagg, 2002).

- Despite the de-professionalisation of academics, the position of universities as major producers of knowledge is a source of unpredictability, and a potential key driver of change in a knowledge economy (Amit, 2000; Olssen, 2005). In other words, there is at least some scope, ironically in terms of sheer economics, for academics to become more assertive in the face of unwanted accountability measures.

- Periodically we are reminded of our racist heritage, as we were by the disturbing video made by university students in which black cleaning staff were made to eat food on which students appeared to have urinated. The outcry and soul-searching in higher education which followed this at least remind us that racist hatred may persist in people too young to have known apartheid directly (Jansen, 2008), and remind us of educational imperatives that have little to do with self-entrepreneurship, competitiveness, consumer choice, contractual relations or throughput, or even with liberal freedom of expression, but everything to do with the cultivation of values and attitudes conducive to building a healed nation.

On the other hand, we need also to be prepared for the possibility of intensified marketisation and managerialism in higher education: more pressure for quantified indicators and outcomes, additional forms of self- or external surveillance, the drying up of funding for any research which is not of obvious value as an investment – or even product innovation as a specific core function of universities?

Perhaps the greatest value of the debate on the pages of *Kagisano* 4 is best captured by Singh and Lange in a later editorial piece: it is the clarity with which the need emerges to examine

> beyond surfaces to fundamental questions on the premises and presumptions that underpin QA beyond improvement triumphalism or easy, sometimes simplistic, diatribes about managerialism. The global trajectory of QA across diverse higher education systems requires reflective attention by researchers and practitioners alike, with an analytical lens that should range over often-cited issues like the purposes of QA in context and the accountabilities of key actors in the enterprise to less addressed premises and assumptions embedded within QA (2007, p.viii).

Hence it is significant that the CHE not only supports colloquia like the one at which Bundy presented his paper, but is prepared to invite and publish scholarly critique and debate. As Bundy himself notes (2006), the spaces that such opportunities create for collective reflection are rare anywhere, and hence to be cherished. There is no need in South Africa to confine concerns about managerialism to the marginalised discourse of complaints in the corridor.

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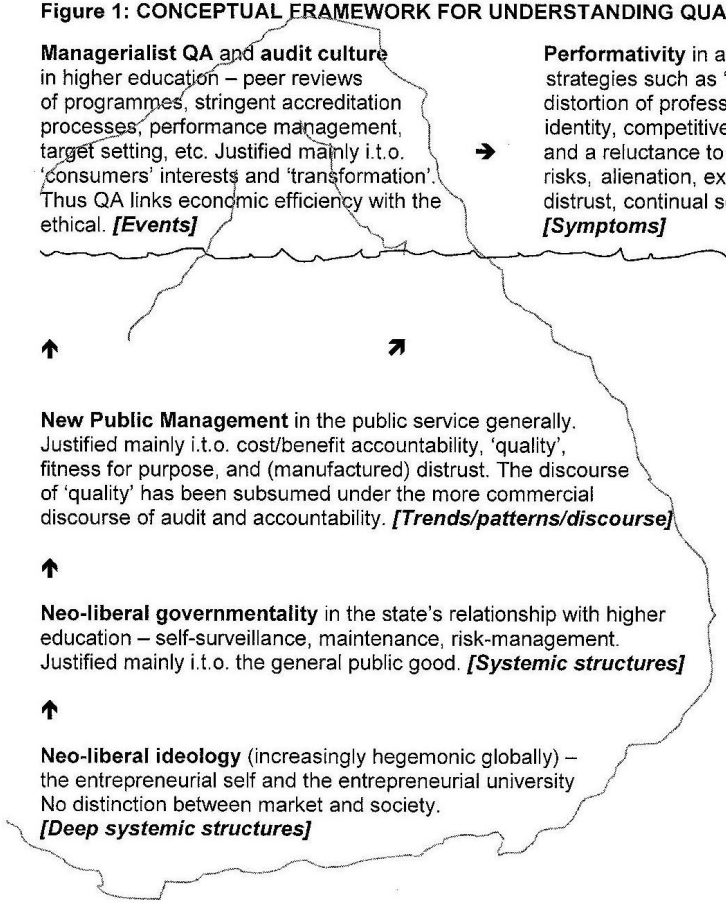
Figure 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING QUALITY ASSURANCE AND AUDIT REGIMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION



Note: I do not claim to have originated the idea of representing deeper levels of causality and structure by means of an iceberg; Peter Senge[1] and his associates use the idea to illustrate the danger of focusing only on visible, surface problems or single events when it is more appropriate to look 'beneath the surface' for the hidden systemic structures.

[1] Senge, P. *et al.* (2000). *Schools that Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators and Parents*. London: Nicholas Brealey. p 80.

From 0 to 100% - How Raithby Primary turned their literacy performance around

Michael le Cordeur

Abstract

Recent literacy results show that only 44% of all Grade 3 learners in the Stellenbosch district, and just over 50% of all Grade 3 learners in the Western Cape, performed at an appropriate level (WCED, 2009c). According to education specialists, the problem starts in the Foundation Phase, during which learners fail to acquire the basic skills in literacy (Heugh, pers. comm.; Webb, pers. comm.). This article reflects on how a previously disadvantaged school turned around its performance in literacy by changing both its style and attitude towards teaching reading, after the circuit manager concerned decided to intervene at the school. In this article, I will argue that low levels of literacy call for a change of attitude and strategy, and the execution thereof, which should reach deep into the instructional practices of reading teachers,[1] who tend, it is believed, to rely mainly on their use of the traditional approach. This approach suggests that learners are passive decoders of graphic-phonetic systems, and that they need to learn letters (sounds) first, before they can read words (Alderson, 2000). As opposed to the traditional bottom-up or top-down approaches, an interactive approach is recommended. The framework for the teaching and assessment of Grade 3 learners at Raithby Primary, in terms of the interactive approach over a period of three years, is described. The literacy results obtained by the learners over this period show that, with the interactive approach, the reading ability of learners could improve, provided that the teachers adopt a positive attitude towards the teaching of reading.

Introduction

In order for our young learners to compete in the global knowledge economy, we need to ensure that they have the best grounding in literacy possible. The MEC for Education in the Western Cape, Donald Grant, confirms this statement: “Ensuring the requisite competency in reading and writing for our learners is a key priority for our country and equipping our learners with skills required to be literate is non-negotiable” (WCED, 2009a). Unfortunately, numerous studies over the years have shown that South Africa’s learners are falling behind international standards, with the Western Cape being no

[1] The term *teacher* is preferred throughout the article, in preference to *educator*.

exception to the general downturn (WCED, 2009c). Currently, too many of our learners are being pushed through the system, despite being unable to master literacy skills. Unable to cope at higher levels as a result, many of these learners either drop out of school, or fail to pass Grade 12. We therefore need to ensure that learners are properly equipped to meet the challenges of the latter stages of their schooling from the beginning of their school careers. The mastering of reading and writing skills is critical to the entire process. The problem of the poor literacy levels attained is next discussed in detail.

Problem statement

Poor literacy levels are not a problem that is limited to South Africa. According to Lenski (2008, p.39): "The majority of the USA's middle school students cannot read at the proficient level and up to 71% of eighth-grade students may be considered struggling readers." In the current article the focus is on South Africa, and particularly on Raithby Primary School. Results show that South African learners consistently underperform and are not only regarded as among the weakest in the world, but also among the weakest in Africa. According to Bloch (2009, p.12), 60% to 80% of South African schools are dysfunctional: "They produce barely literate and numerate learners and [I] believe the country is headed for a national education crisis." Experts argue that the problem starts in the Foundation Phase, during which many learners are failing to acquire the requisite basic skills in literacy (Heugh, pers. comm.; Jansen, 2009; Ramphele, 2008; Webb, pers. comm).

Background to the intervention

Since 2002, the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) has spent a significant amount of its budget on improving literacy levels in schools. It has become evident (WCED, 2009a) that too few of the Western Cape's learners have been attaining the benchmarked literacy levels. As a result, the WCED launched the first provincial study of Grade 3 literacy skills in 2002. The study revealed that only 32% of Grade 3 learners were reading at the prescribed level (WCED, 2004).

Such a finding resulted in the Department initiating a number of interventions aimed at improving the levels of literacy in some of our schools. The results of the interventions have shown that we are making significant progress in

teaching literacy skills, with the pass rate for literacy in Grade 3 having improved by 17.8% since testing first started in 2002: 39.5% in 2004, 47.7% in 2006 and 53.5% in 2008 (WCED, 2009a).

Prior to the launching of such initiatives, Raithby Primary School consistently recorded poor literacy results. In 2002, the Grade 3 learners scored the lowest mark (0%) in the Stellenbosch district; by 2004 their mark had improved, but only to 15% (WCED, 2004). Fearn and Farnan (2008) were convinced that, if an appropriate solution were not found, it would lead to increased levels of underachievement. However, both Peer and Reid (2001) and Townend and Turner (2000) pointed out that, although the problem would not disappear overnight, there could be a marked improvement in reading if the necessary assistance were provided.

At the time of the intervention, I was the circuit manager responsible for Raithby Primary School. After I had conducted intense discussions with the staff at the school, as well as with the WCED, a decision was taken to intervene. The vehicle chosen for the intervention was the interactive approach of teaching reading. The adoption of such an interactive approach towards dealing with reading problems and/or illiteracy has been advocated in the literature for more than two decades (Carrell, 1988).

The current article can, therefore, be viewed as a report on such an intervention, rather than as research *per se*, and will, therefore, not include the description of a research design or methodology. The article rather aims to point out to teachers, and, more specifically, to teachers at Raithby Primary why the traditional method of teaching reading – which I shall discuss later in the current article – did not achieve the desired results.

Scope of intervention

The approach followed by teachers when teaching reading is under scrutiny – in my view, this is one of the fundamental reasons for the large number of struggling readers[2] in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3). First, some key terms in the current study will be explained, followed by a discussion of the traditional method of teaching reading, according to the bottom-up and the top-down approaches. An overview of the interactive approach as an

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[2] The term *struggling reader* is defined fully in the next section.

alternative method of instruction follows. Secondly, the intervention conducted, and examples of teaching reading activities taught, at Raithby Primary School will be discussed. The test conducted to determine the success of the intervention will then be described. Finally, I will discusses the results of, and present some concluding remarks about, the study.

Method

The current article investigates South Africa's poor literacy rate by means, firstly, of a literature review (Denscombe, 1998; Mouton, 2001), and, secondly, by a research intervention. Even a critical review of the literature concerned requires the support of an empirical study to test our new insights (Mouton, 2001).

Literature review

Mouton (2001) states that a comprehensive and well-integrated literature review is essential to any study. Such a review provides you with a good understanding of the issues and debates in the area in which you are working, as well as an understanding of current theoretical thinking and definitions, along with a description of previous studies and their results. According to Mertens (1998), a literature review can also be used to study previously produced literature about a topic. In the current case, such a review can also provide a theoretical framework for the teaching of reading and the nature of reading problems. Mouton (2001) warns against the limitations of a literature review, stating that, at best, a literature review can only summarise and organise the existing scholarship, so that we still need to undertake an empirical study to test our new insights into the identified problem.

Definitions

As the terms *reading* and *literacy* are key terms in the present study, I shall define them in this section of the article.

According to Alderson (2000), *reading* refers to the meaning that a reader both derives from, and contributes to, a text. Experts (Alexander, 1997; Heugh, 2006) agree that poor reading skills lead to the weakening of academic

performance, thereby hindering a learner's overall development. Such weak performance often leads to the adoption of a negative attitude towards reading, which manifests itself in such emotionally unsound responses as a fear of, and shyness towards reading, as well as to general feelings of frustration and a poor self-image.

The WCED's strategy with regard to *literacy* rests on the assumption that explicit teaching of phonics will take place (Le Cordeur, 2004, p.234) embedded in a "whole language" approach, in terms of which the making of meaning is stressed. The constructivist approach is applied, with both reading and writing being considered critical co-components of development (WCED, 2006). Within the framework of the current study, we will regard literacy as the ability to read, write and spell accurately. Nathanson (2009) points out that, although the same teacher usually teaches both reading and writing skills, teachers rarely make the appropriate connection between the two. However, according to Manyike and Lemmer (2010), reading and writing are independent skills, with effective literacy development being dependent on the interconnection between the two. It is also true that, within the wider community, literacy skills are largely judged by a person's ability to spell correctly (Van Staden, 2010).

In a previous section of the current article, I showed that the learners at Raithby had struggled to master reading skills over a long period of time, which led to the result of 0% for literacy in 2002. Although those children who enter Grade 1 and who have not yet learned to read cannot be classified as struggling readers, it is clear from the above-mentioned results that the problem was not just confined to the Foundation Phase. The present study aims to inform teachers about the characteristics of struggling readers, in order that they might be alerted to the need to provide timely support. I will now discuss some of the characteristics of a struggling reader.

The struggling reader

Researchers (see Caskey, 2008; Lenski, 2008) view struggling readers as learners who experience difficulties reading at school. Lenski (2008, p.38) defines the term *struggling reader "as learners* who have experienced difficulty with school based reading". Caskey (2008, p. 170) concurs with the above: "[T]hey are often stigmatised as learners who grapple unsuccessfully with written text". Peer and Reid (2001) point out that learners who struggle to

read often develop a poor self-image and subsequently fabricate excuses as to why they should not read. If such readers continue to fail in their efforts to read successfully, they will often blame their poor reading on a particular disability, instead of realising that reading is merely a skill which they can still acquire. Burns, Roe and Ross (1999) state that those who struggle to learn to read often exhibit behaviour-related reading problems, such as visual disorders, poor spelling, poor verbal abilities, poor reading comprehension and reading speed, listening problems, poor handwriting, and the inability to make notes. Experiencing such problems often leads to the adoption of a negative attitude towards reading, which manifests itself in emotional responses, such as fear of reading, shyness about reading, frustration, embarrassment, and a low self-image. Teachers must equip themselves to identify learners with reading problems as soon as possible, so that they can provide the necessary assistance (Townend and Turner, 2000).

The process of teaching reading skills

The aim of teaching reading skills is to create suitable and sufficient opportunities that allow the learner to learn to read. With the necessary assistance and effective reading strategies, struggling readers can read effectively, provided that they are given specific guidance. Walker (2000) believes that a reading programme should complement the rest of the activities in the classroom. For her, the teaching of the reading process is the sum of the text being read, the reader, the teaching reading technique, and the reinforcement task that has to be performed. The ideal situation would consist of a specially trained teacher presenting a specific literacy programme to such learners. Before I present my discussion of the interactive literacy programme, I will first discuss the traditional approaches which are adopted towards the teaching of reading.

Approaches to the teaching of reading

According to Alderson (2000), two methods of processing information when teaching reading are important within the traditional approach. *Bottom-up processing* is activated by incoming data that enter the system at ground level. *Top-down processing* suggests that language consists of systems that are integrated and interdependent on one another.

The bottom-up approach

According to Carrell (1988), the bottom-up approach is a systemic model that uses the written word as point of departure. Firstly, the graphic stimuli (letters/sounds) must be deciphered. Secondly, the deciphered stimuli are decoded as sounds, which are then joined or recognised as words, with meaning then being shaped accordingly. Each component involves sub-processes that occur independently of one another, but which build on one another. Such an approach has long been associated with the phonetic approach to teaching reading, which requires that learners first learn the sounds of the letters before they read words. According to this traditional view, readers are passive decoders of graphic–phonemic–syntactic–semantic systems. Carrell (1988) emphasises two aspects of the bottom-up approach that can be used during teaching to improve reading: grammar and vocabulary. Research has shown that an in-depth knowledge of grammar can significantly contribute to the development of reading. Carrell (1988) states that beginner readers experience difficulty in abstracting the core meaning of sentences and paragraphs if they have not been taught the basics of grammar. According to her, vocabulary building during the teaching of reading skills should receive much more attention than it currently does.

The top-down approach

The top-down approach defines language as integrated and interdependent systems. The reading activity is a holistic process that cannot be subdivided without disrupting the process. The top-down approach emphasises the importance of the reader's contribution to the text. Reading is regarded as a psycholinguistic guessing game, during which readers guess or predict the meaning of the text on the basis of minimal information, using existing activated knowledge to explain it (Alderson, 2000).

Accordingly, the readers' experience of the reading process, their knowledge of the content, the structure and the grammar of the language, as well as of specific types of text, and both their general and their specific knowledge of the topic are all involved in the reading process. Top-down processing is, therefore, also known as concept-driven processing (Carrell, 1988). If learners rely too much on concept-driven (or top-down) processing, they are inclined to make semantic reading errors. Their answers to questions that they are asked about their reading are often proof of superficial reading. Although such learners might have a sketchy idea of what a text that they read is about, their skills are insufficient to conduct a thorough reading, as is required in the case of comprehension tests (Taylor, Pearson, Harris and Garcia., 1995).

The interactive approach

In the previous sections, details of the bottom-up and top-down approaches were given. The limitations of both approaches were indicated. Neither the bottom-up, nor the top-down, approach is an adequate characterisation of the reading process. As reading is a holistic process, it cannot be divided into subsections without disrupting the process, Alderson (2000) suggests that an interactive approach to the teaching of reading should produce the best results.

Teaching must emphasise the interactive (whole-language) approach, as the whole, the paragraph and the sentence are as important as are the separate parts. Good teaching leads the struggling reader from the whole to the parts, and then back to the whole (Dechant, 1994; Hiebert, 2006; Le Cordeur, 2004; Taylor *et al.*, 1995). Dechant (1994) emphasises the role of the reader in the approach, because the reader has so much to contribute towards the reading process. The reader must interact with the text, and be taught to do so. Meaning comes from diverse sources, and any source may, at any given time, be responsible for transferring meaning. Information from one source often relies on the information from another source, with the reader creating meaning through the selective use of information from all available resources (Alderson, 2000).

Supporters of the interactive model, such as Eskey (1988), claim that readers process words and letters while they are formulating hypotheses about the possible meaning of the text. One of the reasons why the interactive model is recommended so widely is because it moves away from the idea that reading follows either a top-down, or a bottom-up, approach. The top-down approach emphasises high cognitive skills, such as forecasting and background knowledge of the text, whereas the bottom-up approach focuses on the decoding of language. The balance between the two approaches is restored by the interactive model (Taylor *et al*., 1995). According to Carrell (1988, p.89), "[g]ood reading is a more language-structured affair than a guessing-game". Readers with different backgrounds who experience diverse emotions will tend to form different meanings from the same text. The more meaningful an association is for the learner, the quicker that learner will learn it, and the sooner a lasting association will be made with it, thus leading to better reading comprehension (Alderson, 2000; Carrell, 1988).

Therefore, it makes sense that struggling readers should improve both their bottom-up word recognition skills and their top-down interpretation strategies. The one approach must not be seen as a substitute for the other; rather, they complement each other, because, as Eskey (1988, p.95) quite rightly remarks,

"[g]ood reading – that is fluent and accurate reading – can result only from a constant interaction between these processes". It is clear, therefore, that teachers should use a combination of bottom-up and top-down strategies to teach reading.

The interactive strategies implemented at Raithby Primary during the intervention will now be discussed according to three indicators of progress in reading skills, namely reading fluency, reading comprehension and reading attitude.

Reading fluency

Researchers (Fawcett and Rasinski, 2008; Juel and Minden-Cupp, 2000; Nunes (Ed.), 1999; Stanovich, 2000; Walker, 2000) point out that learners are expected to acquire a vocabulary of more than 80 000 words very early in their life. Teaching vocabulary is, therefore, very important, notably for those learners who come from such historically disadvantaged backgrounds as Raithby Primary. Those learners who learn to read early (in Grade 1) come to read considerably better than do others. The former do not struggle with the decoding of words, their general knowledge is broadened, and their word recognition skills are expanded. According to Fawcett and Rasinski (2008), the skill to recognise words is central in the reading process. Thus, the learners at Raithby Primary were taught to read single words using visual leads, phonics and sight words; to read single sentences using word recognition strategies; to read new text with the help of predicting, phonics and visual aids; and to read single sentences without visual leads by using such word recognition strategies as those mentioned above.

Reading comprehension

Various researchers (see Caskey, 2008; Snow, 2000; Taylor *et al.,* 1995*)* hold the view that reading teaching that aims to advance the struggling reader's reading comprehension must emphasise meaning as the objective of reading. Therefore, in order to improve the learners' reading comprehension, they were taught such strategies as making prior acquaintance, summarising and self-questioning, as such strategies would promote their comprehension of the content of a text. Learners were also taught to monitor their comprehension while reading; to answer questions by using retrospection, a self-monitoring list and question-and-answer methods; and to use such general reading comprehension strategies as forming images while reading, reverse questioning, and compiling a story map while reading. They were also taught

to ask questions during or after a reading activity, as well as to conduct self-questioning about the activity, so that they can have enough recovery strategies to improve their comprehension.

Reading attitude

Attitude suggests a lasting acquired tendency to react either positively or negatively to certain matters, such as reading, in a certain way. *Affect*, such as mood and emotion, sometimes forms part of motivation and attitude. According to Hugo (2001), both affective and cognitive components are involved in the reading process. The functioning of one's cognitive domain is strongly influenced by the affective domain. The question arises as to whether attention is paid to the development of the affective or the emotional domain of learners during teaching. According to Alexander and Heathington (1988, as supported by Coleman, 1998), over-much emphasis is placed on the cognitive domain, at the expense of the affective. Such an emphasis is out of place, because affective factors are dynamically involved during the reading process. If teachers were to guide learners to experience reading positively, the latter would come to approach the decision to read with greater perseverance than they might otherwise have. Other factors that play an important role in the reading process are self-motivation, interest in a topic, and mental motivation, such as curiosity. If learners themselves were to choose their own reading matter, they would tend to exert greater effort in understanding the text concerned than they would if the matter were chosen for them (Le Cordeur, 2004).

Intervention

First, I will describe the site, the population and the socio-economic environment in which the study took place, in order to give some background to why the learners concerned obtained the lowest mark (0%) for literacy in 2002 in the Stellenbosch district.

The site and the population

Raithby Primary School is situated on the R45 between Stellenbosch and Somerset West. The school was founded in 1846 by the Methodist Church of South Africa, and is still located alongside the church on grounds which were

donated to the school by the church. According to the WCED's poverty index, this predominantly rural school is classified as a quintile 2 school[A] which, on a scale of one to four, defines the school as poor (WCED, 2009b). The school population comprises learners who come from families with a low socio-economic status within the larger community of the Stellenbosch district in the Western Cape. The medium of instruction at this school is Afrikaans, with 99% of the learners having Afrikaans as their mother tongue, and English being taught as the first additional language.

The demographics of the learners

At the time of the study, 131 learners, the majority of whom could be classified as coloured people,[B] were enrolled at the school, which provided instruction from Grade 1 to Grade 7. It is important to note that, at the time at which the study was conducted, the school had only one class per grade, which, in the case of Grades 2 and 3, was a multi-grade class, meaning that the two grades concerned were taught in the same class by the same teacher. Learners in Grade 1 were taught by Ms C. Anthony, with those who were in Grades 2 or 3 being taught by Ms E. Abrahams. Of the learners, 18 were enrolled for Grade 2 and another 18 for Grade 3 in 2008. Only one learner did not come from a poor background, with all the others concerned living on the surrounding wine farms, with few or no resources for assisting their reading. The only learner who came from a middle-class background was the child of a teacher. Many of the children came to school hungry, though the WCED's Feeding Scheme provided at least one meal per day to each learner. During an interview with the principal, he mentioned that as many as 80% of the learners were the children of single parents who nearly all had to work on the wine farms as labourers and who were largely illiterate. Only two of the learners had attended pre-school at the church (Olivier, pers. comm.). In the light of the above-mentioned facts, it is understandable why many of the learners were struggling to learn to read, and why, according to the principal, it had taken Ms Anthony six months to teach them even the basic alphabet.

Sample

A purposive sampling design was applied in the current study (Mouton, 2001), in which all the learners in Grade 1 in 2006 participated. The learners concerned were envisaged as being in Grade 3 in 2008, when the next WCED

Grade 3 assessment tests would take place (WCED, 2008). The advantage of using purposive sampling is that it allows the researcher to focus on certain participants (in the present case, learners) who are likely to possess certain knowledge that is critical to the research undertaken (Denscombe, 1998). Of the 18 learners in Grade 1, 12 were boys and 6 girls. Only one learner did not have Afrikaans as the mother tongue, with the exception being a Xhosa boy, who stayed with his grandparents because his parents were still living in the Transkei. Since the boy concerned attended the school from Grade 1, he had a very good understanding of Afrikaans by the time that the test was conducted in 2008. One could argue, therefore, that language was not a barrier during the intervention.

The demographics of the teachers

At the time of the study, Raithby Primary School had six teachers, including the principal, who taught Grade 4. Apart from Ms E. Abrahams who, as mentioned before, taught both Grades 2 and 3, each teacher was responsible for teaching one grade. All the teachers had Afrikaans as their mother tongue, which played a pivotal role in the success of the intervention, as it meant the absence of any language barrier. During the three-year intervention period, there was no staff turnover. What is even more significant is that not one teacher was absent during the intervention, proving how committed the teachers concerned were to enhancing the school's literacy profile. Though all the teachers were adequately qualified to teach their respective grades, from the start of the intervention some of them, including Ms Abrahams, decided to further their studies. Despite already being in possession of a teaching diploma, Ms Abrahams improved her qualifications by studying for a BEd degree (Foundation Phase) at a university of technology in order to improve her ability to teach literacy. Concerns have been raised about the teachers' own levels of literacy, with the question being raised of whether they could understand and apply reading strategies. However, over the course of the three-year interventions it became clear that the problem did not lie with the amount of knowledge possessed by the teachers themselves, but more with their approach and attitude towards the teaching of reading skills. The teachers received relevant training, which enabled them to apply their own knowledge in such a way that they understood how to teach reading, especially in terms of the interactive approach, and how to improve their own teaching methodology. The teachers' attitude towards their work has significantly improved, which has led to the improvement of their learners' level of literacy.

The teachers' commitment and enthusiasm were also seen during the five-week long World Cup soccer tournament, during which, despite it being a holiday, they voluntarily stayed at work for two more weeks (without extra remuneration), so that they could provide a meal for the learners who were in desperate need of such sustenance.

Background to the intervention

In 2002, the school's literacy results were met with disbelief and severe disappointment. The staff had to deal with the stigma of their school being awarded the worst results in literacy in the local circuit. In addition, the results of 2004, released in 2005, showed scarcely any improvement, with only 15% of the Grade 3 learners and 11% of the Grade 6 learners performing at the accepted level. As circuit manager, in 2005 I subsequently convened a meeting with all the relevant stakeholders: the staff, the principal, the governing body, and the circuit team (the composition of which I shall describe in the next section). The general feeling was that an intervention that would improve the levels of literacy at Raithby was urgently called for.

Nature of the intervention

The resultant intervention covered the following aspects:

- The staff received training in capacity-building, as the adoption of a positive attitude towards the intervention was considered essential to the success of the intervention.
- The parents were made co-responsible for the day-to-day management of the school, in terms of which they accepted certain responsibilities, such as ensuring that their children regularly attended school.
- The teachers received intensive in-service training from the departmental officials involved (see the details pertaining to the circuit team in the next section).
- All parties consented to signing an agreement of commitment.
- The intervention started with the beginning of the school year in January 2006, from which time the new Grade 1 learners were taught literacy by means of the interactive approach.

The composition of the circuit team

The circuit team that agreed to be part of the intervention consisted of the officials described below:

- The *circuit manager* accepted overall responsibility for the intervention. His suitability for the role was due to him having a good working relationship with both the school staff and the rest of the team, as well as him himself having previously conducted research into literacy.
- The *subject advisor* for literacy had 14 years experience of working in the circuit, and was, at the time of the intervention, studying for her BEd Honours degree. Her role in the intervention was to develop and provide the necessary learning support material concerning the interactive way of teaching reading.
- The school was allocated a qualified *learning support teacher* at the start of the intervention in 2006. Her responsibility was to form small groups of those learners who could be seen to be falling behind, so that she could give them individual attention.
- After having attended the above-mentioned in-service training, the *teacher* concerned was better equipped to teach literacy. Her positive attitude, which was reinforced by the presence of her own child in her class, helped to set the scene for a successful intervention. (Her studies were already mentioned earlier.)

The test

The test to which reference is made in the current study was conducted in October and November of 2008, and was aimed at investigating the literacy levels of all Grade 3 learners in the province. Such a test is conducted on a biennial basis, with the 2008 test forming part of the fourth round of testing since 2002. It should be noted that the tests concerned are WCED assessment tests, and are **NOT** the systemic evaluation tests of the national Department of Education. The intention of the Grade 3 assessment is to measure the performance of, and to track the progress made by, learners towards achievement in literacy (WCED, 2008).

As with the previous assessment in 2006, the entire cohort of Grade 3 learners was tested in 2008. The test was administered by the WCED[C] and was based

on the standards set out in the WCED's *Benchmarks for Literacy and Numeracy and the National Curriculum Statement (NCS)*, which meant that the assessment was suited to the linguistic and cultural diversity reflected in a South African classroom. The application of such a test also implied that the teacher concerned had to be retrained to teach literacy according to the *Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS)* (WCED, 2008). The learners sat for the 120-minute long test on 14 October 2008, with officials of the Joint Education Board (JET) acting as invigilators. No other adult was allowed in the test venue. The test was applied in order to ascertain the learners' ability to read, write and spell (WCED, 2008).

The rationale behind using benchmarks during the test

The benchmarks in literacy for Grade 3, which articulate nationally agreed minimum acceptable standards in literacy, form part of a national literacy plan agreed to by the National Department of Education and all nine provincial departments. The benchmarks reflect the minimum acceptable level of essential elements of literacy. The setting of such benchmarks was facilitated by referring to empirical data that the WCED had obtained in previous tests. Similar work from overseas was also consulted. While the benchmarks represent minimum acceptable standards, the schools concerned must strive to develop the full talents and capacities of all learners concerned. Data are reported by the WCED to the wider community in relation to the achievement or non-achievement of such benchmarks (WCED, 2009d). The three parts of the test are described below.

Part One: Reading (Comprehension)

As Afrikaans was the language of learning and teaching at the school being investigated, the learners were given an Afrikaans story to read. The story was about a baby turtle trying to reach the sea. After reading the story, learners were expected to answer the questions independently. They were given 40 minutes for the task. The story and questions allowed for the application of the following benchmarks:

- illustrations that clarify meaning, with words that were new and strange being supported by the illustrations;
- very little vocabulary that is likely to be inaccessible, with words that tend to be difficult for a Grade 3 learner to understand being clarified by illustrations or the text;

- predictable text structure, with an orientation including characters and a setting in place and time, with a complication (trying to get back to the sea) and a resolution (reaching the sea) typical of narratives;

- predictable sentence structure in statements, questions and commands; and

- compound and complex sentences of two to three clauses, containing prepositional and adverbial phrases.

Part Two: Writing

For the second part of the test, the learners were asked to write an adventure story about a legendary creature. They were given some pictures, including one of a huge creature called 'Big Foot' (*Grootvoete*), and one sentence, giving some details about each creature (for Big Foot the sentence was: 'Everyone knows that I can make myself invisible, but I have other secret powers too' (*Almal weet ek is onoorwinlik, maar ek het ander kragte ook.*) The instructions were read aloud to the learners by the teacher. The learners were then asked whether they understood what to do, and reminded that they had to choose only one creature for their adventure. The learners had 40 minutes in which to complete the task. Some of the benchmarks that were addressed in the test were the following:

- the composition of a simple story by the learner, with the story making sense to the reader and showing a basic understanding of the writing task;

- the incorporation in the text of subject matter that was related to the task and topic, briefly expressed and organised according to some of the basic structural elements of the story;

- textual subject matter showing a basic understanding of the task, and evidence of some gaps in story logic;

- use of the following textual features appropriate to the text type and task:

  - simple statements in the form of sentences in grammatically correct word order;
  - some compound sentences, combining clauses with 'and';
  - some complex sentences in reported and direct speech;

- phrases and words to locate events in place and time, such as 'in the mountains', and to specify means, such as 'with a message', with such phrases and words sometimes being used at the beginning of sentences, such as 'Once upon a time. . .' or 'One day. . .';
- vocabulary appropriate to the subject matter of the text; and
- capital letters at the beginning of sentences and for names, and full stops at the end of sentences over 80% of the time

Part Three: Spelling

In the final part of the test, the learners were asked to write another adventure story about a legendary creature. They were given some pictures, including one of an eagle, with one or two sentences giving some details about each creature (for the eagle the sentences were: 'I am so huge that I could block out the sun with my wings. I also like to eat naughty kids'). The instructions were read aloud by the invigilator. The learners were then asked whether they understood what to do, and reminded that they had to choose only one creature for their adventure.

Some of the benchmarks that were addressed in this sample were that the learner accurately spelt the following:

- frequently used and readily recognised words;
- some words of two syllables with common spelling patterns; and
- one-syllable words with common spelling patterns.

Attention was also paid to whether the learner attempted to spell accurately a relatively wide range of words, and what type of errors were made in the spelling of such words (WCED, 2009d).

The learners were given 40 minutes in which to complete the task. On completion, the tasks were collected by the invigilator and marked by the JET.

Limitations of the test

The above-mentioned test had some limitations. In speaking to the teacher, as well as to other teachers and principals in the circuit, much dissatisfaction was expressed about the learners having to write all three parts of the test without a break in between. In addition, the test was very long, taking into account that the learners were only in Grade 3 and between 8 and 9-years-old. Furthermore,

the test was written directly after the learners had to complete another two-hour test of numeracy. Concerns were expressed that the learners had become tired, which had led to a drop in their concentration and, consequently, a drop in the standard of their performance (Abrahams, pers. comm.).

In the next section, I shall describe the outcomes of the test and the results which were obtained by the Grade 3 learners of Raithby Primary School.

Test outcomes

After three years of being taught reading and literacy skills the interactive way, the class of Grade 3 learners was subjected to the systemic assessment test of 2008. The results of the WCED assessment test for Grade 3 were published on 6 March 2009. On the question of whether the interventions had been successful, Donald Grant, the MEC for Education in the Western Cape at the time, reacted as follows: "The results of these interventions have shown that we are making significant progress in literacy" (WCED, 2009c). The report on the degree of literacy which was obtained by the Grade 3 class of Raithby Primary in 2008 is set out in the following tables (see the certified copies, Annexure A). Table 1 indicates an 81.2% increase since 2006, and a 100% increase since 2002, which is described by the WCED (2009c) as being a substantial improvement over their previous performance.

Table 1: Assessment results of Raithby Primary in literacy: 2002–2008

Assessment	2002 (%)	2004 (%)	2006 (%)	2008 (%)	Difference between 2006 and 2008	Result
Literacy	0.0	15.0	18.8	100.0	81.2	Substantial improvement

Table 2 provides an overall view of the literacy results attained by the learners at Raithby Primary School, with comparable percentages for circuit, education district (ED), and province. The NCS assessment standards were used for the assessment, with 50% considered the required attainment standard (pass percentage) for learners. The assessment test consisted of literacy-related questions directed at grade levels 1 to 3.

Table 2: Percentage of learners achieving at grade level for literacy

Literacy	Grade 1		Grade 2		Grade 3	
	Ave. mark (%)	Ave. pass (%)	Ave. mark (%)	Ave. pass (%)	Ave. mark (%)	Ave. pass (%)
Raithby	98.8	100.0	92.3	100.0	74.0	100.0
Circuit 1	94.4	98.7	78.1	91.8	49.9	51.9
ED: Cape Winelands	92.6	97.2	74.1	88.0	43.7	44.0
Western Cape province	93.4	97.5	75.1	87.6	50.4	53.5

Table 3 is based on the categorisation of each question in the literacy test in terms of knowledge and skill. The table reflects the average and pass percentage obtained per grade at Raithby Primary School for literacy.

Table 3: Percentage of learners passing literacy knowledge/skill items per grade level

Skill	LO	Assessment Standard	Assessment items	Performance					
				Grade 1		Grade 2		Grade 3	
				Ave. mark (%)	Ave. pass (%)	Ave. mark (%)	Ave. pass (%)	Ave. mark (%)	Ave. pass %
Reading single words	3	- Uses visual cues to make meaning - Uses know-ledge of phonics and sight words	Choose one of four pictures to match given word	98.8	100				
Reading single sentences with visual cues	3	Uses word recognition strategies to read unfamiliar texts (phonics, contextual cues, predicting)	Short sentence with missing word, and a choice of four words to complete the sentence			97.1	100		
	6	Works with sentences							
Reading single sentences with visual cues	3	Uses word recognition strategies to read unfamiliar texts (phonics, contextual cues, predicting)	Short sentence with missing word, and a choice of four words to complete the sentence			87.5	98.9		
	6	Works with sentences							

Compre-hension, based on mind map text	3	- Uses word recognition strategies to read un-familiar texts - Makes meaning of written text • Reads a variety of texts • Reads graphical texts, such as maps and flow diagrams	Mind map with pictures for visual cues					85.9	100
	5	- Processes information in different ways: mind maps, tables, charts, etc. - Picks out selected information from a text and processes it							

Key: LO = Learning Outcome
1 = Listening; 2 = Talk; 3 = Reading; 4 = Writing; 5 = Thinking and reasoning; 6 = Grammar

Discussion of the results

By comparing the literacy results attained by the Grade 3 learners with the scores obtained by the same grade in previous years at Raithby Primary, one can conclude that it is possible that the implementation of the interactive approach of teaching reading made a difference in the level of literacy attained at the school. Such a conclusion concurs with the findings of the literature study, in which evidence was found that application of the interactive approach tends to produce outstanding results. However, learning to read is a complex process, as classrooms are complex environments, with learner success depending on multiple interweaving factors. Therefore, it would be presumptuous to say that the adoption of a different teaching approach was alone responsible for the improvement obtained. Many factors that impact on classroom teaching might have contributed to the improvement, some of which I shall now explain.

Positive factors

A few factors played a pivotal role in ensuring the successful course of the intervention that led to obtaining the 100% result attained. One positive factor was that Ms Abrahams taught the same class in both Grades 2 and 3, which led to the development of a special bond between the teacher and learners concerned. The role of the principal in the intervention should also be acknowledged, as he remained positive, and inspired his staff to do the same, throughout the exercise. The circuit manager also played a key role in the intervention, as, having studied literacy, he expressed a keen interest in the intervention, and regularly monitored the process during his normal visits to the school. In no way did such monitoring entail the policing of demotivated teachers, because their commitment to the intervention was indubitable, as has already been indicated.

Closing remarks

This study reflected on the low literacy rate of South African learners and pointed out some of its possible causes. The study scrutinised various approaches to teaching reading, and concluded that teaching reading in our schools does not meet expectations, as the way in which teachers teach reading tends to impact negatively on learners' literacy levels. Teachers are used to the traditional approaches to teaching reading, which often only entail the decoding of sounds. Different teaching approaches that can improve literacy and comprehension skills are seldom explored. Teachers make little effort to encourage a positive attitude towards reading among learners, which might make a sustained difference in the lives of struggling readers. However, I must caution that the lessons learned from a single case at one school cannot be regarded as the answer to all the literacy problems in South Africa. What makes this study relevant to the South African context is that the research was conducted in the field over many years, and the relevance of the resources consulted and the results obtained from the intervention described suggest that, with using the interactive approach and by adopting the right attitude to such teaching, teachers can improve the literacy level of most struggling readers.

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Endnotes

A

The scale concerned rates a school as 1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = average, or 4 = wealthy.

B

The term ‘coloured’ is used only to refer to previously disadvantaged people, and must by no means be seen as the author’s condoning of a system that labeled people on racial grounds.

C

The test was administered by the WCED under the supervision of Dr R.S. Cornelissen (telephone 021 467 2286 or email rcornelissen@pgwc.gov.za).

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Geagte Heer/Dame

2008 GRAAD 3-ASSESSERINGSUITSLAE

U SKOOL SE KLASSIFIKASIE:
Syferkundigheid: GEMIDDELD
Geletterdheid: GOED
Algehele klassifikasie: GEMIDDELD

... 'n ware afskrif van die oorspronklike waarop geen ... veranderings deur 'n ongemagtigde persoon aangebring is nie.
Certified a true copy of the original which bears no noticeable evidence of alterations by an unauthorised person.
10/08/20 (IMG)

Die 2008 Graad 3-uitslae is uiteengesit in die volgende tabelle. Die assesseringstandaarde van die Nasionale Kurrikulumverklaring (NKV) is gebruik en 50% is bepaal as die prestasiestandaard (slaagpersentasie) vir leerders. Let daarop dat die assesseringstoets vrae op graad 1- tot graad 4-vlak oor syferkundigheid en graad 1- tot graad 3-vlak oor geletterdheid ingesluit het. Tabel 1 tot 7 gee die uitslae vir hierdie grade.

Tabel 1 en 5 gee 'n algemene oorsig oor die syferkundigheids- en geletterdheidsuitslae vir u skool, met vergelykbare persentasies vir u kring, onderwysdistrik (OD) en provinsie. Tabel 2 en 6 voorsien die persentasie leerders wat per graadvlak in die verskillende intervalskale slaag en lig die slaagpersentasie van die skool in tabel 1 en 5 verder toe. Tabel 3, 4, en 7 is gegrond op die kategorisering van elke vraag in die syferkundigheid- en geletterdheidstoets, ingevolge kennis en vaardigheid. Hierdie tabelle doen verslag oor die slaagpersentasie by u skool per graad vir kennis en vaardigheid in beide syferkundigheid en geletterdheid.

Oorsig 2006 vs 2008

Assessering	2002	2004	2006	2008	Verskil tussen 2006 en 2008	Uitslae
Syferkundigheids-uitslae		15.0	18.8	**41.2**	22.4	Aansienlike verbetering
Geletterdheidsuitslae		15.0	18.8	**100.0**	81.2	Aansienlike verbetering

Besonderhede van uitslae

Resultaat	Beskrywing
Aansienlike verbetering	Resultate styg met meer as 10%
Verbetering	Resultate styg tussen 5% en 10%
Geringe verbetering	Resultate het met tussen 0% en 5% verbeter
Het onveranderd gebly	Geen verandering
Geringe verswakking	Resultate het tussen 0% en 5% verswak
Verswakking	Resultate het tussen 5% en 10% verswak
Aansienlike verswakking	Resultate het met meer as 10% verswak
Nie van toepassing	Nie getoets in vorige siklus nie

Syferkundigheidsuitslae

Tabel 1: Bevoegdheid op graadvlak

Syferkundigheid	Graad 1		Graad 2		Graad 3		Graad 4	
	Gem Punt-%	Slaag-%	Gem Punt-%	Slaag-%	Gem Punt-%	Slaag-%	Gem Punt-%	Slaag-%
Skool: RAITHBY PRIM.	79.8	94.1	51.0	52.9	**45.3**	**41.2**	32.7	29.4
Kring: 1	72.6	82.0	49.6	50.2	**43.1**	**38.1**	27.9	19.9
OD: CAPE	64.7	72.7	42.8	40.4	**35.5**	**28.4**	23.6	14.8

2008 Graad 3-assesseringsuitslae

OBIS-NOMMER: 0110321842
SCHOOL SE NAAM: RAITHBY PRIM.

Tabel 7: Persentasie leerders wat die graadvlak vir kennis of vaardigheid per graadvlak in geletterdheid bereik het

Vaardigheid	LU*	Assesseringstandaard**	Assesseringsitems	Prestasie					
				Graad 1		Graad 2		Graad 3	
				Gem. punt-%	Slaag-%	Gem. punt-%	Slaag-%	Gem. punt-%	Slaag-%
Lees van enkel woorde	3	• Gebruik visuele leidrade om sin te maak • Gebruik kennis of fonetiek en sig-woorde	Kies een uit vier prente om by 'n woord te pas	98.8	100.0				
Lees van enkel sinne met visuele leidrade	3	Gebruik woordherkenningstrategieë om vreemde teks te lees (fonetiek, kontekstuele leidrade, voorspelling)	Kort sinne met 'n ontbrekende woord en met 'n keuse van vier woorde om die sin te voltooi			97.1	100.0		
	6	Werk met sinne							
Lees van enkel sinne sonder visuele leidrade	3	Gebruik woordherkenningstrategieë om vreemde teks te lees (fonetiek, kontekstuele leidrade, voorspelling)	Kort sinne met 'n keuse van vier woorde om die sin te voltooi			87.5	100.0		
	6	Werk met sinne							
Begripstoets gebaseer op breinkaartteks	3	• Gebruik woordherkenningstrategieë om vreemde teks te lees. • Maak sin van geskrewe tekste: o Lees 'n versamelling van tekste o Lees grafiese teks soos kaarte, vloeidiagramme	Breinkaart met prente vir visuele leidrade					**85.9**	**100.0**
	5	• Verwerk inligting op verskillende maniere – breinkaarte, tabelle, diagramme, kaarte, ens. • Kies sekere inligting uit die teks en verwerk dit							
Begripstoets gebaseer op 'n uitgebreide uittreksel	3	• Gebruik woordherkenningstrategieë om vreemde teks te lees • Maak sin van geskrewe teks: o Lees 'n versameling van tekste o Identifiseer oorsaak en gevolg	Paragraaf in verhalende styl met fotografiese leidrade. Daar is altesaam drie kort paragrawe en 12 sinne					**65.5**	**82.4**
	5	• Gebruik taal om te dink en te redeneer: o Verstaan en gebruik van taal vir logika redenering, oorsaak en gevolg, samevatting. o Kies inligting uit 'n teks en verwerk dit o Opsomming van inligting							

* **Leeruitkomste in NKV**

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Enhancing educational performance: relating the experiences of postgraduate support teaching students involved in a community service project

Annalene van Staden

Abstract

Driven by moral, political, environmental and financial factors, tertiary educational institutions are continually challenged to adapt existing teaching and research frameworks. In particular, the emphasis is on how the processes of developing curricula can be adapted to provide educational experiences that generate sensitivity, encourage social responsibility, provide a variety of educational experiences and create a performance culture among students. One method of achieving this is through community service-learning initiatives. This study focuses on the experiences of 53 postgraduate support teaching students, and the outcomes of a community-based research project involving learners with special educational needs in diverse school communities in the Free State Province. Hence, from a theoretical stance, this study is positioned within Dewey (1963) and Kolb's (1984) theories of experiential education. This empirical paper discusses research findings based on data that were gathered through the triangulation of the following research tools: questionnaires, focus group discussions, and an experimental intervention involving 302 learners with special educational needs in the intermediate phase.

Introduction

Tertiary education institutions in South Africa are being challenged to improve students' learning experiences. The current literature suggests that experiential learning should be a necessary component of formal instruction at tertiary level (Roos, Temane, Davis, Prinsloo, Kritzinger, Naudé and Wessels, 2005; Eyler, 2002). Given sufficient support and resources, universities have the capability to enhance their students' learning and their performances by engaging in community-based service-learning projects. These projects are the 'vehicles' through which students may become more fully engaged with academic material whilst concomitantly having the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in practice. Although service-learning may still be considered a relatively new pedagogical tool, it has quickly become an integral

component of courses and programmes at tertiary institutions abroad (see Boyle-Baise, 2005; Bringle and Hatcher, 2002; 2005; Eyler, 2002) and in South Africa (see Waghid, 1999; Castle, Osman and Henstock, 2003; Pillay, 2003; Erasmus, 2005; Roos *et al*., 2005; Osman and Castle, 2006; Osman and Attwood, 2007; Alperstein, 2007; Bender and Jordaan, 2007; Nduna, 2007). At its core, service-learning is both pedagogy and an activity in which students perform community service as part of their academic work (Gascoigne Lally, 2001). Service-learning pedagogy challenges faculties and universities to reconceptualise not only their curricula but also their disciplinary training and their roles as educators. Focussing on the present paper, the author draws on Silcox's (1995, p.25) working definition of service-learning:

- it implies a method of learning in which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organised service experiences that meet actual community needs;
- it is integrated into a student's academic curriculum or provides structured time for a student to think, talk or write about what he/she has observed, experienced and done during the service activity;
- it provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in 'real-life' situations in their own communities;
- service-learning activities enhance what is taught in lecture rooms by extending the students' learning beyond the classroom and into the community; and
- it helps to foster the development of a sense of caring for others – it entails a reciprocal partnership where all role-players benefit.

From the discussion above, it is evident that service-learning as an epistemology and pedagogy 'de-centres' the university classroom by intentionally placing the community in the centre of the learning process (Heffernan, 2001). Although students can be exposed to community-based interventions in a variety of ways, researchers stress the importance of providing educational experiences that generate sensitivity, encourage social responsibility and provide a variety of educational experiences to different kinds of learners (Roos *et al*., 2005). Moreover, the fact that such a large percentage of community-based projects involve activities with underserved children makes service-learning an especially effective 'vehicle' for diversity work across the curriculum (Zlotkowski, 2001).

In the present study, the author reconstructed an existing course (viz. *Practical Procedures in Support Teaching*) by including a service-learning component that revolved around service internships. Unlike traditional internships, service internships offer students regular and ongoing reflective opportunities (e.g. discussions, workshops, and journal entries) which afford them the chance to reflect on and learn from the service experience and "critically examine the larger picture and context in which the service is experienced" (Reeder, 1995, p.101). Moreover, researchers maintain that reflection forms the basis of experiential education. This implies that "learning from experience in an appropriate way achieves far more than theoretical or technical knowledge" (Bender and Jordaan, 2007, p.637). Hence, this article uses Kolb's (1984) *Experiential Learning Model* as the theoretical basis for applying learning style theory to the following settings: classroom instruction; workshop participation (group work and individual assignments); community engagement; individual problem solving, and assessment (group and individual assessments, including submitting a portfolio). In experiential theory, learning is considered to be a continuous process in which knowledge is created by transforming experiences into existing cognitive frameworks, thus changing the way people think and behave (Kolb, 1984). Building on Dewey's (1963) theoretical work which emphasised the link between the "process of learning and democratic citizenship" (i.e. social action and educational progress), Kolb postulates that learning involves a cycle of four processes – each of which must be present for learning to occur completely (Eyler, 2002, p.520). These four aspects are: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Bender and Jordaan, 2007).

Focussing on the present study, this paper highlights the educative experiences and reflections of postgraduate students of education (support teaching) who have enrolled for an optional practical module in support teaching. As has been mentioned before, this module includes a service-learning component in which the students are expected to complete a service internship at a school of their choice. This service-learning project originated as a response to community needs (i.e. meetings, discussions and questionnaire surveys) which emphasised parents' and educators' concerns for the high failure rates and literacy backlogs among Free State learners. Thus, the dual purpose of this project was to address the community's needs whilst concomitantly enhancing students' knowledge and performances by preparing them to deal with numerous challenges, both practical and theoretical, once they assume the role of student-educator and then educator.

The service-learning project

The lecturer collaborated with several facilitators: four contracted candidates working on an *ad hoc* basis at the university and educators in the various communities (for example a student doing a master's degree in Psychology of Education and identified support teaching and general classroom educators at the different sample schools). The lecturer co-facilitated, co-monitored and co-evaluated the efficacy of the service-learning project to ensure a level of sustainability. In addition, to ensure the effectiveness and success of this community service project the following key processes were identified to guide it, namely:

- establishing the objectives of this community service project;
- training students and developing a literacy intervention programme;
- performing a service; and
- analysing and reflecting upon the services provided.

The objectives of the study

The goals of this community service project were as follows:

- to make students aware of and teach the basic principles of service-learning;
- to develop a literacy intervention programme for learning-impaired learners in the intermediate phase;
- to augment curricular content by offering postgraduate support teaching students the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge practically in typical community social environments, for examples schools in their communities;
- to support learners with learning-impairments in diverse societies; and
- to foster social growth and mutual understanding amongst all role-players involved in this project, i.e. between students, facilitators, educators at schools and learners with special educational needs.

Student training and the development of a literacy programme

As part of the normal honours curriculum in support teaching, student training revolves around workshops that are conducted continually throughout the academic year (from early February to the end of October). Students who had registered for this practical module attended five one-day workshops (in February, March, May, September and October); a three-day workshop during the April holidays and a winter school for five successive days (during July). All the workshops were conducted either on the main campus and/or two identified satellite campuses of the university. During these workshops, students were specifically trained in the basic principles of support teaching and service-learning. Working together, the lecturer, facilitators and students developed a literacy intervention programme for intermediate phase learners with special educational needs. In developing this programme, the focus fell on Hoover and Gough's (1990) *Simple View of Reading* which highlights two important basic processes underlying reading performance, namely successful decoding skills and linguistic comprehension. For this reason the students incorporated direct multi-sensory instructional strategies (i.e. visual, spatial and kinaesthetic learning) to improve learners' word learning abilities and so attempt to address the learners' backlogs. They focused on sight word learning, fluent word identification and vocabulary instruction. In addition, learning-impaired learners were exposed to specific reading strategies to improve their reading fluency and reading comprehension, such as one-minute word naming exercises, 'bingo' games for fast word recognition, as well as the reciprocal questioning procedure (also known as the *ReQuest* reading method) (Manzo and Manzo, 1993).

Performing a service

Throughout this project, students were encouraged to connect their personal goals and values and what they were learning to 'real-world' situations. Researchers (Gibson, Sandenbergh and Swartz, 2001) stress the importance of students working under supervision, in an ongoing training, consultative and supportive role whilst they are involved in community projects. Hence, in the present study, support teaching students who were doing their internships at the school for learning-impaired learners worked under the supervision of one master's level postgraduate student and a support teacher; whilst students who were doing their service internships at mainstream schools worked under the supervision of four facilitators and were supported by classroom educators

(mentors) at their respective schools. Learners in both settings received small group assistance for 30–45 minutes per session, twice per week for a period of nine months. Teaching strategies that had been identified during the initial training sessions and workshops and that were intended to improve the learners' reading and spelling abilities were implemented during these intervention sessions. For the duration of the intervention period, facilitators arranged frequent reflection sessions (i.e. discussions and workshops) where students shared their key experiences and discussed problems that they had encountered in the implementation of the community service project.

An analysis of the services provided and a reflection on them

According to Eyler (2002), in community projects the emphasis should be on reflective service-learning. This means that students develop their capacity to become thoughtful and effective citizens by being actively involved in analysing and solving problems in the community by means of community projects, and by being given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Whilst engaging in this service-learning project, each student was expected to keep a journal for the duration of the service-learning project and, in addition, he or she had to submit a learner's file for each learner that was part of this community project.

Ethical aspects

Permission to conduct this research and to publish the research findings was obtained in writing from the Free State Department of Education, as well as from the parents/guardians of the participating learners. Assurance was given that all the participants' anonymity would be strictly protected. Students voluntarily participated in this community-based research project.

Research design and methodology

Two complementary approaches were implemented in this study, namely a qualitative and a quantitative research design. To begin, this paper draws on data collected by means of a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of three sections:

- Section one: demographic information;
- Section two: students' experiences prior to and after engaging in this community service project; and
- Section three: students' suggestions on how to improve this service-leaning component (open-ended question).

A five-point Likert scale was used to measure the responses to the items on the questionnaire in Section 2. In addition to questionnaires, the efficacy of the experimental study followed a quasi-experimental, pre-test/post-test design, with matched experimental (N = 151) and control groups (N = 151). The control group was formed in such a way that the dependent variables resembled those of the experimental group before the experimental investigation, as closely as possible. Finally, focus group discussions were conducted with the student participants to illustrate in greater detail how they (i.e. postgraduate students in support teaching) perceived their participation in this service-learning project. Focus group discussions were conducted between August and October 2009 and questionnaires were administered in September 2009.

Sampling, settings, and procedure

This research involved postgraduate students in support teaching as well as intermediate phase learning-impaired learners from different schools in the Motheo district of the Free State province. In the present study, fifty-three postgraduate students (50 females and 3 males) in support teaching who had enrolled for the practical component of this qualification were recruited to participate in this community-based research project. A total of 302 learners participated. Learner participants were drawn from a specialised school setting (n =36 learners), as well as from different mainstream classes in diverse communities (n=266 learners). An attempt was made to match the experimental (N=151) and control groups (N=151) by pairing the learners according to age and pre-test scores (reading and spelling outcome variables). To balance for gender, 77 boys and 74 girls were assigned to the experimental group, and 73 boys and 78 girls to the control group. The average chronological age of learners in the experimental group was 136.5 months (SD=15.56) and in the control group it was 138.06 months (SD=15.7). Group comparison using non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney U-test) revealed no significant differences between groups with respect to chronological age

(U=11 795.5, p=0.60), word recognition (U=12 576.5, p=0.12) and spelling performance (U=11 752.5, p=0.64). These learners received educational support from 53 postgraduate students in support teaching twice per week for a period of nine months. Learners in the control group continued with their daily literacy curriculum for the same period of nine months.

Validity and reliability

Prior to this investigation the author had conducted an extensive literature review on service-learning, focusing not only on its theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings, but also reviewing past and current service-learning initiatives and findings both abroad and in South Africa. A provisional draft of the questionnaire was also reviewed by five experts in the fields of psychology and education (for example, a research psychologist, a senior lecturer in educational psychology, a support teaching specialist and two learning facilitators). With regard to reliability, acceptable internal consistency was demonstrated with the present sample (Cronbach alpha coefficient = 0.89). Moreover, in an attempt to enhance the trustworthiness of findings in the present study, various triangulation methods were employed, for example:

- multiple methods (e.g. questionnaires, focus group discussions, standardised instruments to evaluate the efficacy of the intervention strategies);
- multiple sources (a variety of student and learner participants from different communities); and finally
- multiple investigators (the lecturer, a postgraduate master's student, four facilitators and 53 student participants employing the intervention strategies).

Data analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Incorporated, 2001) was used in the analysis of the quantitative data (descriptive and inferential statistics). Since some doubt existed about the assumption of normality, non-parametric tests were used for the data analysis of the experimental intervention. Information gathered from focus group discussions was

compiled, tape recordings were transcribed and main and sub-themes were identified. Participant verification was sought by giving the students an opportunity to react to the facilitator's summarised version of their responses and to correct any inconsistencies.

Results and discussion

The questionnaire survey comprised twelve different questions relating to students' needs, their key experiences and their recommendations on how the content of this module could be improved. Statements and items were placed on a five-point Likert scale with prompts such as: 'very negative', 'negative', 'average'; 'positive'; 'very positive'. In addition to the closed items, the student participants had to respond to an open-ended question and provide constructive suggestions on how they would improve the service-learning component of this practical module. The quantitative results obtained from the students' responses to the questionnaire will be reflected and discussed first.

Postgraduate students' experiences of the module/community service

The first two questions focused on students' experiences and perceptions prior to their engagement in the community-based research project:

- Have you ever engaged in community service before?
- How confident were you to assist learners with special educational needs (prior to the intervention)?

The following questions/statements focused on the student participants' experiences after the completion of the community-based project, namely:

- Did this practical service-learning module empower you sufficiently to make you confident enough to support learners with special educational needs?
- Did this service-learning project contribute to your personal development as an educator?
- Having completed this practical service-learning module, do you feel confident enough to serve on the site-based support team at your school or community?

- Did this module and community project provide you with adequate opportunities to practically apply your theoretical knowledge?
- Did you develop life-long problem solving skills?
- In your opinion were this module and the community project too demanding?
- This module is currently optional. Do you think it should be made compulsory?
- How did you experience the performances of the learners that took part in this community service project?
- In your opinion, did the service-learning component (included in this module) make a contribution to the community at large?
- Make suggestions for improving the service-learning component of this module (open-ended question).

The results of these questions are reflected in Table 1 and will be discussed with emphasis on the following themes: students' needs, their key experiences and their recommendations to improve the content of this module. In addition, through the method of triangulation, students' personal reflection was obtained through focus group discussions.

Table 1: Postgraduate students' experiences of service learning
(N = 53)

Statements	1 %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %
Prior experience in community service	14 26.4%	22 41.5%	16 30.2%	1 1.9%	0 0%
Confidence helping learners prior to project	13 24.5%	28 52.8%	12 22.6%	0 0%	0 0%
Level of confidence to support learners after the project	0 0%	0 0%	1 1.9%	9 17%	43 81.1%
Contributed to personal development as educator	0 0%	0 0%	1 1.9%	11 20.8%	41 77.4%
Confident enough to serve on the site-based support team	0 0%	0 0%	2 3.8%	16 30.2%	35 66%
Practical application of theoretical knowledge	0 0%	0 0%	1 1.9%	15 28.3%	37 69.8%
Development of life-long problem solving skills	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	20 37.7%	33 62.3%
Project/module too demanding	14 26.4%	10 18.9%	18 34%	11 20.8%	0 0%
Compulsory module	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	13 24.5%	40 75.5%
Learners' progress	0 0 %	0 0%	13 24.5%	18 34%	22 41.5%
Contribution to larger community	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	20 37.7%	33 62.3%

The results of the questionnaire were recorded as: negative (1–2); neutral (3) or positive items (4–5). The most important findings from the questionnaire and the qualitative responses of the study are provided under the following themes: student, learner and community empowerment; and recommendations for a future training programme for support teaching students which would integrate community service.

Empowerment of role-players participating in the service-learning project

When both the quantitative and qualitative responses of the students are reviewed, the three main themes arising from students' enrolment for this module, including their community engagement, revolved around empowerment, vis-à-vis students, learners and the community.

Student empowerment

Although most literature and empirical support for service-learning initiatives emanate from the United States (USA), more recently the number of service-learning literature and projects (empirical investigations) has increased in South Africa (Alperstein, 2007; Erasmus, 2005). For example, Osman and Castle (2006, pp.67–68), conclude that "coupling school experience with community service" (as in the case of the School Wide Enrichment Project initiated by the University of the Witwatersrand) has been successful in providing the structured context and support in which students could develop their "pastoral roles as educators" within the classroom as well as in the community. These results demonstrated that community service enhances student performance (i.e. student empowerment) and cultivates a sense of civic responsibility.

These reflections on student empowerment were also evident in the quantitative (see Table 1) and qualitative responses of education students in the present study. The majority of support teaching students (67.9%) had very little experience with community service-learning prior to this community service project and reported that they did not feel confident (empowered enough) to support learners with special educational needs prior to this service-learning project. The core theme emerging from their responses to the question: *Why did you decide to enrol for this module*? concerned student empowerment. In addition, the following sub-themes emerged from the focus group discussions: a lack of knowledge and inadequate training; the need for an opportunity to link theory to practice, personal and career development. The students responded as follows:

> I realised that learners with problems are ignored by educators – we do not have the knowledge to help them. . . (African female student)
>
> To help learners with special educational needs practically – the other modules are too theoretical – in order to assist learners you need to engage with communities and get hands-on practical experience. (white female student)
>
> . . .to empower myself and help those learners to overcome their problems, because many times it is us teachers who fail them. . . we ought to be blamed. (African female student)

As depicted in Table 1, nearly all the participants (98.1%) maintained that, having done this practical module in support teaching, they felt much more empowered to assist learners with special educational needs. Furthermore, 98.2% indicated that community engagement made a positive contribution to their personal development as educators and 96.2% felt empowered enough to

play a leading role in future as members of site-based support teams at schools. The general feeling among students (98.1%) was that this module provided an opportunity for the practical application of theoretical knowledge and the development of life-long problem-solving skills (agree: 37.7%; strongly agree: 62.3%). In addition, the results revealed that, despite students being divided on their opinions on how 'demanding' this project/module was (demanding: 20.8%; average: 34%; not demanding: 45.3%), all of them (agree: 24.5%; strongly agree: 75.5%) asserted that this module should be made compulsory in order to obtain an honours qualification in support teaching. These empowering experiences were also corroborated by the focus group discussions, with the identification of the following themes and sub-themes: performance enhancement, personal development, empathy, gratitude, disillusionment, the awareness of civic responsibility and camaraderie. The students' own words best describe their new perceptions:

> . . .it has enhanced my performance as student-educator . . . if you do not apply your theoretical knowledge; your qualification is worth nothing. (African female student)
>
> . . .as a result I developed empathy for learners with special educational needs. (African male student)
>
> . . . it made me realise how fortunate we are . . . some learners did not even have books… classrooms were cold. . .not conducive for teaching and learning. . . (white female student)
>
> . . .besides assisting learners with impairments, it made me aware that all of us has [sic] a role to play in the future of our country. (white female student)
>
> . . . in breaking down barriers to learning, it is imperative that we have to stand and work together across boundaries, in all communities. (African female student)

Learner empowerment

The National Department of Education's commitment to the provision of educational support for learners with special educational needs is clearly delineated in White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education (National Department of Education, 2001, p.7):

> . . .we acknowledge that the learners who are most vulnerable to barriers to learning and exclusion in South Africa are learners with disabilities and impairments . . . increased vulnerability has arisen largely because of the historical nature and extent of the educational support provided.

Moreover, this policy document stresses the collaborative role of the whole spectrum of educators, including those in tertiary education institutions in training and supporting educators in order to develop specialised competencies

and skills to support these learners. The qualitative information from the focus group discussions yielded positive perspectives with regard to students' roles and viewpoints on addressing the learning barriers of special needs learners within an inclusive education environment. Although some students (± 20%) were concerned about learners who still had not received adequate support, the responses of the vast majority of students (more than 80%) suggested that they were enthusiastic and dedicated to support learners with special educational needs. Students' responses also highlighted the positive progress of learners who had been included in this service-learning initiative. The students' enthusiasm and dedication shine though their words:

> Because there are pupils who have problems who do not get help when they need it . . .now I want to be one of those people who can help them. (African female student)
>
> . . .and I am in a position to meet the needs of struggling learners. . . through this module and community project I have learned ways to improvise, devise and apply different teaching strategies catering for the needs of diverse learners. . . (African female student)
>
> Most of the learners could not read or write at all . . . after nine months they could read and even construct simple sentences. . . and their self-confidence improved tremendously. (white female student)

Researchers argue that, in addition to qualitative methodologies for programme evaluation, quantitative measures need to be considered. This is one of the reasons why it was decided to further the investigation of the effect of this community service project on the progress of learners. The quantitative data for this study were gathered firstly by means of a questionnaire where the students indicated the learners' levels of progress on the Likert scale; and secondly, by employing a pre-test/post-test design in which a battery of standardised tests were administered prior to and after the community service intervention that extended for a period of nine months. In this way an evaluation of the efficacy of the project was attempted.

From the questionnaire responses depicted in Table 1, it is evident that 24.5% of the students in the service-learning project reported an average improvement in learner performance, 34% indicated an above-average improvement, whilst 41.5% of the students believed that learners who participated in the literacy intervention programme showed excellent progress. In addition, further statistical analyses were carried out to evaluate whether the literacy intervention strategies had indeed yielded statistical significant results. At the start of the study, the pre-test scores for the experimental group and the control group were similar, which are demonstrated by the means, standard deviations, and pre-test scores in Tables 2 and 3. Thus, after nine months of

intervention, the learners' reading and spelling abilities were re-tested. The results of the post-test scores (see Tables 2 and 3) demonstrated that there was a considerable improvement in the reading and spelling performances of learning-impaired learners in the experimental group, whilst the control group showed very little improvement. The Mann Whitney test was conducted to determine whether this improvement was statistically significant. In order to investigate the results, the 5% level (= 0.05) of significance was used. Researchers (see Cohen, 1988) argue that apart from reporting results on statistical significance, effect size measures have to be calculated to determine the practical significance of research findings. Accordingly this was also done in the present study. The results for both reading (U = 4 591.0; z = 8.99; $p < 0.0001$, $r = 0.73$) and spelling performance (U = 6 869.0; z = 5.98; $p < 0.0001$, $r = 0.34$) yielded significant results. In addition, the calculated effect size for reading ($r = 0.73$) was of high practical significance; whilst for spelling ($r = 0.34$), it indicated a medium effect. These results not only demonstrated the conceptual and practical significance of this community literacy project but emphasised the importance of direct teaching strategies to improve sight word learning, word recognition and expand learners' vocabulary knowledge, with the ultimate goal of improving reading comprehension.

Table 2: Average pre- and post-test scores for word recognition of learners in the experimental and control groups (*N* = 302)

Groups	Word recognition			
	Pre-tests		Post-tests	
	$\bar{X}$	*sd*	$\bar{X}$	*sd*
Experimental	28.07	(16.20)	40.02**	(16.15)
Control	30.58	(15.89)	31.37	(16.13)
U - values	12576.5		4591.0	
Z - statistic	1.55		8.99	
r (effect sizes)	0.73			

* $p < 0.05$

** $p < 0.01$

Table 3: Average pre- and post-test scores for spelling performance of learners in the experimental and control groups (*N* = 302)

Groups	Spelling Performance			
	Pre-tests		Post-tests	
		sd		*sd*
Experimental	18.99	(9.53)	28.92**	(7.48)
Control	18.40	(9.44)	19.55	(8.55)
U - values	11 752.5		6 869.0	
Z - statistic	0.46		5.98	
r (effect sizes)	0.34			

* $p < 0.05$
** $p < 0.01$

Community empowerment

Community engagement is recognised as one of the core functions of Higher Education and Training in South Africa (Council on Higher Education, 2004), along with teaching, learning and research (Bender and Jordaan, 2007). According to Roos *et al.* (2005), community-based interventions constitute an exemplary classroom where students are given the opportunity to accept the challenge of co-creating environments that promote the well-being within communities in South Africa. The results presented in Table 1 suggest that a notable percentage of the student participants (strongly agree: 62.3%; agree: 37.2%) indicated that the community at large benefited from this project. When one reflects on the qualitative discussions, it is evident that this project has created an awareness of the different needs of different communities and, in addition, it has enabled students to recognise that they can play an important supportive role in the lives of all human beings. The following themes and sub-themes emerged: the development of an awareness of community needs; societal responsibility; reciprocal learning conditions; feelings of belonging, collaboration and communality. Some of the students' comments are quoted below:

> I have realised the importance of collaboration that is built on mutual respect for each other . . . working together to address community needs added value to my future career as support teacher. (African female student)

> . . .in the end we did much more, besides being involved in the literacy project, we helped during breaks to prepare meals for the children who were part of the school's feeding scheme and we assisted the educators with netball coaching in the afternoons. (white female student)

> . . . I have gained a lot and the educators at the school and the children were so appreciative of everything we did . . . and we also learned a lot from them. . . (African female student)

The above findings also support the viewpoints of several researchers who assert that community service-learning initiatives can benefit both the provider and the recipient of the service by focusing equally on the service being provided and the learning that will take place (Eyler, 2002; Roos *et al.*, 2005; Osman and Castle, 2006; Bender and Jordaan, 2007).

Suggestions to improve the service-learning component of this module

Service-learning projects have become increasingly prevalent among tertiary educations in South Africa, especially during the last decade. However, compared to counties abroad (see Bringle and Hatcher, 2002; 2005; Eyler, 2002) community service-learning in South Africa is still in its infancy and little subject-specific research has been done (Bender and Jordaan (2007). A review of South African service-learning literature yielded limited empirical findings that were based on 'real-life' (concrete) experiences of students whilst performing community service (see Alperstein, 2007; Roos *et al*. 2005). Other South African case-studies involving pilot and larger scale community literacy intervention projects (not directly linked to service-learning) have demonstrated positive outcomes of community-based research initiatives. Examples of these projects are a language and literacy pilot intervention programme for learners with foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (Adnams, Sorour, Kalberg, Kodituwakku, Perold, Kotze, September, Castle, Gossage and May, 2007); the implementation of a spelling mastery programme for deaf foundation phase learners (Van Staden and Le Roux, 2010); and the Concentrated Language Encounter (CLE) literacy development programme in the Western Cape (Donald, Condi and Forrester, 2003).

When considering the reciprocal partnerships and benefits associated with service-learning, it is imperative to consider both the students' and the community's feedback in order to assess the projects' efficacy. Otherwise, service-learning and its associated "promise of reciprocity and mutual benefit run the risk of becoming rhetorical promises at the level of national policy and institutional practice" (Osman and Castle, 2006, p.69). In the present study, the participating students' suggestions to improve the service-learning component of this module are reflected in the following themes/sub-themes:

- more practical opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge;
- more workshops for student empowerment;

- exposure to cross-cultural service-learning projects;
- workshops to empower 'established' educators at schools;
- specialised training; and
- 'response' to intervention.

The need for more practical opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge has been discussed earlier in this article (see 'student empowerment'); however, it was again identified as one of the key recommendations to improve service-learning programmes. Student participants made the following recommendations with regard to enhancing concrete and practical learning experiences:

> I hope more time can be allocated for this module and be compulsory as all schools have learners with different learning problems and those learners could be supported to become leaders in the future. (white female student)

> During practical workshops, learners can be brought into the classes – with some students observing whilst other students are helping the learners – video recordings can even be discussed afterwards. (African female student)

More than 80 per cent of the participants indicated that the training should focus on prevention rather than on how to address backlogs and learning problems (i.e. 'response' to intervention) – especially in previously underserved communities where most of the learners still experience exclusion. In addition, needs for more specialised training was also identified. This is supported by statements such as the following:

> Many educators out there do not know how to teach . . . universities, in collaboration with the education department, must conduct workshops for general classroom teachers and empower them with skills and strategies to teach reading and writing, so that learners do not fall behind and develop severe learning problems as a consequence of bad teaching methods. (African female student)

> . . .educators in general, need workshops on how to help hearing- physically-, and mentally-impaired learners; also hyperactive learners and those with dyslexia, because in most of the schools you find them in mainstream classes and teachers simply do not know how to help them – even if you refer them, most of them will still end up in your class or school and be your responsibility. (white female student)

The majority of student participants (±60%) indicated that the training of support teachers should be more holistic. Since this practical module focused more on addressing scholastic barriers, some of them expressed the need to receive additional training in dealing with a wider range of social issues such as rendering support to HIV/AIDS infected and affected learners, victims of

rape and abuse and addressing violent behaviour among youth. Currently, some of these wider social issues are addressed in other honours modules; however, raising these concerns and needs re-emphasises that this honours course in support teaching is too theoretical and needs some major reworking to make it more practical.

In addition, the need for exposure to diverse teaching communities and cross-cultural service-learning experiences emerged as a constant theme among the students participants during focus group discussions (more than 60%). Although many of the participants (approximately 40%) did get this exposure, not all of them had the opportunity to work in culturally diverse communities. Students' needs were expressed in comments such as the following:

> . . .and then what about social issues such as poverty reduction, child-headed families because of AIDS; alcohol and drug abuse, community and school violence, gender inequalities and teenage pregnancies, to name but a few – these module mainly addressed issues on learning problems . . . teachers need more training workshops in order to develop skills to address these social issues, because there are simply not enough psychologists and social workers to deal with these social problems. (African female student)

> . . .universities need to train students for a diverse society with diverse needs – students need to be exposed to previously disadvantaged communities, in the end you must be able to teach in city schools or townships schools. (white female student)

> . . .cross-cultural teaching experiences will empower us all, irrespective of who we are . . .working together we get to know and learn to respect each other's culture. (African male student)

The above-mentioned statements confirm the positive outcomes of service-learning initiatives as noted by researchers both in South Africa (Osman and Castle, 2006; Roos *et al*., 2005; Castle and Osman, 2003) and abroad (Bringle and Hatcher 2005). Both the WITS students in Osman and Castle's investigation (2006) and the students involved in the Roos *et al*. study (2005) acknowledged that they had become more sensitised to cultural diversity and that the service-learning experience brought a 'deeper' understanding of complex social issues, whilst they also gained insight into their own value systems.

From the discussions above it is clear that service-learning projects can be relevant to the South African context. Service-learning presents us with opportunities to integrate teaching, learning, research and outreach to diverse South African communities, whilst concomitantly intensifying the social purpose of higher education (Castle and Osman, 2003). Reviewing the literature on service-learning indicates that these research initiatives draw mainly on Dewey's (1963) philosophy of democratic (social) education and

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory as theoretical underpinnings. The present study is no different:

- by creating opportunities for 'real-life' learning experiences postgraduate students were given an opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge practically in a variety of learning contexts;
- secondly, they reflected on these experiences;
- thirdly, reflective discussions provided them with the opportunity to consolidate their learning – they enabled students to draw conclusions, to monitor their progress, and to identify questions and unresolved issues (abstract conceptualisation); and
- fourthly, the conclusions, insights and experiences they gained through their service-learning experiences guided and influenced their actions, leading to 'new' concrete experiences (active experimentation). In other words, in the aforementioned words of Bender and Jordaan (2007, p.637), that "learning from experience in an appropriate way achieves far more than theoretical or technical knowledge," service-learning teaches a student what a university cannot.

Concluding remarks

One of the crucial changes and challenges that the post-apartheid South African democracy faces is to "reconstruct a society and an education system that will create excellent conditions for teaching and learning" (Masitsa, 1995, p.111). These challenges are clearly delineated in White Paper 6 on inclusive education (National Department of Education, 2001). This policy document underlines the vital role of all role-players in education to reconstruct and develop a culture of teaching and life-long learning within South Africa. Moreover, higher institutions world-wide are being held more accountable for the effectiveness and relevance of their activities, and have to show their social responsibility and commitment, by making expertise and infrastructure available for community service programmes (Castle and Osman, 2003).

Although some disagreements exist on how service-learning should be defined and implemented and what criteria should be used to assess its effect and impact, there seems to be consensus in terms of the major components of service-learning, namely: "active participation, thoughtfully organised experiences, focusing on community needs, academic curriculum integration, structured time for reflection, opportunities for application of skills and

knowledge, extended learning opportunities and the development of a sense of caring for others" (Bhaerman, as cited in Osman and Attwood, 2007, p.16). Thus, we, the members of institutions of higher learning are challenged to reconsider the training we offer to our undergraduate and postgraduate students, and ask these questions:

- Are we educating students solely for a career? or
- Are we educating them to become responsible citizens?

In an attempt to answer these questions, one has to reflect upon and interrogate current teaching and training practices still being employed at some institutions of higher learning in South Africa:

- Are we creating artificial educational experiences by exposing students to experimental classes on campus?
- Similarly, are we creating artificial educational experiences by exposing them to affluent ex-module C schools only? or
- Is it time to take a new view and become actively involved in community engagement by creating a variety of valuable teaching and learning experiences, especially in previously underserved communities?

Tertiary institutions have the advantage of access to valuable resources and thus have the capacity to create a variety of experiential learning opportunities such as internships (as was the case in the present study), which are a valuable educational and developmental tool for all communities. The present study revealed that the students, the university and the community had benefited.

Positive results were demonstrated by quantitative and qualitative measures that evolved from the empowerment of the students, the community and the learners in this community project. Not only did this project enhance students' performance, but it also contributed to their personal development as educators. They developed a repertoire of skills to support learning-impaired learners and deepened their own understanding of complex social issues and community needs within a diverse South African environment. Moreover, the results of the experiential learning experience demonstrated that giving students the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge in practice benefited not only the students themselves but also the learning-impaired learners. After nine months of exposure to literacy intervention strategies, post-test results indicated that learning-impaired learners' reading and spelling

performances had improved significantly. Finally, working in close collaboration with different communities, we also realised that there was a great need for educators' capacity building to cater for the diverse needs of learners with special educational needs in their classrooms. Thus, in an attempt to strengthen our reciprocal partnership with the community, the department of Psychology of Education (in close collaboration with the Free State Department of Education) identified and undertook a variety of initiatives to empower educators to address the needs of learners with special educational needs in the Free State Province.

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Meta-analysis of South African education policy studies: how have we fared so far and what needs to be expanded?

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Abstract

This article provides a critical review of a selection of post-1994 education policy studies in South Africa to propose a slightly different framework with which to study education policies and their evolution over time. It does this by assessing the potential and limitations of political policy analyses rooted in a neo-Marxist paradigm and by questioning their underlying construct of policy powers. Arguing for a multi-pronged understanding of policy powers, it argues that this new policy analysis of educational reforms will have greater explanatory powers to explain why some education policies end up more enabling in their implementation in some locations and not in others. It then applies this framework to an analysis of school evaluation policy studies in the hope of advancing policy knowledge in South African education.

Introduction

With the legacy of apartheid education and the struggle for democratic education changes, there were high expectations that the post-1994 education policies would promote greater quality, equity and redress. Reviewing education policy work and their purpose, Muller (2000) distinguishes two kinds of policy analysts: on the one hand, the intellectuals or critics, usually in academia, who systematically interrogate policies and, on the other hand, the reconstructors or public intellectuals who undertake policy work to assist with more effective policy planning and implementation. Although this article disagrees slightly with Muller's distinction because critical policy analyses can also be used to empower policy implementers and actors to strategise towards more progressive policy outcomes, it confines its critical review to what Muller calls the South African education policy critics.[1]

[1] As there is a flurry of post-1994 political education policy analyses, a selection of these was made for this meta-analysis, ensuring the main trends and approaches are represented within the neo-Marxist paradigm.

This article intends to do a critical analysis of how political policy analyses explain how post-1994 education reforms relate to power relations and impact on patterns of social inequality. The critical political analysis conceives of policy as a set of political decisions which involve the exercise of power to preserve or alter the nature of educational institutions or practice. It consists of discourse and text where the discourse frames the policy and acts as a power structure with possibilities and impossibilities while the text creates circumstances, in which different agents, however unequal in terms of power and authority, mediate, interpret, mediate or contest the policy. Policy discourse and text are subjected to ongoing socio-political conflicts and bargaining between different interest groups, which explain why policies are often fragile temporary policy settlements. Power struggles explain many of the underlying ambiguities and tensions in policy development and implementation processes which often open up space which policy agents can use and exploit to promote their agendas.

Thus, critical analysts see education policy as shaped and determined by many complex interrelated factors and influences at its various stages and processes. Policy formulation and implementation are part of a continuum where powers are exercised in different ways, whether through individual or social persuasion, influence, legitimacy, authority and/or coercion. Policy powers refer to the interaction of various influential interest groups within the state and within civil society, as these groups shape policy discourses and texts. The issue this article contends with here is that many political policy analyses work with a problematic and incomplete conception of power and that this conception of policy power should be broadened to improve the understanding of how various interest groups are embedded in and influence policy structures and processes, how these interests manifest themselves and impact ambiguously on the post-1994 education reconstruction.

Powers take different forms according to the neo-Marxist paradigm. As French (2009), in his analysis of SAQA, distinguishes, there are: the exercise of power, the play of power and power-play. He defines the exercise of power as coming from various power structures – political, institutional (bureaucratic, legal, cultural/educational) and coercive (military, police) – which assert the hegemony of the powerful groups. The play of power refers to "how resources and energy are generated, stored, shaped and directed by a multitude of processes and [tangible or hidden] mechanisms for securing consent and even active participation with minimal use of the threat of violence" (French, 2009, p.28). Finally, power-play works on traditional or

delegated authority, class or group position, personal charisma, expertise, persuasion, financial influence, and/or the threat of violence or direct coercion.

These power constructs do not include those referred to by other radical policy scholars, influenced by Foucault, who understand power as embedded in discourses which set the terrain and frame a form of politics in terms of what can and cannot be said, thought and reacted to (Ball, 1993). This post-modern policy view understands policy powers as a network of powers, diffused and all permeating in the various policy processes, which ensure some form of symbolic domination. However, this perspective is not sufficiently strong in South African education policy analyses to warrant their inclusion for the purpose of this article.

In contrast, this article uses French's (2009) power constructs and adapts them for the purpose of policy analysis. It conceives of the exercise of power as what is embedded in policy structures and discourses; the play of power as agencies contesting and engaging with policy texts to further their interests and the power-play as the enabling policy agency or leadership which mediates the policy within contested social domains for achieving some consensus among stakeholders.

Armed with these constructs of policy powers, this article reviews critically how various political analyses of education policies examine mainly power structures and/or power relations between interest groups at a particular moment in time (i.e. the exercise and play of power). However, they do not focus on acts of individual and social power agency or policy leadership which often emerge at various stages of the policy process, whether through policy negotiation or mediation strategies. This is done to argue that political policy analyses are limited in explaining the full dynamics, evolution and impact of policies.

This article clusters these political policy analyses into four groups and shows how their political policy analyses have an incomplete conception of policy powers. The first two groups focus on the content of education policies, with the one exposing their ambitious and symbolic content while the other provides explanations for their contradictory policy content. The third group focuses on how education policies are translated and operationalised by studying the implementation context and processes and identifying the causes for the gap between policy intentions and practices. The fourth group explores in greater depth policy change processes. Because of their slightly different focuses on various stages of the policy process, these analyses could co-exist

and complement one another. For example, analyses in the second cluster could supplement analyses in the third or fourth cluster. However, if these analyses have to be integrated in tracing their meaning at the various stages of the policy process, they have to be based on the same underlying conception of policy powers, which is what this article will demonstrate.

First group: analyses of symbolic unrealistic policy content

The first group, with its focus on policy content and context, is interested in explaining why education policy-makers chose the administrative and legislative route (the policy framework route) to address the apartheid legacy. Jansen (2002) argues that education policy frameworks were meant to forge an alternative vision of a democratic and equitable education system which would move away from the previous system. Other policy analysts agree that policies were ambitious and too often removed from or ignorant of the context and realities on the ground (Chisholm and Fuller, 1996; Jansen and Christie, 2000; Soudien, 2007).

The debate crystallised around the kind of political interests at play behind these ambitious policies. Citing Halpin and Troya (1994), Jansen (2002) contends that newly elected politicians and senior officials were not interested in addressing educational problems and changing practices through detailed policy plans and strategies. However, Bah-Layla and Sack (2003) disagree that ambitious policies are only symbolic because they can be used as tools to build the capacity and status of policy implementers and draw attention to those targeted by the policies. Jansen (2002) disagrees that it was a question of building implementation capacity and resources because it was the opposite as policy makers realise that, with the poor capacity and resources available, there was even more value in policy's symbolism to gain some international legitimacy and settle political struggles.

Fleisch (2002), in his study of the making of the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE), agrees with Jansen. He shows that the new bureaucratic incumbents appointed many senior officials on the basis of their political records and loyalty rather than their managerial or educational competences and expertise. Their priority was to gain national legitimacy from the people they had to govern. Fleisch (2002) argues that the GDE struggled with poor capacity in exercising its governing powers and delivering on its mandates and

therefore decided to set up participatory consultative fora with organs of civil society and launched various school improvement and support interventions to gain legitimacy from those it governed. In the early years, the DoE also used consultations with civil society groups to gain as much support from them as possible.

Another constituency which the new government wanted to appease was the international community. Chisholm and Fuller (1996) argue that, because fragile governments need legitimacy by acting and looking modern, they adopted globally competitive policies as 'signs of modern progress'. The global policy trend at the time pointed to tighter management and efficiency measures while appearing to satisfying competing interests. Another strategy to gain international legitimacy was to undertake international visits, invite international consultants and privilege their policy advice over those of local groups (Jansen, 2002). Spreen (2004) mentions that policy borrowing from other countries, a frequent feature of the global era, was justified on the grounds that countries wanted to be acknowledged as globally competitive. Sehoole (2005) agrees that South African policymakers in higher education accessed international policy networks to frame policy changes because they lacked policy literacy, defined as the inadequate policy capacity, expertise and resources.

While important to recognise the lack of policy expertise and the need for international and national legitimacy, policy borrowing is also a national political choice. International consultants do not have 'carte blanche' in advising on policy development because they also have to convince local and national interest groups with their policy recommendations. Jansen (2002) argues that some education officials accepted the advice of international experts against those of local consultants and local consultative fora because these fitted in with the interests of the emerging black middle class, with which many department officials identified. He mentions that the controversial international policy advice that public schools be allowed to raise their own funds was adopted (in the 1996 Schools Act) because DoE officials saw it as benefitting the interests of the black middle class.

Other policy scholars, less interested in policy symbolism, agree that the content of much education policy content reflected the interests of dominant groups. Vally and Spreen (1998) argue that education policies did not address the demands of the anti-apartheid education movement because a shift occurs gradually in the balance of forces in favour of international and national capital. This led the state to adopt a market-based globalisation discourse and

neo-liberal policies in education. Chisholm and Fuller (1996) agree that the radical vision of a more socially just educational set up was gradually displaced given the constraints set by discursive practices associated with the compromises of the transition period. For them, the adoption of the neo-liberal 1996 GEAR framework made the goal of social justice recede significantly for the pursuit of efficiency, with damaging implications for the poor (Chisholm, Motala and Vally, 2003; Chisholm, Hoadley and wa Kivilu 2005). Many education policies, in the field of teacher education, curriculum and school governance, were said to favour and promote the interests of the dominant socio-economic groups.

The anti-apartheid goal of democracy and participation also receded as consultative participatory policy-making processes (which took place with civil society in the case of SASA and the Higher Education Act) were gradually replaced by a more centralised top down approach to policy-making, starting with GEAR but also with the 2001 Whole School Evaluation Policy (DoE, 2001), (Motala and Pampallis, 2007; De Clercq, 2007).

Motala and Pampallis (2007, p.370) call for a contextualisation of the limitations of education policies and warn of the danger of "attribut[ing] to education policy powers which lie outside its range of possibilities". Soudien (2007) agrees that apartheid history and the wider socio-economic inequalities pose serious obstacles for what education policies could do to counter the unequal education provisions and resources. Shalem and Hoadley (2009) point out the pervasive influence and penetration of the education process by socio-economic inequalities which affect significantly and unequally teachers' work challenges.

Given the time at which these policy analyses were completed, it is clear that their focus of analysis was limited to policy content and context and that policy power was mainly understood as exercises of powers. These analyses do not understand policies as temporary settlements or interactive texts which are bound to evolve as they are subjected to on-going contestations and mediation strategies by various stakeholders. It is therefore argued here that, as a result, they underplay the existence of ambiguities and tensions in these policies as well as the kind of enabling opportunities these create for various interest groups keen to further their interests. Thus, these policy content analyses are problematic in ignoring the play of power and power-play.

Second group: analyses that problematise policy content

The second group investigates the lack of coherence in education policies, whether within a policy or in relation to other education policies. For example, the curriculum policy (and its 2001 review) is criticised for not being aligned with teacher development policies and appropriate curriculum materials and textbooks to ensure effective curriculum implementation (Fleisch and Potenza, 1999). Carrim (2001) points out that education policies, such as DAS and OBE curriculum, are based on a notion of teachers as professionals with relative autonomy while other policies, such as SASA, contradict this by subjecting teachers to tight bureaucratic controls. Jansen (2004) and Soudien (2007) criticise the internal contradictions of outcomes-based curriculum policy with its simultaneous emphasis on progressive constructivist pedagogic principles and detailed prescription of learning outcomes.

Explanations for this lack of alignment differ. Some argue that policy makers lacked the capacity and expertise to develop policy with coherent objectives and content relevant to the realities on the ground. Mamphele (2008) suggests, for example, that many policy makers and senior department officials came from exile and were either in a state of denial about the extent of the underdevelopment or unable to understand the devastating educational apartheid legacy. McLennan (2009) contends that the bureaucratic administration did not grasp the implications of policy implementation on the ground while Sehoole (2005) blames the lack of policy literacy and expertise in higher education as well as the fragmented and poorly capacitated administration which worked in silos.

Others dispute that poor policy coherence or alignment was mainly due to the inexperience of policy makers. They argue instead that policies are awkward outcomes of compromises that had to be made by various parties. Badat (1995) explains how many post-1994 policies differed from those of the ANC yellow book because they were the products of political compromises between strong opposing groups. Jansen (2001) attributes the problematic policy compromises to the negotiated settlement which weakened the post-1994 state while McGrath (2004) agrees that the politically and administratively weak state was fraught with political tensions which did not allow it to bring policy coherence into effect.

Various education analysts explain the development and amendment of education policies such as SASA, Curriculum 2005, the IQMS and the NQF, as the outcomes of on-going contestations between powerful groups which make these policies fragile and temporary political settlements. For example, Sayed (1997, 2002) explains the development of SASA from its inception to the act and subsequent amendments as the outcomes of continuous negotiations and bargaining around school governance. Analyses of the 2001 curriculum revision also reveal changing political and educational alignments which made the DoE admit publicly to the problematic aspects of C2005 for the majority of poorly trained teachers (Jansen and Christie, 2000; Chisholm, 2001; Cross, Mungadi and Rouhani, 2002 and Spreen 2004). De Clercq (2008) shows how the problematic DAS and IQMS assumptions about teachers as professionals led to resistance on the ground which continue to force amendments in teacher appraisal policies. Lugg (2007), Allais (2007) and French (2009) also explain how the ambiguities and awkward mix of NQF neo-liberal and radical assumptions changed over time in response to changes in stakeholders' interests, policy positions and negotiation strategies with various powerful groups dominating others at different times.

While these policy analysts engage with the global and socio-political contexts of influence which shape a specific policy discourse, they do not explain how this discourse frames certain issues (and not others) as substantive problems which the policy addresses and responds to. They do not analyse the significance or relevance of the variables targeted by the new policies: are these real priorities and deep causes of the poor and unequal education quality in 1994? Hopkins and Levine (2000) argue that policies should be directed at variables with a direct impact on teaching and learning. Cohen (1995) also mentions that teaching and learning will only improve through policies if the latter can impact on teachers' knowledge, skills and beliefs. Yet, apart from the new curriculum policy, the post-1994 education policies focus mainly on structural or system variables such as the management, governance and administration of schools (SASA), the qualification framework (SAQA and NQF), teachers' employment conditions, professional development as well as related issues of quality control (WSE and IQMS policy). In that sense, post-1994 policies target what Sergiovanni (2000) calls 'system-world' changes without being accompanied by changes in the schools' 'life world', which are the schooling aspects which need to be enhanced.

On the whole, these analyses of contradictory policy content conceive policies mainly as texts and temporary policy settlements. They show that these are subjected to exercises and plays of power and that their content reflects the on-

going contestations between various interest groups. However, they are unable to explain why the same education policy appears enabling or, the opposite, constraining in other contexts. This is because they do not explore the role of policy agency and how it can exploit (or not) the opportunities created by these conflicts in the policy development process.

Third group: analyses that focus on the policy implementation gap

The third group consists of implementation studies which analyse the reasons behind the gap between education policy intentions and outcomes (Jansen and Christie, 2000; Sayed and Jansen, 2001; Motala and Pampallis, 2001; Kraak and Young, 2001; Chisholm, 2004). These studies explain differently this gap and the uneven impact these policies have on the ground. There are three strands of implementation studies identified here because of their different conceptualisation of implementation and the source and nature of implementation problems.

The first strand identifies explanations for the policy-practice gap at the level of education departments and the constraints of their weak administration, limited or non-existent implementation plans and strategies, poor capacity, expertise and resources (Jansen, 2001; Sehoole, 2005). The CEPD's Education 2000+ implementation studies (Kgobe, 2001; 2002) as well as Sayed (2002) and Class Act (2007) cite poor implementation capacity, resources and expertise among districts which impact differently on the ground, with poor schools suffering more than rich schools from rather ambitious education policies.

Some of these analyses conceive problematically of policy implementation as separate from, and unaffected by, policy content. They confine their explanations of the policy-practice gap to implementation without linking these implementation problems to the unrealistic policy content, something which Kgobe (2007), the coordinator of the CEPD studies, acknowledges in retrospect as a problem. In addition, by focusing on the human, organisational and financial constraints responsible for poor policy implementation, these studies do not delve much on what contributes to best implementation practices in schools or districts of similar contexts, resources, capacity and interest groups.

Another weakness in these studies is that, in searching for the sources of implementation problems, they don't engage with change theory and the change management process to understand how and why policy agents respond in the way they do to policy implementation. Yet, as Fullan (1992) argues, policy implementation is crucially shaped by change management strategies. Only a few South African implementation policy analyses deal with implementers' change strategies (see the fourth group).

The main shortcoming of this strand is that it underplays the power relations in the implementation process and the various plays of power between policy agents who constantly contest and negotiate for their interests.

The second strand focuses explicitly on the impact of contestations or conflicts that arise in policy implementation. These analyses conceive of implementation as an integral part of the policy process which is socially constructed and politically mediated by various policy agencies. Fullan (2001) calls it a process of further policy-making and Barrett and Fudge (1981) a part of the policy-action continuum. These analyses attribute the policy-practice gap to the contestations and negotiations taking place in the implementation process. McLaughlin (1990) argues in the famous Rand Change Agent study that policy implementation is about mutual adaptation between policies and the local context where various parties negotiate over the meaning and interpretation of policies. However, she underplays the uneven power relations within and around the state when she argues that the policy success depends on the effectiveness of implementation strategies which require a certain level of local leadership, commitment, expertise and capacity.

South African policy analysts (Jansen, 2001; Sayed, 2002) use a similar but more political approach when examining policy contestations and negotiations which take place at different levels of policy-making. According to Sayed (1997, 2002), conflicts, which already exist in policy development and formulation, are exacerbated in implementation. In their trajectory policy studies on the NQF, Lugg (2007) and French (2009) show how implementation conflicts led to changes in content and implementation strategies, which settled temporarily the conflicts, only to open up new tensions and conflicts. The other finding of these studies is that policy and policy implementation often worsen the already existing education inequalities between rich and poor schools (Sayed and Jansen, 2001).

A third strand challenges indirectly implementation studies to shift their focus away from the policy-practice gap on the grounds that this assumes a causal

link and implies that implementation is a forward mapping process (Elmore, 1979/80). De Clercq (2002) shows how education departments' top down implementation approach prevents districts from facing up to the priority problems encountered by schools and teachers before these can be in a position to implement the new policies. Criticising the top down implementation approach (the state's play of power), Elmore (1979/80) points to the advantages of a 'backward mapping' approach to implementation which expects implementers to understand what schools require in terms of differentiated support strategies to assist with the gradual implementation of the policy changes. As De Clercq (2002) mentions, this approach assumes a substantial change in the hierarchical power relations between education departments, districts and schools.

The backward mapping approach also suggests a different research methodology for implementation studies which will yield better understanding. The idea is to investigate what happens at the level of the actors, the targets of the policy, and trace policy implementation work from the 'bottom up' by analysing what influences policy actors' actions and behaviours. Rogan and Grayson (2003) use this approach to show how teachers of poor and disadvantaged schools are stretched beyond what they can manage by districts' 'one-size-fits-all' implementation approach. This is the reason, they argue, for the negative impact of the curriculum policy on poor schools and their teachers. Based on their research, they devise a theory of curriculum implementation which contends that, because schools have different zones of feasible innovation, "implementation work should be aligned to the school profile of implementation, the capacity to support innovation and the school's access to outside support" (Rogan and Grayson, 2003, p.1195).

However, these policy implementation studies all remain rather abstract in their analysis of the state education bureaucracy as they do not investigate the concrete operations and actions of education officials at specific sites. There is little research on why and how some districts or schools faced with similar contexts, capacity and interest groups manage to ward off some of the worst effects of discriminatory policy content. This usually involves an investigation of *how* policy actors exercise their enabling agency to interpret policy signals, as well as what decisions and mediation strategies they take to make the best out of policy implementation. Lugg (2007) and French (2009) provide the beginning of such analyses by focusing on the leadership of various NQF policy communities, its mediation and implementation strategies. Lugg (2007)

argues that policy leadership explains hegemonic moments of some NQF policy groups at certain times.

Thus, implementation studies tend to ignore an analysis of the different manifestations of policy power (exercise and play of power and power-play) in the policy process. They would be richer if they capture how policy discourse and text are constantly interpreted and contested by agents who exploit the opportunities created by policy to strategise around its implementation.

Fourth group: analyses that examine how change occurs on the ground

The South African government had to be the main driver of education reforms since system-wide changes were needed after 1994 to counter the legacy of apartheid education. This centralised approach to policy work mirrors that of many other countries in the 1990s as state-driven standardised education reforms were introduced. But policy-makers and education departments had a limited engagement with change theory or the change management process. The fourth group deals more directly with change management issues by examining the nature and impact of the change management tools of pressure and support, often embedded in various school improvement interventions or policies.

Fleisch (2002) studies the pre-1994 NGO-led school interventions and their use of support and development to argue that many of these interventions were unsuccessful because they only provided support to often poorly functioning schools with little managerial functionality and/or accountability. His study of the GDE accountability intervention programme with poorly performing schools (the 1999 Education Action Zones programme) welcomes the use of external bureaucratic accountability for aiming at restoring and stabilising these schools' managerial authority. The problem with Fleisch's study is that it does not delve into the quality and balance of pressure and support used by the EAZ nor does it look at its medium-to-long term impact. Yet, a researcher, working on a parallel qualitative case study of the EAZ in a few schools, found that the bias towards pressure (in terms of high stakes external bureaucratic accountability) led to conflicts and demoralisation among teachers who felt shamed by the EAZ but not internally motivated to work for lasting improvement (Mukwevho, 2002).

In his research on the poor success achieved in the 1990s by NGO interventions in poorly functioning schools, Taylor (2007) agrees with Fleisch (2002) that managerial authority is needed *before* support interventions can take place and impact meaningfully on schools. He argues that the problem with NGOs is that they do not have managerial authority over schools and that the department has to develop stronger bureaucratic school accountability, especially in dysfunctional schools. Like Fleisch (2002), Taylor (2002, 2007) does not engage with the quality or relevance of these NGO school support interventions nor does he debate what is an appropriate balance between pressure and support for different kinds of schools.

Shalem (2003) investigates the issue of meaningful opportunities for teachers and school to learn, something she criticises Taylor (2002) and Fleisch (2002) for not addressing. She also accuses them of manipulating selectively the findings of the international change literature and ignoring the work of Cohen and Ball (1999), Hopkins and Levine (2000) and others. Using Elmore's (2001) concept of reciprocal accountability, she argues that the government has the responsibility of building teachers' professional knowledge, skills and attitudes through meaningful support *before* accountability can be introduced and legitimised in schools.

Although sympathetic to Shalem's arguments, this article argues that these three authors neglect to study how change interventions initiated from outside impact on schools' internal capacity and agency. Outside changes only work through the internal school contradictions and if they manage to mobilise some kind of school agency. Thus, change management studies should identify the contradictions and gaps created by ambiguous reforms and their change processes. In doing so, they would have to explore how different policy agents respond, strategise and mediate these change reforms and processes (the power-play), something that is absent of their analyses.

Thus, it has been argued so far that these four groups of policy analyses adopt a political analytical approach with some limitations. These four groups are not all mutually exclusive because they have slightly different focuses of analysis. However, they all have something problematic when analysed with our framework of multiple policy powers: they omit to incorporate the dimension of power-play or policy agency which is vital to explain how policies can be enabling and provide opportunities for some policy agents who know how to use these policies to achieve some of their vision for an improved school system.

Applying the new analytical framework of policy powers to school evaluation policies

What does it mean then to apply the new analytical framework of multi-pronged policy powers to education policy analyses? Let us turn to the example of school evaluation policies? Silbert's (2007) Master study of the 2001 Whole School Evaluation (WSE) policy conceives policy essentially as an exercise of power which frames and excludes certain monitoring performance areas while Lucen (2003) explains the WSE policy as both exercise and play of power by the DoE. De Clercq (2007) supplements these content analyses by delving into the power dynamics and the policy's contradictions, tensions and opportunities these create. An analysis of how these opportunities are exploited at the level of policy (re)formulation or implementation by enabling policy agency by officials and/or school staff would reveal how power-play is exercised to develop strategies which can either divert or build on this school accountability policy for developmental purposes.

A few post-graduate research studies (Pym, 1999; Barnes, 2003 and Gallie, 2007) were done on appraisal policies. Barnes (2003) and Gallie (2007) use a political approach by locating DAS and its implementation within the historical and socio-politically contested context of the time. They identify various educational and political tensions in the policy as well as the compromises reached between education departments, unions and schools (the play of power). Little consideration, however, is given to the problematic DAS assumptions about teachers being professionals and the ambiguous position of the various stakeholders on this. These studies also trace teachers' interpretations and contestations around the DAS implementation process, mentioning teachers' distrust of education departments and their lack of capacity to support schools. They do not study, however, how DAS implementation problems are related to its contradictory content and tensions or how policy agents mediate and strategise around the space and gaps opened up by DAS (the power-play).

In contrast, Pym's (1999) PhD study on a school-based appraisal exercise focuses predominantly on the policy leadership and its inadequate conceptualisation and implementation strategies (or power-play). This critical reflection by the researcher (who, as the school principal, initiated this peer appraisal) explains how the policy's context was not favourable for appraisal given the poor school accountability culture and the lack of continuous teacher support opportunities. Pym also criticises the problematic theory of change

and ineffective change strategies used as no stakes were attached and no attempt was made to root the appraisal in teachers' priority concerns.

Other studies (Mathula, 2004; Class Act, 2007) were undertaken on the IQMS and its implementation. Mathula's (2004) study of the IQMS (as well as DAS and WSE policy) identifies political tensions and contestations around the content and implementation of these policies (the play of power), but does not see their manifestations in the ambiguous and contradictory content of the policies. Being a departmental official, Mathula (2004) prefers to focus on what made departmental implementation strategies ineffective and he cites lack of consensus amongst stakeholders and their leadership. He does not engage with the unequal power relations around these policies and the role of policy leadership in navigating through the tensions in policy content and implementation (power-play).

The Class Act report (2007), commissioned by the DoE, investigates the problematic IQMS implementation through an interpretive approach based on teachers' perceptions and engagement with the IQMS. It reveals that parts of the IQMS instrument are not clear and technically coherent (some performance standards and criteria, poor training and capacity to produce reliable data, etc.) but prefers to mention the technical and not political character of the contestations around the IQMS content and implementation (the exercise and play of power). It also hints that well performing schools, with their collegial culture and professional commitment, are advantaged in engaging with the IQMS while poorly performing schools, with poorly qualified teachers and little access to meaningful support opportunities, are victimised by the IQMS. Like Mathula's analysis, this a-political report can only conclude that more consensus and acceptance by all stakeholders should be achieved. De Clercq (2008) mentions the political character of the IQMS tensions but does not explore the opportunities that these provide for enabling agency or leadership.

This article argues that school evaluation policies, as most education policies, have many other complex and interesting dimensions which need to be fully analysed to understand their development, implementation and evolution over time. Policy scholars should not conceive of policies as all constraining as this underplays the notion of policy agencies and leadership. Policies do also open space for policy agencies. If policy-making has to be captured in its complex contested dimensions and its different implementation and impact on the ground explained, the power-play of policy agencies has to feature in the analysis to understand their different implementation and impact.

Policy agencies are those who enter and constitute the power-play as they mediate the policy within contested social domains. They are crucial especially if they possess the political and educational knowledge to assess the context and contested nature of school/teacher evaluation policies, together with the various needs and interests of various stakeholders. These agencies have to identify the various tensions and ambiguities of these school/teacher evaluation policies for development to find the space to act and power-play within it. It is only then that enabling policy agencies will be able to mobilise resources, decisions and strategies to exploit the opportunities created by these school/teacher evaluation policies and use them in a strategic manner, not to threaten various stakeholders involved but rather to win them over by working out how these policies can be used to benefit them and contribute to the improvement of the school system.

Concretely-speaking, policy leadership at district level, for example, has to understand the tensions provoked among teachers and their unions by teacher appraisal/evaluation policies and work out a way in which these can be managed and/or minimised. For this, it will assess the policy political and educational context, such as the differences between the unions and departments' agendas and interests. It will also identify the policy content ambiguities and tensions as well as the needs on the ground, such as tensions between evaluation for quality assurance and for development and what they require in terms of evaluation performance areas. It will then take decisions, mobilise resources and partners to navigate through the implementation process and secure the buy-in from the various stakeholders to ensure that the appraisal policy can be read and implemented in a way which benefits and improves the performance of teachers and the system. It will work out a way to present teacher monitoring in a non-threatening manner and in a valid form so that the department has a reliable idea of where the problems are, and the teachers and their development providers will understand genuinely on what meaningful developmental interventions have to focus. In that sense, appraisal could become, with policy agencies and leadership, an exercise for quality assurance and for development.

In conclusion, this article shows how policy analyses, which use the two power constructs of the exercise of power and the play of power around school/teacher evaluation policies, will unravel the power agendas of education departments as well as the resistance of teachers and their unions. They will also assess the intensity and evolution of the political and educational contestations as well as the way these manifest themselves in negotiations over policies' formulation and implementation in schools.

However, these analyses cannot explain why, in some areas, appraisal policies are implemented in an enabling, as opposed to constraining, manner. It is only analyses focusing also on the third power construct (power-play) and the actions of various policy agencies which will manage to unravel how policies evolve and are translated on the ground through strategic decisions and activities of policy agencies which manage, thanks to their policy knowledge and actions, to mediate the policy tensions and enable stakeholders to work together and find a way in which they can benefit from the policy.

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The views of academics on the use of student feedback for curriculum improvement

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Abstract

The research compared and contrasted the views of educators in Teacher Education Programmes, located in two different institutions, regarding the ways in which they utilised student feedback to improve the curriculum. The educators were selected on the basis that they collected student feedback using self-created questionnaires, then analysed it manually. The design was qualitative. Data were obtained using open-ended questionnaires and triangulated with semi-structured interviews. The findings confirmed that the participants utilised student feedback to improve the curriculum. Nonetheless, inherent challenges, contradictions and gaps were identified in the evaluation system, including the lack of coordination of the evaluation process which resulted in the fragmentation of the system. The lack of monitoring of the evaluation system and of training of academic members on the analysis and use of student feedback proved to be vital processes that adversely affected the success of utilising student feedback maximally. In this article it is argued that for student feedback to be utilised effectively to improve the curriculum, clear policies and guidelines should be formulated and monitoring should drive the implementation of the evaluation process.

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) commonly solicit student feedback as a means of evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Student feedback provides data which serve a variety of purposes including a university's quality assurance and performance management processes, revision of courses and programmes, reflection, improvement of teaching and learning processes, institutional accreditation and decisions about staff promotions (Zepke, Knight, Leach and Viskovice, 1999; Barrie, 2001; Hess, Barron, Carey, Hilbelink, Hogarty, Kromrey, Phan and Schullo, 2005). Although different evaluation strategies exist, for example, action research, portfolios, self-evaluation and peer reviews, student feedback still remains the most popular of all. To support this view, Greenwald and Gillmore (1997) and

Hess *et al.* (2005) claim that student feedback represents an important, if not the best method for evaluating teaching and learning. In contrast, others believe it is not the only and best source of information (Emery, Kramer and Tian, 2003; Haefele, 1992; Iyamu and Aduwa-Ogiegbaen, 2005).

Whereas the assumption is that HEIs administer course evaluations in order to fulfil various institutional and curriculum needs, there is a paucity of research on academics' views on how student feedback may be utilised to improve the curriculum. This situation ignites the following pressing question: Do educators in HEIs utilise student feedback to improve the curriculum? Although some research in this area has been conducted in the USA and Australia (Rowley, 2003), in South Africa these questions have not yet been addressed.

The research on which this article is based investigated, compared and contrasted the views of participants who taught in Teacher Education Programmes (TEPs) within two institutions of how they utilised student feedback to improve the curriculum.

The research adds new insights into the way university lecturers could manage and ensure maximum use of student feedback to improve their own curriculum practices. It also provides a well-grounded set of recommendations for TEPs regarding the possible measures to close existing gaps in the use of student feedback. Furthermore, policy makers could use the information to develop a clear set of guidelines regarding the use of student feedback.

Context of the TEPs

The organogram of the universities in which the TEPs are located shows that they use the top-down managerial approach, with Executive Deans at the top of each faculty. However, decisions regarding teaching and learning are taken consultatively at the different levels of the organisation. Both institutions take high quality teaching and learning and professional development seriously, as shown by the presence of a teaching and learning centre in each institution. These centres promote and support academic growth and development of the academic staff by providing regular training workshops and seminars on a variety of teaching and learning aspects, including assessment. In addition,

they ensure that high quality teaching and learning takes place and that these processes are organised in an orderly manner. They also offer induction programmes specifically designed to improve the skills of the novice educators. Nonetheless, attendance of these programmes is not mandatory, which may adversely affect the improvement of the competences of the academic staff.

Unlike teaching and learning which is highly organised, course evaluations take the *laissez faire* approach by which lecturers use whatever evaluation instrument they deem fit. Thus, even though high quality in teaching and learning is emphasised, the evaluation format contradicts this ideal. Furthermore, the teaching and learning centres have not yet aggressively embarked on supporting the staff in developing individualised evaluation questionnaires. To address the evaluations, one of the two institutions has piloted a standardised evaluation questionnaire and the other has developed committees to look into the evaluations within the respective faculties.

The evaluation models

This section presents the different paradigms emphasised in the student feedback questionnaires. Barrie contends that:

> Student evaluations of teaching systems reflect the underlying understandings and beliefs about teaching and learning of those who design and use them (2001, p.6).

The different frameworks may also explain why different descriptors are used to refer to the evaluation process. These descriptors are course evaluations, student ratings, student feedback, learner-centred evaluation, evaluation of instruction, students' evaluation of teachers' performance and students' evaluation of teaching effectiveness (Johnson, 2009; Caulfield, 2007; Sadoski, Charles and Sanders, 2007; Iyamu and Aduwa-Ogiegbaen, 2005; Richardson, 2005; Filak and Sheldon, 2003; Gold, 2001).

Similarly, diverse views on the process of teaching and learning may manifest themselves in the choice and construction of the items included in the evaluation questionnaires. For instance, Prosser and Trigwell's (1998) 3Pmeta-model focuses on the aspects of the learning process, including characteristics of the student and the course, teacher and teaching, student

perceptions of context, student approach to learning and student learning outcomes.

In contrast, Johnson (2009) proposes a learner-centred evaluation model which comprises four areas: learning goals, learning activities, learning assessments and learning outcomes. Ballantyne (1999) extends this model by suggesting a framework which emphasises teacher-student relationships, as these are of paramount importance in facilitating learning.

Cannon (2001) notes that student evaluations tend to place emphasis on teaching and courses instead of learning. He perceives this approach as risky as there is no universally accepted model of good teaching. He suggests moving towards the learning-centred approach, using the portfolio in documenting evidence. Thus, learning rather than teaching becomes the driving force of change while teaching takes the role of designing learning environments that are student and learning focused.

Pettigrove (2001) concurs and refutes the evaluation model that focuses on teacher behaviour as the assumed cause of effective learning. He proposes broadening the scope of the evaluation questionnaires to embrace both learner and teacher behaviours. Thus, Pettigrove (2001) suggests the progressive uncovering of the student discourse and what it says about teaching, learning and the relationships between the three in the context of diverse and changing educational contexts. He promotes the use of 'contextualised' questionnaire items, since the latter can stimulate more focused comments than non-contextualised questionnaires. He further suggests that evaluations should include topic- and statement-responses.

Sadoski *et al.* (2007) advocate an evaluation model which focuses on course characteristics or overall course quality rather than teacher behaviours. They recommend evaluations that include characteristics such as course organisation, course goals and objectives, knowledge and preparation of academic staff, appropriateness of workload, student understanding of their responsibility and their evaluation, fairness of performance evaluations and quality of lectures and textbooks. They maintain that a course is highly rated based on the extent to which it is well organised with clearly communicated and delivered goals and objectives.

Rankin and Hess (2001), on the other hand, propose an evaluation approach which requires students to provide feedback on the links between course

goals, objectives and assessment tasks. Specifically, this approach entails using the course syllabus to clearly align and explicitly link course objectives with student assessment. Such evaluation could be used to explore the effectiveness of the chosen assessment tasks against the stated goals and objectives.

For the purpose of this article, the model adopted and used as a reference is the one emphasising teacher-student relationships (Ballantyne, 1999) as relationships underpin the phenomenon of effective learning and teaching.

The models discussed above show that since there are different understandings about teaching and learning, it stands to reason that the participants may emphasise different curriculum features for curriculum improvement. Consequently, these research questions directed this study:

1. What are the views of academics within Faculties of Education about the collection of student feedback for purposes of course evaluation?

2. What are their views on the usage of student feedback for purposes of curriculum improvement?

3. What challenges do academics experience in course evaluations?

Methodology

The research used a qualitative approach on three TEPs within Faculties of Education located in two different institutions. These programmes were purposely selected on the basis that, in them, student feedback was collected using individually self-created rather than institution-wide standardised evaluation forms, and that student feedback was analysed by the academics and not centralised.

Before the research was conducted, seven South African universities offering TEPs were surveyed in order to determine in which of them standardised evaluation forms and centrally-analysed student feedback were used and in which self-created evaluation forms and self-analysed data were used. The survey revealed that four out of seven HEIs utilised self-created evaluation

forms and self-analysed data and three used standardised forms and centrally-analysed data.

Since the intention of the research was to solicit qualitative data, responses were collected using open-ended questionnaires. Where probing and further explanations were necessary, follow-up interviews were conducted. A questionnaire was sent to a purposeful sample of 40 participants, including four Heads of Departments (HoDs), six Course Coordinators (CCs) and thirty lecturers who taught in the three TEPs. Twenty-seven (68%) responses were received from the participants who had received the questionnaires. This response rate was acceptable based on Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), who maintain that researchers should be satisfied with a 50% questionnaire response rate.

Additional information was solicited from HoDs and CCs regarding monitoring and evaluation of the course evaluations. Data obtained provided the basis for the analysis of the evaluation models for these TEPs.

Data were analysed using the highlighting approach (Cohen *et al.*, 2000) in order to uncover the thematic aspects. Thus, the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts were read several times and statements that appeared to be revealing about the phenomena under study were highlighted and coded. After identifying and recording themes, their interrelationships were described and finely analysed.

Several measures were taken to ensure instrument validity and reliability. A mother-tongue speaker of English reviewed the original questionnaire and verified the meaning with the researcher. The instrument was then piloted on two mother-tongue speakers of English and two second-language English speakers to ensure similar interpretation. In addition, some of the data obtained through the questionnaires were triangulated using interview responses.

The participants were informed about the confidentiality of the information gathered and about the voluntary nature of their participation. Ethical clearance was also obtained from the institution's Research Ethics Board.

Results

Frequency of course evaluations process

The responses of the participants revealed that the frequency of course evaluations varied considerably. Some participants indicated that they administered summative evaluations at the end of a semester or full-year course, or twice a year, at the end of each semester, in a full-year course. One of the participants stated that he evaluated his courses informally each term and formally at the end of the year. Others, however, maintained that evaluation was formative, which suggests that it was ongoing, as shown in this statement:

> I evaluate my courses constantly and regularly, after each assessment and formally at the end of the year.

Other participants noted that they solicited student feedback when something had gone wrong during the lectures for example, if students were unable to answer the questions correctly at the end of the lecture, or if a problem was detected after the initial evaluation for example, after the students had failed a test. This shows that the participants were not proactive as student feedback was collected to find out what had caused a problem.

The curriculum domains advocated in the TEPs

The participants were asked to identify the curriculum features they included in the evaluation forms and the ones they improved. Tables 1 and 2 summarise their responses.

Table 1 and 2: Frequencies of evaluated and improved curriculum features

Table 1: Frequency of evaluated curriculum features		Table 2: Frequency of improved curriculum features	
Curriculum features evaluated	**Frequencies**	**Curriculum features improved**	**Frequencies**
Course outcomes	3	Students' interest	1
Course content	12	Course content	11
Classroom activities	2	Classroom activities	1
Assessment tasks	13	Assessment tasks	4
Instructional materials	7	Instructional materials	1
Lecturer-student interaction	2	Lecturer-student relationships	1
Student support	1	Student support	1
Teaching methods	10	Teaching methods	10
Timing/Pacing	5	Timing/Pacing	2
Lecturer	6	Students' involvement	1
Classroom organisation	2	All aspects	4
Course design	5		
Students' attitudes	5		
All aspects	8		

Table 1 showed a high frequency of evaluations of course content, assessment tasks and teaching methods, including instructional materials and lecturer. Course outcomes, classroom activities, lecturer-student interaction, student support and classroom organisation featured the least, with student support the lowest. The average frequency of timing, course design and students' attitude was five. When compared with Table 1, Table 2 showed the same high proportion of the course content and teaching methods and a sharp decline in the frequency of assessment tasks and instructional materials. The low frequency of classroom activities, lecturer-student interaction/ relationships and student support which was noted in Table 1 remained unchanged in Table 2. In comparison with Table 1, the frequency of 'all aspects' in Table 2 decreased by half, while that of timing decreased by three.

Some participants asserted, remarkably, that they evaluated and/or improved 'all aspects' of the curriculum instead of distinct curriculum features. They argued that doing so helped them to 'get a bigger picture'.

Other participants evaluated themselves, as illustrated by the frequency of six for this item in Table 1 and by the utterance:

> In my subject evaluation, I do not have students evaluate the curriculum but they evaluate me as a lecturer.

Ironically, the curriculum feature of 'lecturer' was excluded in Table 2.

Some inconsistencies were noted in the data presented by the participants in Tables 1 and 2. For instance, the curriculum features such as course outcomes, lecturer, classroom organisation, course design and students' attitudes included in Table 1 did not appear in Table 2. Instead, new items such as students' interest and students' involvement appeared in Table 2.

Utilisation of student feedback

Improvement of professional practices

One of the participants indicated that student feedback was used to improve professional practices:

> When the feedback arrives, I review the comments around my lecturing style and presentation, and try to accommodate the students' needs as much as possible.

Another participant acknowledged that although students sometimes made unrealistic demands in the evaluations, some of their suggestions were easy to implement, such as replacing a certain topic with one which the students found more useful. Other participants claimed that they used student feedback to reflect on their practice, such as ascertaining which teaching methods worked or did not; enhancing various aspects of the curriculum such as students' interest, difficult aspects, assessment tasks, course relevance, pedagogic approaches and reading materials, and helping the students learn how to learn. Others reported that after reading the student feedback, they wrote reflective reports resulting in action plans used to improve their practice, especially when compiling their course guides or for planning.

Judging by the participants' responses, it is evident that the majority of them were concerned about curriculum and professional improvement and not so

much about meeting bureaucratic needs, except for one participant who claimed:

> I use the information to support my presentation for changes to management, and as a way of showing my worth to my superior after which they are more confident of what I am doing here.

Handling of student feedback

It could be safely argued that for course evaluations to yield positive results, negotiations with students should be entered into before they fill out the evaluation questionnaires, to explain clear guidelines and ethical concerns. They would then understand the purpose and their expected roles in this process, as put succinctly by one participant:

> Course evaluations are crucial for the students and myself. In order to obtain maximum benefits, I explain to the students why I need this info, discuss confidentiality issues, ask them to be honest and to make comments where necessary, and give them enough time to fill out the questionnaire. More often than not I obtain very good feedback that helps me to grow as an educator.

Ballantyne (1999) emphasises dialogue with students about their feedback to make them feel part of the teaching and learning process. In the research, one of the participants said he paid attention to the importance of dialogue:

> A week or so after conducting the evaluation, I give feedback to the students (on their feedback!). I discuss some of the suggestions they made and indicate to them whether I will be able to make the suggested changes. I think it is important that students should know the reasons why certain things are the way they are and why they can or cannot be changed. . . this contributes to a sense of being involved in decision-making, which will serve to motivate students.

It was evident from the participants' statements that some of them applied certain criteria to judge student feedback before implementing the changes, such as looking at the feasibility and common trends of the students' remarks. One participant explained that she looked at the students' achievements in relation to their comments before deciding on the changes to make. Others used feedback which they considered 'constructive' and 'appropriate' while discarding what they regarded as 'not useful' or 'irrelevant'. Other participants considered improvements only if there were 'a substantial number' or 'more than 10%' of similar negative responses to a specific

aspect. One of them admitted that if 'only 2/50' of the students had made the comment, no improvements were effected.

Contradictions embedded in the course evaluation system

It was striking that, although the lecturers had explained how they utilised student feedback to improve the curriculum, the CCs and HoDs were ambivalent. Out of the four HoDs and six CCs, only two HoDs confirmed that course evaluations were administered in their programmes. The rest of the HoDs and CCs were hesitant, with one of the HoDs responding with:

> I am not sure to what extent this is happening. . .there is really no concrete evidence where that has happened in my department,

and the other CCs putting it thus:

> Some do [and] others don't. It should be part of the performance process, where the lecturer give[s] feedback on the student evaluation as well as provide the evidence, the originals, but this does not always happen – we only see the interpreted results.

The other CC assented, adding that:

> Some do, with others it's not clear because they do not submit the reflective reports.

Another CC added the dimension of negative student feedback, arguing that some lecturers manipulated student feedback when writing evaluation reports. She put it as follows:

> Very few do this [course evaluation]… and it is a known fact that there are lecturers who do not reflect anything negative in their reports... I cannot understand why lecturers at our faculty are allowed not to make their originals available to the HoD.

Some HoDs and CCs believed that negative student feedback was the cause for some lecturers avoiding conducting course evaluations. Others argued that lack of consequences for the defaulters led to some lecturers not feeling compelled to perform this task. They articulated the need for the evaluation process to be formalised, hoping that everybody would buy into the idea.

Inherent challenges in the course evaluations system

The responses of the participants showed that course evaluations and utilisation of student feedback could have structural challenges. These challenges involved the lack of reliability and validity of evaluation questionnaires and student feedback, ambivalence in dealing with student feedback which was beyond participants' control, poor data analytical skills and the lack of systematic monitoring.

Some of the participants expressed a concern about the self-created evaluation questionnaires which they claimed had not been tested for reliability and validity. They argued that the biases inherent in these questionnaires led to subjective evaluation as some lecturers avoided questions that might yield negative responses.

They further highlighted the fact that the students sometimes suggested curriculum changes that were beyond their control, or too difficult to effect. Emery *et al.* (2003) repudiated student feedback, maintaining that it failed to distinguish between factors that were within the control of the academic staff and system-determined factors that were beyond their control. One participant said he explained the curriculum changes that could or could not be effected and gave the students reasons for this. Others stated that they consulted with their colleagues and supervisors to find answers for these suggestions.

In the three TEPs studied, student feedback was analysed manually by the participants. The respondents expressed a grave concern about inadequate data analysis and interpretation skills, which Emery *et al.* (2003) refer to as user errors in data interpretations emanating from unskilled users, which could pose a serious challenge to some lecturers in using student feedback. So, other lecturers expressed a preference for electronic data analysis above manual analysis, maintaining that the former could help prevent flaws in data interpretation.

The participants also identified the lack of training and induction for the academic members on the analysis, interpretation and utilisation of student feedback as a huge obstacle to the effective use of student feedback. Only two of the four HoDs claimed to have received training while the rest of the lecturers and CCs had never received any training. The HoDs and CCs expressed much ambivalence regarding the induction of newly appointed lecturers on the use of student feedback. None of the newly appointed

lecturers acknowledged having received the induction. One of the CCs was under the impression that:

> All new lecturers are experienced and do not need this kind of assistance.

Some of the HoDs and CCs candidly admitted that monitoring and evaluation were 'not applicable' in their programmes. Another HoD acknowledged that monitoring happened informally but was never included in the minutes of the meeting.

Discussion

The responses of the participants indicated that the evaluation system in the three TEPs was problematic. For example, inconsistencies in the frequency of the evaluations could have emanated from the lack of standardisation in the process, which would invariably have guided the participants about the frequency and purpose of the evaluations.

The high prevalence of course content in Tables 1 and 2 might be an indication that the participants mostly evaluated and improved course related aspects. This paradigm supports the conviction of Sadoski *et al.* (2007), that evaluations should focus on course characteristics rather than teacher behaviours. Nonetheless, the frequency of teaching methods was also high, which might be a reflection of the participants' orientation toward teaching as well. Orientation towards the course and teaching indirectly suggests that the participants overlooked the features related to the learner and learner-teacher relationships. In contrast, Ballantyne (1999) views teacher-student relationships as vital in facilitating learning, suggesting that items such as lecturer-student interaction/relationships and students' interest, involvement, support and attitudes should have been rated much higher than they were in Tables 1 and 2.

The discrepancies between the curriculum features identified in Tables 1 and 2 are worth noting. The interpretation might be that the items omitted in Table 2 did not require any improvement. Similarly, the decline in the frequencies of some items in Table 2 compared with Table 1 could be interpreted in the same way. However, the emergence of new items in Table 2 could suggest a mismatch between the curriculum features that were evaluated and those that

were improved, which could highlight a lack of synergy between student feedback solicitation and curriculum improvement.

Iyamu and Aduwa-Ogiegbaen stress:

> The involvement of students in the evaluation of their lecturers' teaching effectiveness [as it] is seen as a practical demonstration of democracy in education (2005, p.621).

Zepke *et al.* (1999) concur, emphasising respect, care for students and listening to what they have to say on teaching and other issues as vital to good teaching. Granted, some participants made a concerted effort to accommodate the students' needs and to handle their feedback with care. However, the criteria which some participants used to select or discard student feedback raise concerns about power and powerlessness. Those with power are seen to have been able to determine what was 'appropriate', 'not useful', 'irrelevant' and 'constructive', which could be interpreted as a lack of care and respect for the students' voices.

The emphasis placed by some HoDs and CCs on raw evidence as opposed to evaluation reports could point to a level of mistrust in the evaluation system and the lecturers under their supervision. This insistence is unsubstantiated as research supports the value and validity of self-reports in promoting instructional improvement (Braskamp and Ory, 1994) and in developing teaching portfolios (Seldin, 1997). Nonetheless, Rowley (2003) recommends that raw and analysed data be shared among course leaders and managers as they are in a position to use them to contribute to quality enhancement.

Of particular importance was the concern about the reliability and validity of the self-created evaluation forms. Existing literature confirms this (Haefele, 1992; Harrington and Reasons, 2005). Equally significant were the arguments raised about the subjectivity of the self-created questionnaires and some participants avoiding dealing with negative feedback. Rowley argued that if student feedback is analysed by module tutors, there is a chance that:

> they [would] suppress negative comments and write history to suit their own agenda (2003, p.148).

Manipulation of student feedback, whether positive or negative, could be regarded as a violation of the students' rights. In this article it is argued that important lessons could be learnt from negative student feedback, and that the

academic members should respect and use such feedback for curriculum improvement.

Other issues pertain to the lack of training and induction and the uncertainty of the HoDs and CCs about the evaluation process. Of equal importance are the contradictions between their statements and those of the lecturers about administration of the course evaluations, and by implication, student feedback utility. Lack of training and induction could have severely hampered the effective use of student feedback. Similarly, in an ideal situation one would expect the HoDs and CCs to be in control of the evaluation process. However, they themselves were uncertain and did not possess the expertise, which could have adversely impacted on the effective use of student feedback. Likewise, the fact that evaluations were not monitored and evaluated, as reported in the findings, could be a reason for the gaps identified in the evaluation processes.

Recommendations

A number of issues about the administration of course evaluations and utilisation of student feedback were raised in this article. There is overwhelming evidence in support of the fact that the participants in the three TEPs utilised student feedback for curriculum improvement. For instance, the participants were able to identify the curriculum features they evaluated and improved, albeit with some discrepancies. They were also able to describe the ways in which student feedback helped them to improve their practice and how they handled the feedback from students. However, a number of gaps existed in the evaluation system. In this section of the article, a number of recommendations are made that could help to address the gaps identified.

It was evident from the data collected that the evaluation system in the TEPs was inconsistent, unsystematic and uncoordinated, as shown by:

- the lack of uniformity in the frequency of the administration of the evaluations

- the mismatch between the curriculum features that the participants evaluated and those they improved (Table 1 and 2)

- the contradictions between the views of the lecturers and those of the CCs and HoDs about whether the evaluations were administered and student feedback utilised.

The lack of structure and coherence could suggest that the evaluation process is chaotic and that student feedback is under-utilised. However, a systematic approach and a set of clear underlying objectives and guidelines for conducting evaluations could guide the participants to evaluate in an orderly manner. Hence, it is recommended that the TEPs formulate an evaluation policy with a set of clear guidelines that determine the frequency of the evaluations, the curriculum features to be evaluated and the management of the evaluations. Such a policy might minimise the ambiguities and challenges embedded in the evaluation system.

The findings also uncovered the criteria used by some of the participants to make decisions about using or discarding student feedback. The decision to label student feedback as 'irrelevant' (simply because it has been raised by few students) could reflect the biases and subjectivity entrenched in the academic members' practices. Cannon warns as follows about the judgement process:

> It is here that much of the good intentions of an evaluation system can come to nought (2001, p.85).

Hence, evaluators should receive training so that they would learn to make sound judgements regarding student feedback.

Data also revealed that the manipulation of negative student feedback occurred. Negative feedback cannot be avoided, as students often blame even effective teachers. Therefore the academic members should not ignore it, as it could contribute to substantial curriculum improvements if taken seriously. In order to counter this behaviour, the academic corps should be trained in handling both negative and positive feedback. Furthermore, an audit mechanism should be put in place to enable the HoDs and CCs to audit and moderate raw and analysed student feedback. Rowley (2003) argues that doing so may enhance transparency. In addition, accountability measures should be put in place for the participants to ensure that they reflect on all feedback.

One of the challenges raised by the participants was the lack of data analysis and interpretation skills. Arguably, flaws resulting from inefficient data

analysis skills could lead to misinterpretations and inappropriate utilisation of student feedback and to a degree of defensiveness on some participants especially if they disagree with student feedback. Malos (1998 in Emery *et al.*, 2003) argues that the use of untrained evaluators may be subject to legal challenge. To avoid the challenges experienced by incompetent evaluators, Rowley (2003) recommends that a dedicated and central resource should be provided to undertake the data analysis task. The teaching and learning centres should also be more aggressive in making training on evaluation mandatory for the academic members.

According to the views expressed by the participants, monitoring of the evaluation system was generally not conducted. Thus, there were no mechanisms for determining the strengths and weaknesses of the evaluation system, which are critical in providing information about the success of the programme and the changes that need to be effected. Ideally, monitoring and evaluation should drive the evaluation process and be ongoing. It is therefore recommended that a well-coordinated evaluation system with monitoring and evaluation strategies in place should be developed so as to be able to determine the success and effectiveness of the evaluation system.

It was clear from the statements of the participants that some of them used the evaluation model that stressed teacher-student relationships. Such an approach should be commended and encouraged as it makes the students feel that they are included in the teaching process (Brookfield, 1986 in Zepke *et al.*, 1999) and that their feedback is acknowledged and valued. Educators should bear in mind that student feedback is the single most powerful tool for students to express their concerns about the teaching and learning processes. Hence, when conducting and dealing with course evaluations, academic members should respect, care for students and listen to what they have to say on teaching and other issues as these are essential principles of good teaching (Brookfield, 1986; Centra, 1993; Greene, 1973; Taylor, 1995 and Vella, 1994 in Zepke *et al.*, 1999).

Conclusion

The research uncovered the controversies surrounding the use of student feedback or lack thereof, and also revealed the gaps that may hinder the process of improving the curriculum through student feedback. These gaps

may indicate that the system in the TEPs studied is fragmented and uncoordinated. Similarly, lack of training and induction on the utility of student feedback and the absence of monitoring and evaluation pose a threat in the evaluation system. These gaps, coupled with a lack of policy guidelines and proper systems, render student feedback worthless. Unless clear guidelines and policies are put in place and implementation is monitored and evaluated, fragmentation and inefficient use of student feedback are likely to continue. Nonetheless, the challenges and gaps identified are not insurmountable. With proper structures they could be overcome.

Due to the non-representative sample of the study, the results cannot be generalised to other TEPs which utilise self-created evaluation forms and manual data analysis, or to those which utilise standardised course evaluations and electronic data analysis. Further studies need to be conducted in both situations in order to determine differences and/or similarities in the results. It is hoped that the comparison would further enhance the use of student feedback in improving the curriculum.

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