Response to Plenary: Policy images and the Contextual reality of Teachers' Work in South Africa

Logan Govender, Senior Research Specialist, HSRC, Pretoria

Presentation prepared for Kenton at Mpekweni, 27-30 October 2005, in response to the following papers:

i. ***Why do Teachers do what they do? Exploring Teacher Decision Making Frames in the Context of Curriculum Change in South Africa. By Newton Stoffels***

ii. ***The new accountability and teachers' work in South Africa. By Linda Chisholm and Ursula Hoadley***

iii. ***What is teachers' work? By Wally Morrow.***

Introduction

As a respondent, I could not have asked for three more stimulating papers. I hope, therefore, that this brief commentary will do some **'justice'** to the **'quality'** of the papers and that my treatment of the three papers borders on, at least, a relative notion of **'equality'**. These brief introductory remarks, even if it serves no other purpose, should at least remind us of the conference theme: *(In) equality, democracy and quality.*

1. **The papers, all three of them, have remained faithful to the topic for this plenary: *Policy images and the Contextual reality of Teachers' Work in South Africa.***

In the main, they invoke the 'intensification' thesis of teachers' work to argue their own theses. [Although in WM's case he does not use the words 'intensification' or 'intensify', instead he provides a though-provoking perspective of why teaching may be considered an "impossible task".].

The papers are, of course, not just about the intensification of teachers' work or the "suicidal workload" [WM] of teachers in South Africa. They connect us to several related subjects that underpin the broad theme of this conference.

NS's paper, for example, draws our attention to the 'unequal' experiences of Martin and Thabo, both in their indivdual long-term historical experiences, and in their contemporary embrace of curricular decision-making and practices with schools in a 'Coloured' area and in a white former Model-C school, respectively.

C&H's paper recalls the history of democratic struggles around the issues of teacher appraisal and supervision, and emphasises at various points, the 'democratic' or

negotiated compact between teacher unions and the state post-1994, with its attendant tensions and contradictions.

While WM's paper talks in subtle and not so subtle ways to what constitutes 'quality' in the lives and work of teachers. His paper raises, for example, the idea of how what might realistically be expected of teachers, and by implication how the quality of teaching, can be compromised by policymakers' confusion of the formal with the material elements of teachers' work; and how education quality can be "muddled" by policymakers semantic tinkering in their misappropriation of the notion of "educator".

Nevertheless, the papers are primarily concerned with the intensification of teachers' work and the various policies that cause intensification: notably, curriculum and assessment policies, Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), teacher accountability policies (now encapsulated in the mouth-watering umbrella term of Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS)), and teacher education policies.

The papers, arguably, therefore, cover one important aspect of the vast subject that teachers' work comprises. They do not focus on related theses and arguments, for example, the 'proletarianisation' of teachers' work, which highlights skill as a social construction and the tension between human agency and structural constraints (e.g. economic) on teachers' autonomy and creativity (cf. Ozga & Lawn, 1988); or the importance of teachers' class location; nor the intensely political nature of teachers' work (although this is often implied, especially in C&H's paper). As Ginsburg (1995:4)) posits: "all actions (and inaction) by educators reflect and have implications for politics (viz., power, interests, and the distribution of resources)".

Thus, a big piece of the puzzle that seems to be missing is a broader contextualisation of teachers' work, that is, the power relations between teacher unions and the state; their intrinsically corporatist relationship wherein agreements (whether achieved in the boardrooms of the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC), the South African Council for Educators (SACE) or elsewhere) are the result of negotiations and trade-offs, which often sees the compromising of members (teachers') interests. In this regard, although the papers make fleeting references to the double-edged ideological contestation of unionism and professionalism underpinning teacher-state relations, there is an overall silence on how the invoking of one or the other in the context of school micro-politics, can mediate the nature of teachers' work. Unpacking current debates relating to unionism and professionalism could thus offer an additional lens to deepen our understanding of teachers' work. At its simplest level, perhaps, we might remind ourselves of the tension between the conceptions of teacher as 'worker' and teacher as 'professional'. [In this regard, C&H's paper draws our attention to the need to understand "teachers' core professional identities" (page 20)]

[I now turn to the individual papers]

2. Paper 1: Newton Stoffels: Why do Teachers do what they do? Exploring Teacher Decision Making Frames in the Context of Curriculum Change in South Africa.

2.1 The paper illustrates quite strongly the profound disjuncture between policy intention and educational practice, in this case C2005 and its underlying OBE philosophy in the South African context. It does so by providing two case studies of NS teachers, one of a male teacher in a historically "Coloured" school, Martin, and another of an African male teacher, Thabo, in a former white Model C school. The paper makes the core argument, [and it does so convincingly], that [and I quote]:

> The study veers away from popular scholarship that simplistically explains policy failure in terms of teacher resistance to imposed reform or resource problems. Instead, it takes an in-depth look at the decision-making frames of two science teachers...and demonstrates how and why the decision-making and practice of both are still dominated by the traditional pedagogy.

This emerges from the teachers' reliance on the learner support material (LSM), in particular the SciGuide texts, [which, incidentally, sells at a useful R650, 00], reverting to tried-and-tested routines and generally drawing on past experience as opposed to grappling with the more progressive teaching strategies implied by C2005. This, in spite of, in Martin's case, demonstrating a strong devotion to C2005 and its outcomes-based principles.

2.2 The paper then makes two related claims:

Firstly, that the study "illustrates the multiple and personal nature of the decision-making frames that impact on [teachers] practices", and once again does so convincingly. The multiple natures of teachers' decision-making frames are quite apparent: illustrated through the impact of the new 'outcomes-based' learning support material, the impact of departmental (GDE) directives, the impact of classroom routines etc. [So, a variety of factors shape teachers' curricular decision making.]

Similarly, the personal nature of the teachers' decision-making frames is made visible through the discussion on teachers' subject matter competence; through the impact of their past experience [as in relating their teaching patterns, such as their extensive use of the chalkboard, to their own experience as high school students], and in Thabo's case, as a black teacher at a well-resourced, historically privileged school, struggling to leave behind "his traditional teacher-centred apprenticeship and routines" to grapple with "the deeper, epistemological changes inherent in C2005/OBE" (page 23).

The second related claim that the paper makes is:

> that the inability of teachers to exercise their considerable decision-making authority is a function of the overwhelming and multiple threat of intensification of [teachers'] work.

In my view, this claim, which is an important one to be making, is not as convincing as those already mentioned. The author begins the claim by suggesting that the various factors discussed, such as the reliance on LSM, impact of departmental (GDE) directives, the impact of past experience, the impact of classroom routines etc. "resonates well with the 'intensification' literature, citing Hargreaves (1994) and others. And later (Page 27), that the intensification of the two teachers' daily work "came through very strongly throughout the research period. The most dominant rationale of why they do what they do in their classrooms, particularly in terms of their mechanical and perfunctory use of the LSM, was that they were overworked, overloaded and that they just did not have the time to be more responsive to the C2005 intentions". This strikes me as being somewhat contrived, given that what emerges most powerfully from the study, is the teachers' continued reliance on traditional pedagogy, the tried-and-tested methods of their teaching. So if they had been doing what they were doing all long, at what point did their work intensify? Or was intensification in these particular cases "timeless"? This is not all that apparent.

A second observation that I'd like to make is that it would seem to me that the paper's main argument that the decision-making and practice of both teachers still being dominated by the traditional pedagogy can be explained as much by the "intensification thesis", as it might by another. For example, if the author wanted to explain the teachers' "passivity in decision-making" [a powerful construct introduced in the paper], he could just as well have explained it as a function of the political nature of teachers' work or as a function of the global-cum-local manifestation of capitalist relations.

2.3 Two further points:

2.3.1 It was refreshing to note the genuine effort to locate the study beyond the confines of research emanating from the North and the West. There are various references in the paper to studies relating to the post-colonial or Third World or Southern African contexts; and most of us are aware how challenging a task this could be given the difficulty in accessing research from the developing world.

The C&H paper, on the other hand, draws mainly on the Anglophone literature. I believe the paper compensates well, though, because of its disclaimer on the problems associated "with applying some of these frameworks unproblematised onto the South African context" (p.19), and, of-course, the paper's detailed invoking of the peculiarities of the nature of teachers' responses to new accountability and assessment regimes in South Africa, which, lest we forget, is also part of the developing world. Thus, the paper's emphasis on the relevance of understanding the "global script" and the importance of combining "theoretical frameworks developed in an Anglo-American context and the theoretical insights provided by local scholars concerned with local realities" (p.21), is a point well taken.

And, at the risk of contradicting myself, WM's paper demonstrates how a paper rooted in the experience of one's home country, with deft references to some of the Anglo-phone

literature, can contribute to global debates on the subject of teachers' work and their education.

2.3.2 [Returning to NS's paper] we are reminded of the essentially historical nature of teachers' work [in the section on *the impact of past experience* (pages18-19)], which refers briefly to the influence of 'Fundamental Pedagogics' on teachers' own pedagogical identities and drawing on an apt metaphorical quotation from Cohen (1990). However, this merely serves as a reminder and I think if more attention was paid to the historical dimension, especially an historical overview of the intensification of teachers' work in South Africa, the paper's sale of the intensification thesis might have been more strongly grounded.

The C&H paper, on the other hand, provides a more detailed historical grounding (about eight pages) in respect of the IQMS and the RNCS; while the WM paper is infused with a personal history that reminded me of my own beginnings as a teacher, posted to various corners of KZN and memories of the tri-cameral education bureaucracy's octopus-like harassment of my work as a teacher.

Thus, to varying degrees, the papers acknowledge the importance of history. It seems, though, that the writing of a comprehensive history, if you like, of teachers' work in South Africa, encompassing its varied dimensions, and over a longer-term historical span, is yet to be undertaken.

3. Papers 2 and 3: The new accountability and teachers' work in South Africa by Linda Chisholm and Ursula Hoadley; *and* What is teachers' work? By Wally Morrow.

3.1 In the C&H paper, as already alluded to, there is a powerful sense of the increased teacher workload occurring at a rapid pace of change. In capturing this for the IQMS, the authors refer to, among others, the judgmental inspection regimes, panel inspections, and more recently, Personal Growth and School Improvement Plans; for the RCNS, new assessment requirements, Learning Programmes and portfolios for both learners and teachers. The portrayal of the intensification of teachers' work is almost crescendo-like in its effect.

Similarly, WM speaks of the "nightmare of "continuous assessment" – known as "CASS by the *cognoscenti*", the imposition that teachers' work must be specified both in terms of the requirements of an employee of the Department and in terms of a formal definition of teaching; and that educators be regarded simultaneously both as teachers and as care-givers.

A major casualty of policy overload, both papers argue, is that educators have less time to devote to their core work, teaching. How does all of this square up to the counter-argument, which WM acknowledges, that there are "thousands of deficient schoolteachers, teachers who do not have the competences, or perhaps the willingness, to implement our policies capably" (page 3); and to the argument that what we need are

more committed and dedicated teachers, not teachers who stand ready to leave their classrooms at the drop of a hat. An important part of WM's answer is that we cannot "ignore the reality of the conditions in which the majority of teachers in South Africa work", a reality that "inflates the conception of their workload" (page 7). This, he argues, is what the "seven roles"-conception of the educator in South Africa has failed to grasp; and that we need to separate the formal and material elements of teaching if we are to liberate teachers from the shackles of an impossible workload.

In concluding, let me add that perhaps the time is ripe for a critical review of teachers' work, involving government, teacher unions, statutory bodies and the research community. This could focus on, for example, the accountability mechanisms, both internal and external that C&H's paper speaks to. Perhaps we could start with a review of the *severe assessment regimen* that educators – and, here I use the term to refer to classroom teachers – have been subjected to by the spate of curricula changes we've witnessed in recent years. Simultaneously, isn't it time that we opened or reopened the debate on an appropriate philosophy of education (or values?) in SA, and the related discussion on a positive work ethic among educators – and, this time, I include school clerks, school management, government officials and administrators etc. Perhaps, then, will more teachers be motivated to acquire the "capacities to aspire" and thus be empowered to take their rightful place in making quality education for all in South Africa more attainable.

Thank you.