*Transformation of the South African schooling system*

# Change Agents in the South African Schooling System: Challenges and Prospects

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## List of Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| CEPD | Centre for Education Policy Development |
| DoE | Department of Education |
| EPU | Education Policy Unit |
| HSRC | Human Sciences Research Council |
| NECC | National Education Crisis Committee |
| NEPA | National Education Policy Act |
| NEPI | National Education Policy Initiative |
| OBE | Outcomes-based Education |
| RDP | Reconstruction and Development Programme |
| SASA | South African Schools Act |
| SMT | School Management Team |
| UCT | University of Cape Town |

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## About the Publication

In 1997, the CEPD and its partner organisations (the Education Policy Units based at the Universities of the Witwatersrand, Natal and Fort Hare) embarked on a major longitudinal study – Education 2000 Plus. The study sought to track and examine the transformation of the schooling system in South Africa, focusing on the policies and programmes of the new government. The study was undertaken over a period of five years, and several intermediate reports emerged as the study progressed.

Towards the end of the study, the team spent a year examining and analysing the data, with a view to sharing the findings of the study with regard to the extent, nature and direction of education transformation in South Africa, specifically in relation to the schooling system.

The papers in this series – *Transformation of the South African Schooling System* – reflect on that process. The papers in this series have undergone a several review processes. Firstly, they were all presented at a national conference that was held in 2004. Following comments that were received at the conference, the papers were revised. The papers were then given to two independent reviewers.

The ten papers in the series have all undergone the review processes discussed above. Each of these papers provides an account of the transformation processes relating to the schooling system. The titles in this series are as follows:

1. Change Agents in the South African Schooling System: Challenges and Prospects, *George Moyo*
2. "Transformation" Revisited, *Enver Motala*
3. Transformation in the School Environment: An Analysis of Photographs from One Rural Secondary School, *Jenni Karlsson*
4. Exploring the Mutability of School Ethos during South Africa's First Post-apartheid Decade
   *Jenni Karlsson and Sandile Mbokazi*
5. Prospects and Challenges of Doing Social Justice Research: Experiences from the Education 2000 Plus Study, *Madumetja Kgobe and George Moyo*
6. Policy Change and the Experiences of Learners in Post-apartheid Schooling, *John Pampallis and Princess Tabata*
7. The Fault-lines in South African School Governance: Policy or People?, *Veerle Dieltiens*

8. Districts: Looking for a Place in the Education System, *Hersheela Narsee*
9. Teacher Professionalism and Education Transformation, *Julie Douglas*
10. Selected Macro-indicators of Education Transformation, 1991-2001, *Monica Bot*

Each of these papers reflect the multiple dimensions of the change processes, and the many aspects and features of transformation. Collectively, the papers suggest that important achievements have been made in driving education transformation towards an open, democratically organised quality for all, although major challenges remain.

# 1. Introduction

Since the attainment of democracy in South Africa in 1994, there have been a number of initiatives aimed at transforming the schooling system from one characterised by the gross inequalities of the apartheid era to one that is consistent with the new democratic order. To this end the post-apartheid state has enacted education policies that seek to bring about change in terms of five key goals – access, equity, redress, democracy and quality. Within this framework, the Education 2000 Plus Project has sought to contribute, first, to an understanding of the implications of post-apartheid education policies for transformation and. second, to "…monitor the relationship between policy and implementation at macro, meso and micro levels…" (CEPD, 2002:2). However, from the experience arising out of research activities in the past five years, the project has recognised that it has neither understood nor explained the relationship between policy and implementation within the schooling system.

This paper is an attempt to advance the work of the Project in these two respects. The guiding thread of focus concerns an exploration of the nature of the relationship between policy initiatives on the one hand, and the process of educational change and transformation on the other. In this regard, the paper examines the interplay between structural enablers and constraints, in the form of transformation policy provisions, and the capacity of the human agency to resolve these. This conceptualisation is at the heart of the so-called structure-agency debate in social science. The paper concludes by drawing on real-life data from selected Education 2000 Plus research.

# 2. Understanding Educational Change

## 2.1 Policy vs. Implementation

In the last few decades there has been a growing realisation throughout the world that there is often a schism between the mandates of educational policies and the realities of implementation. In South Africa widespread research (CEPD, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003; Sayed & Jansen, 2001; Motala & Pampallis, 2001; Fleisch, 2002) shows that enactment of policies does not automatically

translate to the changes envisaged by those policy. A key question in this regard relates to what is understood by "change". Despite the lack of an agreed approach to change, recent educational history has seen a plethora of initiatives aimed at bringing about change in school systems worldwide. These have been variously referred to by terms such as "restructuring", "school reform", "school effectiveness" "school improvement", "transformation of the schooling system". Dimmock (2002) has argued that all these labels can be subsumed under a generic term – "restructuring" – that describes the many and varied change situations at systemic and school levels.

## 2.2 Educational Change as Restructuring

Proponents of educational change as restructuring generally agree that that changes in the schooling system must, first and foremost, occur in the classroom and the day-to-day experiences of learners. Schools on their own, without the support of other stakeholders, may not succeed in restructuring themselves. According to this line of thinking, changing the schooling system has to do mainly with realigning relationships at system and stakeholder levels. Within the South African context, it has been argued that restructuring in the schooling system takes place against the background of an education system that was traumatised by years of apartheid rule, where "…relationships between communities and schools, parents and teachers, pupils and principals, principals and officials have been polarized…" (McLennan, 1997:47). It is for this reason that restructuring has tended to focus on a model which emphasises relationship building among various stakeholders, with a focus on issues such as governance of the system rather than on control. The emphasis of the post-democratic dispensation is, among others, on facilitation of processes, participation and communication, collaboration and negotiation rather than rule compliance. In its preamble, the South African Schools Act (SASA) (RSA, 1996) aims to establish a legislative framework which sets out "uniform norms and standards for the education of learners at schools and the organisation, governance and funding of schools throughout the Republic of South Africa".

Against this framework, a number of legislation and policy statements followed over the last eight years or so (Karlsson, 2001). However, all these are structural instrumentalities and mandates

that, in themselves, can only create an enabling framework to be negotiated, interpreted and implemented by human actors in different ways at all levels of the schooling system. These human actors constitute various agents that initiate and bring about change.

Before I explore the notion of change agents and their exercise of agency, and in order to develop a tool that can be used to assess change and non-change, I will detail what I understand by the process of educational change.

## 2.3 Educational Change as a Continuum

It has been argued that educational change is multi-faceted. Often policies which seek to bring about change do not have a tool to assess the many dimensions of change. Education 2000 Plus has, over the years, grappled with this issue, with mixed levels of success. Figure 1 shows one tool that emerged from the endeavours of the study to understand change.

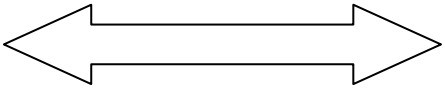
| **Exclusive, privilege for the few**<br><br>**Apartheid Schooling System** |  | | | **Inclusive, equity, access, quality**<br><br>**Post-apartheid Schooling System** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Apartheid<br>*Stage 1* | Symbolic Change<br>*Stage 2* | Analytic Change<br>*Stage 3* | Structural Change<br>*Stage 4* | Transformative Change<br>*Stage 5* |
| Legally sanctioned physical, and social separation. | Policies in place to change inequality (Jansen, 2001). Actors in the schooling system see themselves as committed to governance, school admission policies, etc., while cultures of privilege and paternalism remain intact (e.g. some ex- model C schools) | Actors desire to eliminate inequality while mindset governed by dominant discourses which may be at the stage of symbolic change. | Actors develop new policies and models of practice for an inclusive, equitable schooling system. Build a new culture of teaching and learning. | Actors in the schooling system reflect contributions and interests of diverse cultural and economic groups. Commitment to confronting and dismantling social inequality. |

**Figure 1: Continuum of Change in the Schooling System (adapted from Karlsson, 2001; Kass & Szabo, 2004)**

In Figure 1, change is depicted as taking place along a five-stage continuum, from the legally sanctioned apartheid schooling system which entrenched inequality, through symbolic, analytical, structural and transformative change. Education policies that have been developed will impact the system along a continuum of change. At any one time implementation, or an aspect of implementation, may be symbolic, analytic, structural or transformative, depending on the forces and power dynamics that are at play at the time. In real life, it may be difficult to compartmentalise change in such a neat fashion, as implementation may straddle more than one stage in practice. The usefulness of Figure 1 as a tool for assessing change or non-change in the schooling system, however, lies in the fact that what might be recognised as change in one setting may merely be symbolic in another. Yet whenever an intervention has been undertaken, whether in the form of legislation or some other action, change has in fact taken place even though it may not be located at stage 5. Perhaps the fundamental change that post-apartheid educational policies seek, however, is transformative change. The section below explores how such change can be achieved, through identifying and explaining factors at play in the process of change.

# 3. Change Agents in the Schooling System

## 3.1 The Exercise of Agency

Sen (1999:19) defines an agent of change as "…someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of [that person's] own values and objectives…". Implicit in this definition is the idea of freedom to act in a manner one chooses. The concept of freedom is central to Sen's notion of exercise of agency. According to Sen, an individual exercises agency when he or she takes part in various activities directly or indirectly to bring about desired changes in the economic, social and political spheres of life. Often, however, freedom to act is constrained by a variety of factors which Sen (1999:15) describes as *unfreedoms.* These comprise a number of social and economic vulnerabilities such as famine, malnutrition, lack of basic healthcare and non-functional education. In post-1994 South Africa, education policies focusing on equity and redress, access and quality were designed to create an enabling framework for the exercise of agency in bringing about educational

change within the schooling system. The policies were designed to eliminate structural unfreedoms imposed by the apartheid policies to and create structural enablers.

Exercise of agency in the schooling system, as implied above, is enabled and constrained by a number of factors. I will explore the interplay between agency and structure by dealing separately with structural enablers and structural constraining factors. This separation, however, is for analytical purposes only. In real life, the interplay overlaps; that is, disabling and enabling factors always compete for space. What influences actions and outcomes at any moment depends on a number of other related factors, not the least of which is power, as will be seen below. The argument is that inherent in any policy position are structural enablers and enabling factors, as illustrated below.

## 3.2 Structural Enablers

Three kinds of structural enablers can be identified as embedded in the development of the post-apartheid education policies. The recent history of educational policy development has shown how various actors operating within different structural arrangements – People's Education, NECC, NEPI, CEPD and others – were agents of change in terms of determining the purposes and frameworks for post-apartheid schooling. It can be argued that to the extent that these actors were articulating public concern for those who were powerless and disenfranchised by the dominant power structure, they were organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense (Gramsci, 1971), or transformative intellectuals (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1986) (see also Rahim, 2000). The point here is that agency, although exercised at individual level, takes place within the context of the collective. It is difficult to conceive of an individual operating alone as an intellectual because it is a concept that has meaning within a social context.

I will illustrate this line of thinking about the South African schooling system by reference to three types of collectives – *team*, *community* and, to a limited degree, *social class*.

### 3.2.1 Team

One of the key pillars of post-apartheid transformation policies in the area of school leadership and management is the idea of managing with teams. The Department of Education's (DoE's) five-year Implementation Plan for *Tirisano* expects that all schools should "…have management teams that demonstrate a commitment to the development of a school…" (DoE, 2004:8). The call is for shared leadership as well as collective management of the school through a structure called the School Management Team (SMT). The concept of an SMT is based, first, on the idea that the structural arrangement of collective management gives each participating member a chance to exercise agency and to develop expertise by working collaboratively. Second, collaborative management has the potential to move the school system away from inherited hierarchical management structures which, as Mclennan (1997) argued, characterised the apartheid education system.

In a similar vein, McDermott (2003) has argued that teams can be great vehicles for learning and sharing knowledge in the sense that:

- Team members can build on each other's ideas to deepen their thinking and insights.
- Teams can provide a safe environment in which people can collectively reflect on their experiences and the implications of those experiences for the organisation.
- By working together in close proximity over an extended period, teams develop rhythm, rapport, common identity and trust that vastly improve their ability to build on each other's ideas towards the solution of problems.

From the Education 2000 Plus database, one school (Baobab) gives an example of an SMT which worked as a collective and thus exercised agency collectively. The SMT meets once every week to plan, report back and make decisions regarding school management. All management plans are actively monitored and evaluated at these meetings. In consequence, the school has made plans in the following areas:

- *Teaching and learning:* The SMT assessed the school curriculum and introduced new learning areas, reduced and simplified criteria for learner assessment, and placed greater emphasis on skill-oriented learning activities.

- *Educator support and mentoring:* New SMT members and new educators receive support and mentoring from more experienced members. This kind of support engenders high levels of commitment among staff; it has the effect of pooling resources, developing new teaching techniques and creating a conducive, safe working environment for the growth of the individual and the school.
- *Extra-curricular* activities: The SMT conducted an informal survey of sporting activities at the school; they terminated a fifty-year-old tradition of rugby and introduced soccer in its place.
- *Budgetary:* The SMT raised funds to renovate school buildings.

These successes in the work of SMT were possible because of the high levels of co-operation and trust and good working relations among the staff. Educators who were interviewed believed that the democratic and participatory style of management permeated the entire school. They felt that SMT members were faithful and supportive and made decisions through democratic processes involving all SMT members. When decisions involve educators, they are consulted. On the whole the SMT at the school is credited with establishing high levels of communication with all members of the school community.

While data from one school shows what can be achieved through teamwork, Harris (2003:5) has argued that we need more empirical evidence

> …about the ways in which distributed leadership currently operates in schools. We need to know more about how it is developed and promoted. In particular we need to know if, and how, it contributes to better teaching and learning process in schools.

Studies in other countries have also raised issues around how SMTs are formed and work (Wallace & Hall, 1996). Questions have been raised concerning what sustains teams and teamwork. Notwithstanding these cautionary remarks about teams and teamwork, modern non-hierarchically oriented organisations place a great deal of emphasis on teamwork. Furthermore, evidence from the Education 2000 Plus school cited above shows how exercise of agency has worked, given this structural enabler.

### 3.2.2 Community

The idea of "community" is another key structural enabler in post-apartheid educational transformation policies. As one of the priorities under the five-year *Tirisano* plan, it is stated that schools are expected to develop into "…centres of community life." (DoE, 2004:7). Although the term "community" is commonly used, however, it is difficult to define. Many and varied definitions have been offered to date (Sergiovanni, 2000, 2001). I have chosen to define it in two ways – first, loosely and in the sense implied in policy documents such as *Tirisano;* second, in terms of what has been called *community of practice.*

I start with a commonsense definition. In education *community* has been used to describe a grouping comprising the principal, educators and learners as members of the school community. It has also been used to refer to people who live in the vicinity of the school and who send their children to the school. In democratic South Africa, a great deal of effort has gone into encouraging school and community integration. The *Tirisano* expectation, as mentioned above, is that there should be mutual interdependence between the school and the community, a structural condition in which individuals can exercise agency for change towards developing centres of excellence.

Unfortunately, the Education 2000 Plus database shows hardly any example of change agents who have shown agency by developing their schools into centres of excellence and community life. There is a need to carry out further research on how this might be achieved.

However, I would like to argue for a particular type of community as a vehicle towards the creation of schools as centres of community life. This is the idea of community in the sense coined by Etienne Wenger (1998). For Wenger, "communities of practice" are places where people develop, negotiate and share knowledge. In other words, individuals exercise agency within an enabling structural context of a community of practice. When applied to education, it is conceivable that principals and educators, as well as members of the SMT, can form communities of practice through clustering schools or through some interest in a particular learning area.

Wenger's idea of community of practice is further defined by reference to a group of people who share a common concern, set of problems or passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. In the schooling system, for example, a community of practice focusing on language and literacy education could be formed, consisting of educators, district subject specialists and academics in tertiary institutions.

The case for building communities of practice in the schooling system is based on what Hewitt and McDermott (1999) define as key features of a community of practice:

- Their purpose is to share knowledge.
- Membership is self-selected and voluntary.
- They are "glued" together by the passion they hold about a particular topic.
- They last as long as the interest lasts.
- They are informal in nature.

I would argue that these conditions provide freedom for members to exercise agency towards the transformation of the schooling system. While a team tends to be defined by the task it has to perform, a community of practice is focused on a knowledge interest.

### 3.2.3 Social Class

The third category of a collective as a structural enabler is social class. Theorisation around collective action in the form of social class has been well documented in the past (Althusser, 1971; Gramsci, 1971; Poulantzas, 1972; Cliff, 1986). From these sources, it can be argued that one of the defining features of social class is the class actor's position in the means of production (including knowledge production) (Young, 1971) as well as interests in the control of those means.

At the risk of over-simplifying the complexities of the concept of social class, my interest is restricted to identifying and understanding how different agents of change negotiate and position themselves in

the exercise of agency through exercising power of one kind or another. Within the South African schooling system, individuals acting under the auspices of teachers' unions have, for example, been able to exercise agency with considerable consequences for policy implementation and practice. It can be argued that teachers in this sense may be seen as a community of practice, and at the same time that their actions constitute class action. Teacher reaction to policies such as Whole School Evaluation and the Developmental Appraisal System are cases in point.

The Education 2000 Plus databank does not show much evidence of collective transformative action in the form of social class. This is another area for further research. For the purposes of this paper, suffice it to view social class as a structure of social relationships that enable exercise of agency.

## 3.3 Structural Constraints

### 3.3.1 The Nature of Power

While the existence of certain structures may create enabling conditions for exercise of agency, sight should not be lost of the fact that any structure or system exists in terms of power dynamics. The notion of power is central in critical social science theorising, including an analysis of change in the schooling system. An understanding of power dynamics is important as it helps us recognise and unpack a number of assumptions that lie behind certain behaviours and any judgment as to whether there is change or non-change.

This assertion implies that all our social practice is entrapped in power dynamics. To appreciate how power works I draw on Foucault's conception. A common perception is that power flows in a single direction, from top to bottom, and emanates from a specific source, such as the state or the ruling class. For Foucault, however, power does not function like that. Instead, it circulates and is never monopolised at the centre (Hall, 2001). According to this view, we are all caught up in its circulation. Power relationships take on a structural form that operates at every site of social life. However,

power is never total. Individuals and groups (teams, communities and social classes) can still exercise agency and overcome constraints.

The implication for educational change is that actors at all levels of the schooling system – national, provincial, district, school and community – are constrained by power that entraps them from all directions. At the same time, they have the potential to exercise what power is at their disposal. A related point is that power is not only negative and repressive; it can also be productive. While negative power can be seen as constraining, productive power is transformative, in the sense that it can be used to bring about desired change. Structural enablers such as SMTs, communities of practice and social class empower agents of change to exercise agency.

To gain a deeper understanding of how power works in the schooling system, it is necessary to distinguish between three types of power. I begin with the type that Foucault refers to, *discursive power,* which is everywhere. I will then consider two other types, *criteria power* and *operational power,* that at work at various levels of the system.

### 3.3.2 Discursive Power

There are many definitions of discourse. Foucault saw discourse as a "…system of representation" (Hall, 2001:72), a group of statements which provide a language for talking about or a way of representing the knowledge about a particular topic. For example, *equity*, *access*, *redress* and *quality* are discourses which have characterised an agenda for educational change and transformation in post-apartheid South Africa, and to which individuals in the schooling system are subjected. These discourses denote social practices in the sense that they comprise structural as well as individual elements of social action. From a discourse analysis perspective, it is argued that every social practice has a *semiotic* element – that is, ways of analysing language and meaning which includes "…all forms of meaning making – visual images, body language, as well as language" (Fairclough, 2001:122).

On the one hand, the structural semiotic aspects of terms used in policies of educational transformation come before all actors in the schooling system. Jansen (2001:276) has, for example, shown that post-1994 education policies in South Africa have drawn very heavily on international consultants from countries like "…Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand and others…." While it can be argued that this is not necessarily bad, it can at the same time be seen as a source of constraining discursive power. In this sense, it can be argued that it is possible to trace where the discourses which characterise debate about educational change and transformation came from. On the other hand, dominant discourses provide the opportunity for change agents within the schooling system to engage with them as they negotiate their meanings in terms of their lived experiences.

Wenger, however, warns that negotiation of meaning within a social practice includes the process of *reification.* For Wenger (198:58), reification is the process of "…giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness'". By doing this we create points around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organised. In other words, terms such as *access*, *quality*, *redress*, *equity* and so on become points of focus around which debate about educational transformation takes place rather than the actual experiences of people in the schooling system. Herein lies discursive power – that is, the ability to shift attention away from the way social life is experienced in various settings towards dominant discourses. If agency is concerned with the subjective capability and capacity to exercise choice, as Sen argued, then discursive power can be seen to be constraining through discourses and the process of reification.

### 3.3.3 Criteria Power

Another type of power is what Simkins (2003) calls criteria power. For Simkins, criteria power is "…concerned with determining purposes and frameworks relating to the 'what' and 'why' of service provision…" (Simkins, 2003:217). This means that educational stakeholders who have this kind of power define the aims and purposes of an educational service. It has to do with systems design, formulating policy, legislation and other instrumentalities. It is on the

basis of these that implementation is judged. The Education 2000 Plus Project, as mentioned above, identified a number of policy areas to track. In other words, system performance is judged in terms of pre-set criteria, the implication being that there are designers and implementers, a view which depicts a top-down approach to policy making, implementation and change. This perspective is highly contested, especially when other conceptions of power are considered.

Examples of those who have exercised criteria power in the South African schooling system are key actors operating within organisational frameworks at a systemic level – Peoples' Education, NECC, NEPI, CEPD (the Yellow Book), the Hunter Commission (policy goals like equity, redress, access, quality), the RDP document, and the South African Schools Act.

In a number of ways, the actors, under the auspices of these organisations, exercised criteria power in the sense that they defined in broad terms the aims and purposes of schooling in a democratic South Africa. However, taking into account the way in which discursive power works, it can be expected that such criteria for education are heavily influenced by dominant discourses. Indeed, early on in the democratic dispensation Kraak (1998:43) argued that many of the education policies were already progressively moving away from the key principles of People's Education, which inspired current transformation efforts. If this is true, then the Education 2000 Plus research was, in a way, already constrained by these discourses and by criteria power. In other words, are there no alternative concepts of understanding and tracking change and transformation?

### 3.3.4 Operational Power

Operational power, according to Simkins (2003), has to do with the "how" of education service delivery. How something is actually done does not necessarily coincide with what the designers of the system envisaged. It constitutes what some writers (Horvath, 2003; Awad & Ghaziri, 2004) refer to as tacit knowledge – that is, embedded knowledge or ways of doing things which are acquired as a result of culture and experience. Awad and Ghaziri (2004:6) put the

proportion of what they call "uncaptured" tacit knowledge at 95 per cent and an explicit knowledge base at only 5 per cent. If this is true, as Horvath (2003:2) argues, "…much of what the [organisation] 'knows' remains unknown or inaccessible to those who need it." Yet, Horvath goes on, tacit knowledge tends to mirror the way work *actually* gets done within an organisation and not necessarily what is mandated in policies, procedures and processes.

If this is true, it would partly explain the mismatch between policy and practice in the schooling system. This is illustrated below with data from Education 2000 Plus schools. The 95 per cent and 5 per cent proportions also suggest that much agency is exercised by reliance on tacit embedded knowledge which has the potential to engage with dominant power systems and create new or even counter discourses. Given this scenario, the failure of systems to capture "unofficial" ways of doing things becomes a structural constraint to the exercise of agency.

# 4 Locating Agency within the Social Continua of the Schooling System

## 4.1 A Complex Interplay

As seen in the foregoing section, there is always a complex interplay between structural factors and individual actions. Indeed, a number of writers –Noble (2000) and Evans (2002), among others – have recognised the need to consider both structural influences and individuals as actors who exercise agency. For others, such as Giddens (1984), the interdependence between action and structure is temporal and suggests that change is always implicit in social interaction because every process of action is a new production, although in the context of what has gone before (Ross, 1991). While this view may explain change that comes about incidentally and unintentionally, other theorists focus on exercise of agency that brings about change that is both intentional and deliberate.

## 4.2 Dimensions of the Interplay between Structure and Agency

Evans (2002) has sought to unpack the notion of agency through concepts of *agency* and *control.* For Evans (2002:248), agency refers to "…those aspects of social engagement which are predominantly individual, creative, proactive and involve resisting external pressures." Evans further explains agency as "socially situated", "influenced but not determined by structures." The second related concept, *control,* is referred to as "…subjective representations of [the person's] capabilities to exercise control." It comprises a belief that people are able to act in ways that will produce probable outcomes. Control belief also includes the recognition that certain actions will affect outcomes in particular ways. In sum, Evans' research focused on behaviours that imply agency and feelings of control. He went on to outline a conceptual schema for understanding the interplay between structure and agency to produce intentional change. Evans three dimensions of structure-agency are depicted in Table 1.

**Table 1: Dimensions of Structure-Agency**

| Dimension | Descriptive Features and Lines of Inquiry |
|---|---|
| <u>*Dimension 1*</u><br><br>Social determinism versus individualisation | • Individuals conceive of themselves as the centre of action.<br>• People are agents actively and individually engaged in the construction of their biographies.<br>• The social world is unpredictable and filled with risks that can only be negotiated on an individual level (see Wenger's negotiation of meaning and reification).<br>• Structural forces operate as powerfully as ever (see discursive, criteria power).<br>• Need to explore the subjectivities associated with choice and determination under differing structural and cultural conditions.<br>• Need to explore the kinds of beliefs and perspectives that stakeholders in the schooling |

| | |
|---|---|
| | system have on their future possibilities and whether they feel in control of their lives. |
| *Dimension 2*<br><br>Internal versus external control | • Emphasis on internal processes of the action individual in relation to external environment.<br>• Some aspects of personal circumstance are extremely difficult to change.<br>• Some people strive to change their environment to better fit their aspirations<br>• Other people change their subjective perceptions, aspirations and interpretations to match the environment.<br>• Most people believe that things will improve in the future. This drives their social action.<br>• Need to asses conditions under which individuals develop beliefs in high or low control.<br>• Whether a person underestimates or overestimates their extent of control is dependent on their experiences and socialisation.<br>• Emphasis on the internal processes of the acting individual. |
| *Dimension 3*<br><br>Social reproduction versus conversion | • The individual is both producer and reproducer of meaning.<br>• Knowledge and culture are fluid and shifting, and can be manipulated.<br>• People orient their actions not in terms of rules but in terms of shifting possibilities. |

*Source: Constructed from Evans (2002) and Beilharz (1991).*

From elements of the dimensions outlined in Table 1, it can be seen that while structure is not static, there is no blueprint concerning how

agency is exercised. Depending on the problem at hand, exercise of agency can be understood along three-dimensional continua as depicted in Table 1 and summarised in Figure 2.

The implications for educational change through policy intervention are that change and non-change can be explained in terms of power dynamics within these continua. However, crucial to understanding the exercise of agency is an exploration of different moments of agency within social continua (see Figure 2 in the following section).

## 4.3 Locating Agency with Social Continua

The actions of change agents in schooling can be located and understood in terms of where they are at any particular time with regard to a particular challenge within any of the three continua summarised in Table 1. Using this schema, it should be possible to examine and identify moments when various stakeholders exercise agency to achieve change or to identify the barriers to the exercise of agency. In other words, exercise of agency should be explored in terms of how it "…operates in the social landscape involving the dynamics of multiple, interlocking, socio-biographical journeys in a social terrain" (Evans, 2002:262-4). Figure 2 shows how this can be viewed.

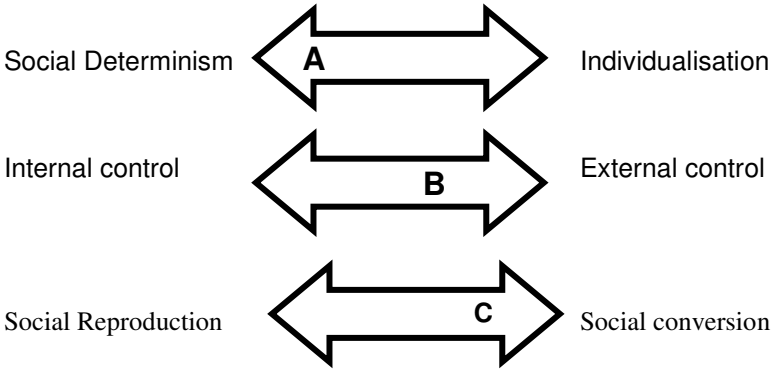



**Figure 2: Locating Agency within Social Continua**

The hypothetical situation shown in Figure 2 attempts to demonstrate different positions and moments of exercise of agency. In position A the agent experiences an issue in terms of, for example, a given

discourse about educational change, or through team, community or social class. However, due to internal motivation, a feeling of control and belief that things could be different (position B) moves on to position C where the agent actually converts the discourse into something meaningful to him or her in terms of prevailing contexts. It is also important to add that positions A, B and C may depend on the social position of a change agent within the society or schooling system.

The preceding discussion illustrates the point that the exercise of agency is linked to the issues of freedom and choice, as well as social positioning in terms of positions A, B and C. It is useful to explore how this can help us to understand what has been happening in the South African schooling system in terms of opportunities and constraints in the exercise of agency by various stakeholders.

# 5. Examples of Exercise of Agency in Education 2000 Plus Schools

## 5.1 Introduction

In this section I draw on a few examples from the Education 2000 Plus database which shows change agents and how they exercised agency. Because of the way the study was designed and carried out, data relates mainly to the school level. A good starting point, however, is at national level.

## 5.2 Exercise of Agency in Policy Proclamation

As mentioned above, policies of educational transformation are meant to create an enabling structural framework for change. One example is a proclamation by the former Minister of Education, Kader Asmal. It is argued that Asmal's *Call for Action* under *Tirisano's* nine priority areas had the effect of mobilising the education fraternity in the country to focus on transformation. Karlsson (2001:13) has noted that the Minister's decisive moves to accelerate change within a clearly defined framework was received positively. This form of charting a way forward exemplifies the exercise of agency at the highest level. How this call was interpreted

and translated into agency by various players within the schooling system could constitute the subject of an interesting investigation. However, the Education 2000 Plus Project did not investigate this aspect. There is some evidence from the Education 2000 Plus Project that school-level actors exercised agency within the priority areas.

## 5.3 Exercise of Agency in Changing the Culture of Teaching and Learning

During year 2000 there was evidence that some schools showed a culture of teaching in the sense that learners and educators attended school regularly and were punctual (Kgobe, 2001:159). In these schools educators were teaching, monitoring and evaluating learners' work as expected in an environment conducive to teaching and learning.

However, the same study showed that in other schools there were still major challenges – learners and educators were late for the start of the school day, work was not monitored regularly, and there were tensions in relationships between school management and staff and staff and community. I have argued that these challenges have been resolved through the exercise of agency by people acting individually and/or as collectives.

In one case study school in 2002 (Kgobe, 2002), stakeholders got together and decided on strategies to promote learner attendance through the active involvement of parents as envisaged by the South African Schools Act. This was achieved through:

- agreement with parents that whenever a learner was absent the parents would be involved in stating the reason why; and
- establishment by the school of a parent representative in each class in order to promote parental involvement.

Educator absenteeism and late-coming were reduced through a combination of building educator motivation and applying sanctions, some of the provisions of which are already regulated, such as filling in leave forms. The actual actions that the principal took in motivating educators are not spelled out in the Case Study Report.

## 5.4 Exercise of Agency in Changing Educational Leadership Management

In the above case it can be seen that agency in changing the culture of teaching and learning was exercised through leadership. In another school (Kanana), there were two examples in which the principal of the school exercised agency by addressing the late-coming of SMT members and by team building.

In an effort to build a culture of teaching and learning, as well as to build an atmosphere conducive to an orderly school, the principal had to act to change behaviour unbecoming to members of her SMT, that of coming late to school. In the principal's words:

> …I called them [members of the SMT] in and then I said to them … I'm not happy with you as a management team. Number one, you come late to school and I'm unable to tell teachers that they are late because you, management, comes late to school…."

From the above quotation, it can be seen that there was exercise of leadership when the principal pointed to the right thing to do. However, this was just one manifestation of lack of teamwork within the SMT.

In the same school, educators who were interviewed perceived the principal as a poor communicator and an autocratic person. In the words of one educator,

> …the involvement of the SMT is minimal…. Their role is to rubber stamp … in terms of decision making; their participation is minimal as everything will always come from above….. She [the principal] once said, in the Zulu family the head takes the decisions and the neck just does what the head wants.

However, when the principal was interviewed in connection with how managing with teams worked at this school, she said the following concerning one educator:

> … whenever we are in a meeting with … the staff, you know, he would just burst out … and try to challenge me and so on….

This sort of behaviour was obviously worrying to the principal as it could be seen to undermine her authority. Faced with this problem, she had the choice of either confronting the educator on the spot or using other strategies. This is what she did:

> … I would let him talk and after talking I would say, okay, I will address that later on. And after the meeting I would call him into my office and say to him, why did you do that to me? You know, I do not think we are working as a team if you do that … and this means we are no more a team, we are individuals. And working in management as individuals we will never achieve what we want to achieve. So I requested them to go back and do some soul searching … look into their inner selves.

Here is an example of how the principal exercised agency. Her actions, through speech, showed her belief that she was really in control and that things could change through team building and educating the staff member in what it means to be part of a collective.

## 5.5 Exercising Agency in Changing the Curriculum

The national curriculum is an area which comes as a structural mandate but which is interpreted and negotiated by actors, mainly at school level. The case of one school (Hakanang) illustrates Evans' determiners for successful exercise of agency – feeling a lack of control, and belief in positive outcome and control of change. In this particular school, the principal clearly did not support outcomes-based education (OBE), as is revealed in his description of OBE as a

> … first-world education system implemented in our third-world schools…. Learners are being pushed through at the bottom and this will explode in five or six years' time. We'll see the devastating effects of OBE later … Government … are asking too much from teachers…. (Kgobe 2001: 51)

The principal's lack of feeling of control in the face of possible change was potentially a constraint to the exercise of agency. By contrast, however, educators were positive about OBE. They recognised the difference between traditional and OBE teaching methods. The educators spoke of "… getting learners to discover for themselves ..." and "… learners having to explain how they arrived at answers …" (Kgobe 2001:51) Despite the principal's reservations about OBE and other constraints, which included large classes, educators did a number of things that were consistent with the new curriculum. They:

- Met fortnightly to plan lessons. One educator explained, "…we use Departmental information sheets and feed our own idea". These educators remained an hour after the learners had left to do preparatory work.
- Evaluated learners through a variety of means including projects, assignments, daily classroom observations where they checked how learners worked in groups and how they coped with tasks. Some educators also used peer and group assessment.
- Prepared monthly assessment sheets which they handed to management. They also gave feedback to learners and quarterly reports to parents.
- Prepared learner portfolios which were filed and accessible.

The initiatives of educators in this school show that change comes about through actions of individuals, as individuals and as a collective.

The three examples from the Education 2000 Plus schools cited above show how some change agents exercised agency to bring about desired change. It is unfortunate, however, that due to lack of specific data from the study no more examples could be cited which cover the exercise of agency and the constraints experienced in other aspects of post-apartheid policies of educational transformation.

## 6. Conclusion

Four major points have been made in this paper. The first is that the apparent schism between policy and practice can be understood

through an exploration of the interplay between structural enablers and structural constraints. These constitute the possibilities for and challenges to change agents. The nature of the interplay is at the heart of the structure-agency debate in social science. The second point is that, within the framework of this debate, it can be argued that the ability of the human agent to resolve the ambivalence between enabling and constraining factors of the process of change is the essence of the exercise of agency. The third point is that the examples of policy practice in the three areas of Culture of Teaching, Learning, Leadership and Management, and Curriculum show the possibilities of exercise of agency for change, confirming the view that change comes about not through instrumentalities and mandates, but through individual and collective human action. Related to this is the fourth point, that if change depends on human action, then more research needs to be undertaken, specifically that which examines how agency works. Finally, it is important to note that mandates and instrumentalities on the one hand and human action on the other should not be seen as a dichotomy. There is always interplay between the two.

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