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Understanding policy implementation:

An exploration of research areas
in the education sector

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the results of the first phase of a study of policy and its implementation in the education sector. It forms part of a major research project aimed at examining the gap between policy and implementation in South Africa, and identifying ways in which this can be closed. Case studies are being conducted in four sectors – education, justice, water, and health – and of three key policy instruments: the RDP, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, and the National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS). Finally, the findings of these studies will be synthesised and some general conclusions formulated.

The case studies are proceeding in two phases. During the first, researchers have undertaken preliminary literature reviews aimed at identifying the main issues in each sector or policy area and formulating research hypotheses. These will be examined and tested during the second phase, which will be marked by substantive, empirical research.

The new education challenge

The political negotiations of the early 1990s inevitably led to far-reaching changes in South Africa's social policies and programmes. After the demise of apartheid, policies were formulated that would help the new government establish a new socio-political order that would cater for all South Africans. Thus transformation in the education sector has been driven by the need to create a system that affords equal access and opportunities to all.

The transition presented a unique opportunity to all stakeholders in education to help reconstruct the system. The new policy attempts to provide equal education to all by creating a system that facilitates redress, promotes equality among schools, and promotes a democratic culture that enables stakeholders to participate in decision-making at the local level. Given the disparities inherited from apartheid, achieving this required that planners rapidly expand the capacity of the system, revitalise existing infrastructure, and level the educational playing field by eliminating the geographic and fiscal inequalities inherited from apartheid. The process started with restructuring 19 racially based departments into a single national department and nine non-racial provincial departments. Large inequalities were found among provinces.

But providing equal access to education, redistributing resources, and improving the quality of education have proven to be very difficult. As the experiences of other countries show, providing universal access to education may have unintended consequences. Financially the government concerned may not have the resources needed to redress the imbalances of the past. In such a situation the quality of the education provided is often compromised – universal access in a context of limited resources usually implies that text books and qualified teachers are in short supply. Also, establishing a democratic culture aimed at ensuring that all stakeholders play a part in governing their schools may also entrench disparities among regions. Therefore, South Africa's education departments face the twin challenges of providing education for all without compromising on quality,

and giving a greater voice to communities in running their schools without entrenching apartheid disparities.

Since 1994 the national department of education has made policy prolifically, sending at least eight bills to parliament (excluding private acts relating to individual universities), and publishing four white papers as well as many other documents.¹ This paper will focus on two key policy documents: the white paper on education and training, and the white paper on decentralisation and funding.

Transforming the system has been the main challenge facing the new ministry. This has required achieving the correct balance between two equally pressing needs: initiating change, while maintaining delivery. Three processes are critical to achieving equity and efficacy: expanding education at all levels, providing technical and professional instruction, and drafting new curricula. In examining what has been achieved in these three areas, we will focus mainly on the schools system. In an effort to achieve these objectives, the government decided to decentralise education. However, it must be borne in mind that different processes are interlinked, and are also linked to social change. The white paper on education and training refers to this as continuity in change.

The objective of this paper is to determine whether the government's education policy has been put in practice in line with its legislative intent, and, where outcomes differ from expectations, to establish why this has occurred.

RESTRUCTURING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Education policy and its context

In a democratic society, policy-making is expected to be a democratic process at all levels of government. As such, policy-making is characterised by diversity, conflict, and reconciliation.

Therefore, when considering policies and their implementation, it is important to consider their political context. Policy documents must be analysed in the light of the contradictory views of various groups in South African society, and efforts to negotiate consent on shifts in education policy in a broader social theatre. Therefore, to be properly understood, changes in education in post-apartheid South Africa must be viewed in the context of the broader transition to democracy.

As is to be expected in such a diverse society, various ideological differences are apparent in approaches to national issues, including education. However, far from undermining the existence of different views on education, the transition in which the ANC took

¹ Other documents are: the Technikons Amendment Act, 27 of 1995, the South Africa Qualifications Authority Act, 27 of 1996, the South Africa School Act, 84 of 1996, the Education Laws Amendment Act, 100 of 1997, the Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997, the Employment of Education Act, 76 of 1998, and Further Education and Training Act, 98 of 1998. The four white papers are the Education white paper 1: education and training, 1995; Education white paper 2: the organisation, governance and funding of schools, February 1996; Education white paper 3: a programme for the transformation of higher education, July 1997; and Education white paper 4: a programme for the transformation of further education and training, August 1998, <http://www.polity.org.za>.

² Department of education, Annual report, June 1994–December 1995 (Pretoria, 1996), p 10.

office as part of a government of national unity (GNU) with the National Party (NP) and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) somehow attenuated these differences. Although historically these parties represented very different approaches to economic and social policies, significant areas of convergence emerged during the transition.

The NP and ANC agreed that South Africa should have a mixed economy and that access to education, health and housing needed to be dramatically expanded among the black majority. What followed is that the state, via the tranquillising language of the rainbow nation, tried to portray itself as a neutral force. In the process, the mediating role of the government founded on its consensus-seeking mandate gave considerable legitimacy to its new education policies. Because of this, as Enver Motala suggests, there has been little conflict over education policies and their implementation.³ Supporting this, Salim Vally and Carol-Anne Spreen note that, after the 1994 elections, various social forces expected that the new political dispensation would automatically be translated into a better education system.⁴

In reality, even under the GNU, education continued to teem with conflicting interests – and it is the existence of strong, conflicting interests that has contributed to frustrations over the implementation of policy. The debate has mostly been about transforming the education system from one catering for whites to one serving the majority. In this sense, the first goal of the development of education policy has been to forge changes in beliefs and values. In this case, the transformation had to be systematic, deep-seated, and integrated. Given South Africa's past, the transition to inclusive democracy led to a strong demand for mass education from the previously disadvantaged. This is not surprising, as education is always strongly expanded after independence, characterised by an increase in participation of some groups who had little or no access to formal education before. In this society this has been a contentious issue, since political change has brought the dominance of new beliefs and values while those who hold the old ones – white parents, for example – still wield considerable power that continue to frustrate implementation.

Two further issues require attention: the first is the way in which the discourse on education fits into the wider discourse on policy, and the second is the disjuncture between the discourse on education policy and the political context – from cabinet to classroom – in which policy is made. For the ANC, and blacks in general, comprehensive schooling signifies nonracial and egalitarian social reform; for whites, the transformation of education should not signify the transfer of resources from former white schools to former black schools, or the preference of former black schools over model C schools. However, the increasing number of black families placing their children in model C schools suggests that all blacks do not share the same interests and values; if this is the case, then one reason advanced for the gap between policy and its implementation may be too simplistic.

³ E Motala, The weaknesses of the analytical framework for education policy in South Africa (unpublished paper, 1998).

⁴ Salim Vally & Carol-Anne Preen, Education policy and implementation developments (*Quarterly Review of Education and Training in South Africa*, 5[3], Wits Education Unit, 15 May 1998).

Michael Ashley, for example, argues that, in the course of the transition, white Afrikaners have not expressed a keen awareness of black feelings and have tended instead to define reform as a technical issue, involving adjustments to the existing system instead of a thorough transformation.⁵ This is the old issue of white fears and black aspirations, and this is the context in which policy is being formulated and implemented.

Key factors obstructing or aiding implementation

Policy implementation is often problematic; adopting a policy does not necessarily mean it will be implemented, or that this will produce the intended results. This is certainly the case in the education sector. But just how problematic implementation has been, and with what consequences, remain unclear.

The white paper on training and education concentrates on improving classroom practice. Many factors influence policy implementation in this area. This study will deal with five: the policy message, teachers, political factors, finance constraints, and the bureaucracy. An attempt will be made to assess how these factors have impacted on the transformation of the schools system.

The policy message

This refers to the substance of a policy, the means specified for putting it into effect, and the way in which substance and means are communicated. In essence, the substance of a policy is about realism. The key question is: considering the changes proposed, could the policy be implemented under any foreseeable circumstances?

The formulation and implementation of policies can and should be distinguished analytically. However, results of the formulation stage put constraints on implementation and can decisively affect the probability of success mostly if those responsible for policy formulation are largely unconcerned with or uninformed about issues bearing on implementation.

Criticising Nigeria's attempt in the late 1970s to implement universal primary education, Urwick notes that it is hard to take seriously the author's professed emphasis on the problems of implementation with reference to a scheme whose basic problem was the unrealistic definition of goals.⁶ A lack of realism at the formulation stage is one cause of bad implementation. This also suggests that, while certain policies may be implementable, they may not be conducive to the larger objectives being sought. This can be caused by a lack of capacity to implement a specific policy, or the policy might simply conflict with other policy goals. Studies of these educational policy mishaps, as they have been termed, argue that, in view of the objectives sought, the changes introduced by such policies have been inappropriate.

Thus Jonathan Jansen, for example, argues that matric failures are taken to be a direct result of bad policy implementation – but this does not mean that policy formulation was

⁵ Michael Ashley, Ideology and change in South African education (*Orientation*, 55/57, 1989), p 78– 87.

⁶ Ashley, Ideology and change in South African education .

successful. He says one reason for the failure to implement policies is that, since 1994, education policy has largely been driven by political considerations, to the exclusion of practical considerations.⁷ Similarly, Job Mokgoro has noted that, 'because of the need to speed up transformation, a plethora of white papers have been produced, and yet best-practice principles require prioritisation, focus, and the identification of small wins'.

Those who maintain that implementation failures can be traced back to unrealistic policies hold three general and, in some respects, incompatible positions. Those in the first group argue that the problems defined and ostensibly addressed by particular policies are intractable, or at least cannot be resolved in the absence of massive and unanticipated social and attitudinal changes. Studies in this category tend to focus on policies directed at changing the pace of educational expansion, promoting greater equity in access to or progression through schooling, or transforming curricula. Examples include studies which insist that educational reforms cannot succeed unless preceded or accompanied by what amounts to social revolution. One example is Tanzania's education for self-reliance campaign. The core argument here is that the success of that campaign was predicated on the creation of a socialist society, which did not materialise. In the absence of such a society, it is argued, reforms designed to achieve equality, socialist values, and attitudes are bound to fail.

However, a revolutionary approach was not possible in South Africa. Given the reconciliatory approach of the GNU, the ruling party committed itself to consulting stakeholders before any decisions were made. In South Africa, success in reforming society is predicated on the creation of equitable systems. Because this has not yet happened, it may be argued that most policies enacted to change social values have not had the desired results.

History suggests that it may be possible to implement bad or incorrect policies. In most cases the planning document, statute or decree does not address such mundane but critical issues as scheduling, monitoring, and evaluation. In many cases these lapses on the part of planners and policy-makers - these deficiencies in the policy message are at the root of the implementation problems that follow. This is the result of the over-investment of policy-makers in the political symbolism of policy rather than its practical implementation. Analysts argue that governments often disregard key rules of policy-making. The consequence has been interventions without a sound analysis of their consequences.⁸ For example, the cleansing within three months of more than 100 apartheid syllabuses shortly after Sibusiso Bengu's appointment as minister of education in late 1994 only brought about some cosmetic changes.⁹ Also, very little was done to ensure that these minor changes were realised in the classroom.¹⁰

Those in the second group criticise policies for their unrealistic assumptions or projections in respect of monetary resources. In the case of Africa, several studies argue that

⁷ Jonathan Jansen, *Why education policies fail* (*Indicator South Africa*, 15(1), Autumn 1998), pp 56 -8.

⁸ Ann Bernstein, *Policy-making in a new democracy: South Africa's challenges for the 21st century* (Johannesburg: Centre for Development and Enterprise, August 1999).

⁹ Jansen, *Why education policies fail*, pp 56-8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

policies formulated on the eve of the independence were too ambitious, given the funds likely to be available. Others criticise policies for failing to take into account recurrent costs or the implications of population growth, grade repetition, and changing rates of attrition and progression. This also resonates with events in South Africa. For example, while providing textbooks was said to be a priority, the budget did not allow the government to provide textbooks to all schools; in fact, it failed to realistically estimate the number of new learners entering the system. Despite an additional allocation in 1998 of R200 million by the department of finance, public schools had their textbook budgets slashed by more than 70 per cent.

Those in the third group emphasise what can be described as unrecognised links: the dependence of particular initiatives on other policies that have not been introduced or perhaps even contemplated. There are cases where policies involving educational expansion have been adopted without adequately considering or providing for the physical facilities, textbooks, and other material resources that will be needed. A lack of security has also hampered the implementation of some policies. For example, there are cases where textbooks are provided to schools only to be stolen the next day. And why put windows in schools if they will be broken or stolen the next day?

Critics also argue that some policies, however efficient when viewed narrowly, have undesirable broader consequences that should have been taken into account when they were formulated. Examples of this are policy-makers who over-emphasise the quantitative expansion of education as opposed to qualitative improvements, physical facilities as opposed to teaching, curricular reforms as opposed to textbook provision, secondary and higher education as opposed to basic education, and schooling as opposed to job training or adult education. Although education policies have focused on all these factors, they seem to lack a sense of emphasis and priorities.

Claiming that programmes are implemented is not the same as claiming that they are effective. Analysts generally observe that while many programmes are being implemented, they are not having the desired effects on the quality of education. There is little evidence of an improvement in the standard of schooling available to the poor. When 1999 matric results in various provinces are compared, the evidence suggests that provinces with well-resourced and qualified teachers – Western Cape (78,3 per cent), Northern Cape (64,3 per cent), and to some extent Gauteng (57 per cent), have an advantage over other provinces. Mpumalanga and Northern Provinces, on the other hand, had matric pass rates of 48,3 per cent and 37,5 per cent respectively, and yet their departments are budgeting to spend even less on educators. Although matric results are not necessarily a definitive indicator of the state of education, they do provide a valuable pointer. However, there are government initiatives that demonstrate a concern with improving the quality of education. These include the relaunch of the culture of learning programme, and the establishment of the chief directorate of quality assurance in the national department.

But when implementation or school performance is sound, means are needed to evaluate both the implementation and efficacy of policies. In South Africa, this has given rise to a debate on the use of performance indicators, and assessments of the degree to

which a school or schooling system is performing in respect of various notions and standards of schooling quality, or of policy intentions. Policy researchers and analysts have challenged the use of the matric examination as the only indicator of school performance, student achievement and quality, and have urged the use of much wider indicators.

Teachers

History has taught that matters pertinent to effective practice must not be ignored, and in this respect the quality and morale of teachers loom large. It is generally accepted that the quality of teachers is the largest single determinant of the quality of education.¹¹ Education researchers continue to argue that the effects of education policies and programmes depend primarily on what teachers make of them. The general point is that educational reforms have often been compromised because there are no prospects that the teachers needed to carry them out are in fact available. Therefore, for any policy to be successfully implemented, teachers must first understand it.

Teachers' involvement in policy formulation

An attempt will be made here to relate administrative interventions to teacher responses over time. This task inevitably poses problems of interpretation, explanation, and legitimisation. Research shows not only that many local educators do not want to implement new programmes (the will is not there), but also that they do not know how to implement them (the capacity is absent). This refers to the fact that most educators are not involved in conceptualising and formulating policy, and are not properly trained before a particular policy is introduced.

Unless there is a mutual adaptation process in which local educators tailor a given programme to their local needs and circumstances, difficulties in implementation will persist.¹² In short, research on local change processes shows that if higher levels of government undertake policy initiatives, it is unlikely that local educators will implement them in line with the spirit of those policies, the government's expectations, and the relevant rules and regulations.

In a private discussion before his appointment, the new minister of education, Kader Asmal, noted that education policy-makers had little, if any, classroom experience.¹³ Understandably, many of the more senior officials recruited after apartheid ended were political appointees, not education experts. Their collective mindset has resulted in what can be called policy by declaration; a naive belief that making or proclaiming policy automatically constitutes change. These policy-makers tended to be preoccupied with getting pet concerns on to the public policy agenda, and shaping the appropriate legislation. What happens after policies are adopted receives little attention, either because this is

¹¹ World Bank, *Education in sub-Saharan Africa: policy for adjustment, revitalization, and expansion* (Washington, DC, June 1988).

¹² Milbrey W McLaughlin, *Implementation as manual adaptation: change in classroom organisation* (*Teachers College Press*, 77[3], New York, February 1976), pp 339—51.

¹³ Centre for Policy Studies, *CPS Monitor* (Johannesburg, second quarter, 1999), p 7.

regarded as beyond their control or, in a more cynical view, they do not care or are incompetent. Asmal's appointment as minister suggests at least a willingness on the part of government to tackle education in a fresh way. Will the change of minister influence implementation? This needs to be analysed. Many analysts reduce implementation to leadership. This may be extreme, but leadership is a factor that must be considered – particularly in education, where a switch from weak to strong leadership is said to have taken place.

But some analysts believe teachers are always left out when policy is made, and, because they were excluded from the strategic planning process, many feel undervalued. Policy-makers generally assume that they can steer school practice and change school outcomes with instruments such as competency tests, teachers' evaluation systems, teacher certificate codes, mandated curricula, and graduation requirements. Although this approach is not unique to South Africa, it alienates teachers. This suggests that teachers should be involved in all policy formulation.

Quality of teachers

Besides participating in policy formulation, teachers must also have the intellectual tools and discipline needed to implement policy. The presence of textbooks in the classroom is second only to the quality of teachers in influencing the quality of learning. Education researchers in the United States have reported that, given untrained teachers, federal and state policies have affected practice weakly and inconsistently.

It is well known that many African teachers in South Africa are demoralised, disorganised, and poorly trained. Two main steps have been proposed to improve this: improving salaries, and improving working conditions. This has to be linked to the whole question of service conditions for teachers, which needs constant attention to ensure that the best possible people enter and are retained by the profession.

The administration should not be the only recipient of blame for the quality of teaching. There is also the incompetence of teachers, caused by neglect and poor qualifications – factors that have dominated discussions of education in recent years. In a report released in May 1999 on behalf of the national department, the Teacher Development Centre found that teachers at some schools only taught for 21 days a year out of a required 191.¹⁴

The school environment

An important lesson of the 1980s is that removing constraints does not in itself ensure more effective practice; for example, teachers with smaller classes or new materials – elements that policy-makers have focused on in recent years – do not necessarily do a better job.¹⁵ Also, despite common curriculae, grade structures, and student placement policies, schools in various areas differ fundamentally from one another. A high-school English course in a wealthy Sandton classroom differs substantially from the same course

¹⁴ Centre for Policy Studies, *CPS Monitor*, p 8.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

offered under the same title in the inner city, or in the township of KwaMashu in KwaZulu Natal.

Other elements are also needed to enable teachers to perform their duties. These include productive collegiate relations, organisational structures that promote open communication and feedback, leadership that manages opportunities for professional growth, and norms of individual development. These are lacking in many South African schools.

Conditions under which teachers operate impact negatively on implementation. For example, in 1999 it was reported that only three classrooms in a school at Schmidtsdrift in the Northern Cape had electricity, and most roofs had blown off or been vandalised: when it rained, teachers were forced to send pupils home. The school, with 1 300 pupils and 39 teachers, had only three functioning toilets. At times there was no running water for two to three days, thus exposing pupils and teachers to serious health hazards.¹⁶ The key question here is whether education policy has helped to reduce teachers' motivation and if it has, a failure to take the need for enthusiastic teaching into account could be a central reason for the implementation gap.

In fact, many teachers in disadvantaged schools regard many of the government's policies and programmes as simply part of a broader environment that presses in on their classrooms. Thus, to ask them about the role or consequences of a policy, programme or practice risks misrepresentation because it gives these elements a significance they do not have daily classroom life. Teacher interest or behaviour may have nothing at all to do with policy – but it may have something to do with professional networks, school departments or other school-level associations, and with colleagues, however organised.

Are policy-makers mistaken in assuming that their efforts can change teaching and learning? Or do researchers fail to notice ways in which policy does affect instruction? The answers to these questions are not known. Also, little is known about how teachers perceive and interpret policies; what is known about policies stops at the classroom door, for policy research has seldom investigated their effect on actual teaching and learning. But research has now been undertaken to investigate what is happening in the classroom. The assumption that the structure most relevant to teachers is a policy structure that is eventually translated into classroom practice contributes to bad implementation. If we understand this, then we should be able to understand that the policy system is not always relevant to teachers on a day-to-day basis.

Finances

Entrenching old disparities?

The government's new school funding policy has been welcomed by many because it provides, for the first time, a funding system that attempts to address imbalances among historically advantaged and disadvantaged schools. Via provincial allocations, the national department tries to link funding to the needs of schools and poverty levels in given communities. Fees are also based on a sliding scale which enables wealthier households

¹⁶ Centre for Policy Studies, *CPS Monitor*, p 8.

to contribute more than poorer ones (see box 1 below). Furthermore, the prescribed norms and standards also require that provinces reduce their personnel costs to increase contributions to levelling the playing field.¹⁷ In doing this, the department is tackling issues of redress and the optimal allocation of resources.

Yet, despite these attempts to increase equity, some commentators argue that the current structure continues to encourage inequality between well-resourced and poor schools.¹⁸ They argue that, although decentralisation gives communities more say in education policy, it also compels them to assume responsibility for financial costs. Thus, while some argue that bigger contributions by wealthier households are subsidising poorer ones, others contend that, given existing disparities, they will tend to perpetuate inequality.¹⁹ Provinces that have inherited large poor populations will inevitably have to provide more financial support to its schools. When compared with better resourced provinces, which have a larger number of well-resourced schools able to raise their own funds, poorer provinces have a larger financial burden to bear. And while these provinces are able to even out intra-provincial inequalities – via the financial mechanisms mentioned earlier – interprovincial inequalities will remain. Thus poorer provinces with limited resources will have to support a larger proportion of schools than wealthier ones.

Another shortcoming of the funding norms and standards is that they require huge provincial capacity to implement. Firstly, they require extensive information on each school and its social context. This requires maintaining an elaborate database as well as the expertise to analyse the relevant information and link it to funding allocations. It is questionable whether all the provinces have the capacity to do so. Similarly, provinces are obliged to allocate functions to governing bodies according to their capacity. Each province will therefore need to establish what the capacity is of each school governing body, and use that as a measure for delegating functions. Again, this requires extensive resources. Once again the efficacy of the system hinges on provincial capacity, with disparities among the provinces tending to exacerbate inequalities.

National norms and standards for school funding²⁰

The minister issues funding norms and standards for the public funding of public schools;²¹ the public funding of independent schools;²² and the exemption of parents who are unable to pay. The funds are disbursed according to general principles of equity, redress, efficiency, capacity-building, etc.

¹⁷ S Motala, *Reviewing education policy and practice: constraints and responses* (*Quarterly Review of Education and Training in South Africa*, 5[5], 1998).

¹⁸ S Vally, *Inequality in education? Revisiting the provisioning, funding and governance of schooling* (*Quarterly Review of Education and Training in South Africa*, 5[4], 1998).

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p 3.

²⁰ The information used here is drawn from a presentation by F Khan entitled *National norms and standards for school funding* (Education Foundation, 1998).

²¹ Public schools include former state and state-aided schools which are run in partnership with the provincial education department and the local community (see Education white paper 2).

²² Independent schools are privately owned schools.

Once each province obtains funds for education, it divides up all public schools into quintiles, from the poorest to the least poor.

School quintiles, from poorest to least poor	Expenditure as a percentage of budget allocation	Expenditure per learner indexed to an average of 100
20%	35%	175
20%	25%	125
20%	20%	100
20%	15%	75
20%	5%	25

Source: Funding norms and standards (Government Gazette no 19347), cf *Quarterly Review of Training in South Africa*, 5 (5).

It then allocates a larger proportion of funds to more needy schools, and relatively smaller proportions to less needy ones. Fifty per cent of the allocations are used for capital projects aimed at improving the physical condition of schools and their facilities; these are based on the school register of needs and other planning data.

Another 50 per cent of the provincial allocation is used to fill the poverty gap, based on the relative poverty of the community around the school, as calculated from census and household data in terms of criteria such as access to electricity, the level of education of parents, etc.

The province is directly responsible for capital projects, such as building work, and funds them directly.

Schools are given funds for recurrent costs depending on need. These can be transferred to school funds – run by governing bodies – once the Head of Department has delegated these functions to a school. They include:

- immovable capital improvement allocations, such as building maintenance;
- the allocation of easily separable recurrent costs, such as utilities and services; and
- other recurrent costs and small capital equipment costs such as school books, stationery, and equipment.

The fee structure is based on a sliding scale so that poorer families contribute less than families that are relatively better off. Parents' contributions are calculated on the basis of joint household incomes. If gross household annual income is less than 10 times the annual fees, the parent(s) qualify for full exemption. Those households that earn more than 10 times and less than 30 times the annual fees qualify for partial exemption, while households that earn more than 30 times the annual fees do not qualify for any exemption. It is up to school governing bodies to encourage families that can afford it to increase their contributions. Governing bodies can also encourage in-kind contributions from parents.

Another important issue is the decentralisation of decision-making powers to governing bodies. Attempts to train governing bodies have been described as 'patchy and uneven'.²³ By the end of 1998 only Gauteng had the resources to start training governing

²³ Vally, *Inequality in education?*

bodies. Training across provinces has therefore been irregular, with some provinces being further ahead than others. Furthermore, the relevance of training programmes, particularly to disadvantaged communities, has been questioned.²⁴

Once again, the issue of inequality comes to the fore. Schools with governing bodies with managerial expertise will undoubtedly do better than those without. Thus schools in poor areas are often locked in a vicious cycle; compared with former model C schools they are less likely to have skilled parents who can augment teacher capacity in running the school, and they also have less money. Given this, there is a need for the government to provide training. However, if governing bodies are not properly capacitated, decentralisation may entrench existing disparities among schools and provinces.

Disparities in the capacity of governing bodies raise yet another question. The policy of decentralisation rests on the assumption that members of the community are interested in school governance, and willing to assuming the responsibilities that come with this. The extent to which this is true in all localities is questionable. Research by CPS shows that the level of interest varies considerably among localities; in some areas there are few active parents serve on governing bodies, with most preferring to leave school matters to teachers. It was also found that in rural areas the functioning of governing bodies was hampered by the long distances teachers have to travel without adequate transport. In addition, some parents found it difficult to get time off to attend meetings. Urban areas experienced other difficulties; for example, women members of a governing body in Soweto often did not attend meetings because of high levels of crime. All these logistical issues hamper the activities of governing bodies, and adversely affect their ability to perform their functions.

GEAR and its implications

The conflict between growing pressure on the government to improve social services on the one hand and growing pressure via the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy to maintain fiscal discipline on the other is a serious problem for implementation. Although the education budget continues to grow, it is still not big enough. Also, provinces are struggling to contain expenditure; they barely have enough money for recurrent costs, and very little for new initiatives. The number of teachers continues to be reduced under rationalisation drives. This raises questions surrounding the supposed transformation of education: how much is in fact changing, and how much remains the same?

GEAR has been described as a self-imposed structural adjustment programme. Judging by the impact of structural adjustment on education in many other countries, implementing such a programme in South Africa will not be easy. A study of the impact of structural adjustment on education in Nigeria has showed that enrolments in primary educa-

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See C Kihato, *Building in power* (Johannesburg: Centre for Policy Studies, 1998).

²⁶ This is contrary to the effects of economic adjustment on education in many sub-Saharan countries, which has mostly resulted in cuts in public education budgets.

tion declined from 14,7 million in 1983 to 12,5 million in 1986; also, the budget allocations for educational materials, buildings and furniture almost disappeared. The decision of South African policy-makers that entrants to grade 1 must be at least seven years old might just have to do with the fiscal constraint that GEAR imposes on government spending to deal with high level of enrolment at that stage.

Funding inequalities are contributing to a failure to upgrade the standard of learning at previously disadvantaged schools. The Financial and Fiscal Commission has reported that the poor receive about 40 per cent of education resources, but make up 53 per cent of the population; the rich receive 23 per cent, but make up 12 per cent. Also many members of poor communities cannot afford school fees of R100 a year; these do not include out-of-pocket expenses such as uniforms, transport, food, and school trips. This should not have been happening since the government promised free education for all? The ANC policy on fees remains contradictory. It has abandoned free education for all, but the law bars schools from denying admission to pupils whose parents cannot pay, and allows them to exempt parents whose earnings fall below a certain threshold. However, a preponderance of parents who don't pay fees adversely affects the functioning of those schools.

A study in Zambia has shown that public education finance suffered as a result of economic adjustment. Expenditure per pupil in 1985 in real terms was half that in 1970. The impact was greater on primary and secondary schools than on universities. Under these conditions, the basic education budget increasingly became a payroll. Capital expenditure fell disproportionately, and Zambia became increasingly dependent on donors for teaching materials. As a result, parents and communities have been playing a growing role in financing education. In general, quality has worsened. This is not far from what is happening in South Africa, since the government has abandoned free education and has asked governing bodies to help finance the education of their children.

A comparative analysis of Costa Rica and Venezuela between 1980 and 1987 shows striking similarities in the ways in which structural adjustment affected education in those two countries – both of which have a strong commitment to public education in their constitution. In Costa Rica, real expenditure on basic education declined by 5 per cent a year between 1980 and 1987 – and in Venezuela, real expenditure per student on primary education declined by 7 per cent between 1980 and 1986.

In sum, the impact of adjustment programmes on education has been unfortunate. Austerity measures have resulted in reduced government funding of public education programmes, lower personnel incomes, smaller amounts in family budgets available for education, and increased encouragement of private education which few can afford. In

²⁷ K Hinchliffe, Economic austerity, structural adjustment and education: the case of Nigeria (*IDS Bulletin*, 20(1), 1989).

²⁸ *The Star*, 30/7/1998

²⁹ W Happer, The response from the grass roots: self-reliance in Zambian education (*IDS Bulletin*, 20(1), 1989).

³⁰ *ibid.*

many developing countries, quality and equity in education provision are losing out to an increasingly economic interpretation of efficiency. Is South Africa in the same camp?

The redeployment and rationalisation programme in education is driven by fiscal austerity. This flows from an attempt by the state to curb public expenditure in the same way that structural adjustment programmes do. Another example is the national department's attempt to equalise teacher–pupil ratios (and deal with an assumed surplus of teachers). This exercise has jeopardised attempts under GEAR to control the public wage bill. An abortive policy of offering voluntary severance packages proved far more expensive than originally planned, leading to it being abandoned in December 1997. The subsequent attempt to deal with the problem by passing it on to the provinces resulted in a threatened strike by teachers' unions. As a result, the efforts to redistribute teachers among advantaged and disadvantaged schools and among urban and rural areas have failed. The redeployment of schoolteachers and conditions at tertiary institutions have also given rise to conflict. Both issues demonstrate the inability of the education budget to meet the government's commitments as set out in its white papers.

The issue that continues to define the discussion is whether the dominance of GEAR will lead to a greater polarisation and sharper inequalities in the schooling system. The government is optimistic about the outcome, and refers to successes during the first five years of democratic government. In his 1999 budget speech the minister of finance, Trevor Manuel, pointed out that spending on education, health and welfare had increased strongly since 1995; specifically, education expenditure had increased by more than 35 per cent between 1995 and 1998, and was likely to grow further from R48,5 billion in 1999 to R54,1 billion in 2001. Education enrolment at primary level had increased by more than 1,5 million learners since 1994, while the average number of learners per teacher had decreased from 40 to 34. This might mean two things either the government has built more schools and employed more teachers. This would need to be tested in the empirical research during the next phase of the project. Government optimism is also about the primary school nutrition programme which is said to have reached about 6 million poor children. Despite these claims, however, a number of indicators, including falling university enrolments, shows that the education system is in deep trouble.

An argument can be made that the problem does not lie with the size of the budget, but with poor financial management at the provincial level. This bleak view of provincial ability to deliver is at the source of the debate about whether a centralised or decentralised system would provide the best framework for delivery. The question then becomes: is there any room in the current constitutional framework for a redefinition of national and provincial competencies?

³¹ Department of education, Annual report June 1994–December 1995, p 52.

³² Linda Chisholm and Tracey Petersen, Education policy and practice on the eve of the 99 elections (*Quarterly review of education and training in South Africa*, 6(1), December–March 1999), p 2.

Resource constraints

In South Africa the choice between expansion and quality is no longer an either/or. Without some basic revitalising inputs, particularly textbooks and institutional material, almost no learning can occur. Making essential inputs is a prerequisite for the fundamental goals of quality and expansion.

Schools are not supplied with books every year. According to the regulations, they should collect textbooks from students at the end of each year and redistribute them the following year. But this does not always happen, for two reasons. Firstly, many school administrations are inefficient; and secondly, many students refuse to comply. As a result, stocks of textbooks dwindle rapidly every year. Political leaders and civil servants often blame failures to implement educational policies on resource constraints. However, it would be risky to accept these attributions at face value. While shortages of financial and other material resources often contribute to failures of implementation, it is important to distinguish between those constraints that could have been foreseen and those that are unpredictable. The task facing provinces of trying to deal with their massive wage bills and staying within their budgets has meant that the proportion of provincial expenditure on textbooks, stationary and maintenance has declined from 1,5 per cent in 1995–6 to 1 per cent in 1998–9. According to the school register of needs survey tabled and debated in the house of assembly in 1998, 24 per cent of state schools have no water within walking distance; 8 per cent need to draw water from communal taps; only 25 per cent have water available indoors, and 11 per cent receive water from dams or rivers. Less than half are electrified. These are not conditions conducive to transforming disadvantaged schools into ‘centres of excellence’, as planned by the education ministry.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION

While education in South Africa has had to change in quantitative terms, it has also needed to change in qualitative terms, in order to better equip school leavers for the rapidly changing demands of the world of work. This has required new curricula inter alia involving a shift from the liberal arts to scientific and technical subjects, Africanising course contents, reorienting programmes for adult education, and introducing new thinking on African languages. It was in an effort to achieve this that Curriculum 2005 was developed.

Curriculum 2005 fits into National Qualifications Framework (NQF),³³ the keystone of the transformation of South African education. Under this framework, Curriculum 2005 has become a major tool for transforming South African teaching and learning.

Launched in March 1997, introduced in grade 1 in 1998, and meant to be expanded a year at a time since then, the new curriculum has the development of human resources potential as its main stated goal. It embodies the principle of Outcomes-Based Education,

³³ By establishing an integrated national framework with common standards for learning achievements, the NQF is aimed at making it possible for all learners, whatever their age, to realise the goal of lifelong learning.

which means it concerns itself more with what learners should know and be able to do at the end of a course than the means used to achieve those results – the focus of more traditional content-based methods.

Besides this, subjects have been grouped into eight learning areas: language, literacy and communication; mathematical literacy, mathematics and mathematical sciences; human and social sciences; natural sciences; technology; arts and culture; economic and management sciences; and life orientation. This is meant to help students relate their knowledge to a political, social, and economic context.

Curriculum 2005 has been heatedly debated; in fact, some analysts regard it as a paradigmatic example of failed implementation since it clearly displays common problems surrounding policy and its implementation in South Africa: a tendency for policy to be too abstract, overambitious, and unaware of capacity constraints; and to fail to anticipate interest group resistance.

Critics say it is a highly sophisticated instrument, which assumes the availability of first-world resources such as well-equipped classrooms and highly qualified teachers. To introduce it without adequately training teachers, and providing them with the resources they need to implement it, they argue, is a recipe for failure. This criticism has persisted despite the government having spent R25 million on emergency training and materials; in fact, the fact, the latter action seems to confirm rather than weaken their case.

This criticism has also been borne out research conducted by the President's Education Initiative (PEI). It has found that, while many teachers have enthusiastically embraced Curriculum 2005's principles and intentions, they do not have the conceptual ability to give effect to it in their classrooms. Teachers, it is argued, particularly those in poorly resourced schools, are incapable of achieving the curriculum's goals. Indeed, provincial reports claim that half of the primary schools in some provinces initially ignored the launch of Curriculum 2005.

The national department has belatedly acknowledged that more time and resources are needed to give the curriculum a chance, and has partially delayed its implementation. However, it did not want to be seen as bowing to public pressure, so OBE for grade 1 learners to 3 remains mandated. There is another anomaly: originally, both grade 1 and 7 were targeted for implementation in 1998; as a result, OBE remains mandated for grade 7 as well.

The lesson to be drawn from this is that politics played a major role in planning OBE and its implementation. Ran Greenstein has noted that understandable political considerations (notably the desire to transform apartheid education) led to an unworkable policy being adopted; in fact, implementing Curriculum 2005 is likely to deepen instead of reduce inequalities between privileged and underresourced schools.

First, most former black schools have not started implementing Curriculum 2005, or if they have, they are not doing it in the right way; second, most former white schools believe they have been doing something similar to Curriculum 2005 before 1994, and it hasn't really changed anything; and third, while most white teachers have accumulated resources and support material far beyond those provided at the short information ses-

sions by provincial departments of education, black teachers have very little in the form of support material.

Many teachers at former model C schools have dismissed Curriculum 2005 as ‘simplistic and repetitive’, and have resisted attending workshops on its implementation. In it is estimated that at least 20 000 primary schools rural or underserved areas (one in five of the schools targeted) have failed to implement the new curriculum because of a lack of teacher preparation or resource materials.³⁴

Even where teachers might be following the new curriculum, does that mean they fully understand it, and that it is being properly implemented? This is unlikely: the fundamental changes embodied in it require a new understanding and expertise. Developing a new curriculum does not just entail writing new syllabuses, producing new textbooks and other materials, and implementing new teaching methods. Democratisation of the production of knowledge needs to be taken seriously. It is both impossible and undesirable to have policy which is devoid of politics. Political commitment is an inescapable component of policy formulation and implementation. States everywhere invest political values and choices through policy.

Another aspect of Curriculum 2005 that has provoked concern is the relationship between education and work. Blacks worry at the system’s failure to equip them with the skills they need to meet the demands of a technological society; mathematical and scientific education especially as seen as wanting.

Following all these pressures, the new curriculum will be phased in, tested, and redefined over eight years (hence the 2005 in the title). However introducing it before putting the proper fundamentals in place has already creating implementation problems. The first phase of implementation coincided with a national pilot programme aimed at testing the practicalities of implementation and its impact on schools, as well as a national in-service education programme aimed at reaching all 350 000 teachers in the system. The pilot is supposed to cover all the provinces and all types of schools.

The outcomes of the pilot and training programmes should be considered in further implementing the curriculum. A better course of action may have been to implement the two programmes before finalising the curriculum; this would have allowed the experience of teachers and learners to be drawn directly into the process, and enabled officials to plan in a more informed manner. As it now stands, the framework has been designed in isolation from the concrete context of teaching, learning and training, under state-driven rather than education-driven imperatives, and is certain to face major difficulties as a result.

THE DECENTRALISATION OF EDUCATION

Unravelling the concepts

Policy-makers have decentralised South Africa’s schools system, arguing that this is a more efficient way of managing schools and governing them democratically. Whether

³⁴ A Duffy, Curriculum 2005 falls further behind (*Mail & Guardian*, 3-10 April 1998).

this objective has been achieved is open to debate; initial evidence suggests that decentralisation has increased the financial and managerial responsibilities of governing bodies that are ill-equipped to assume them. In this section the debate on decentralisation will be surveyed, following which the South African experience of decentralising responsibilities to school governing bodies will be examined.

In recent years the education debate has been dominated by a critical evaluation of centralised and decentralised systems. This has been instigated by a shift towards decentralised education models. But what exactly does decentralisation mean? And in what way does it differ from centralised education systems? A look at the literature suggests that the concepts of 'centralisation' and 'decentralisation' are not very precise, and are used to refer to a variety of processes and structures.

Lauglo argues that decentralisation can be used to denote both a process and a condition.³⁵ Spatially, for instance, it could be used to describe the process of dispersing, say, an object from the centre, but also a 'structural condition that is distinct from a process'.³⁶ Conceptually, decentralisation refers to a hierarchical structure with the centre at the apex, and decentralised units below the centre.³⁷ Bray³⁸ distinguishes between two strains of centralisation/decentralisation: territorial, and functional. Territorial decentralisation refers to 'the "horizontal" division of powers between levels of government', while functional decentralisation refers to 'the "vertical" division of powers over specific functions'.³⁹

Ural and Rideout list four types of decentralisation: deconcentration, devolution, delegation, and privatisation.⁴⁰ But the precise definitions of these terms are contentious. Although the literature agrees that they refer to some form of decentralisation – a process by which a higher authority authorises subordinate units to take decisions – it does not agree on their exact meanings. Bray⁴¹ lists three types of decentralisation: deconcentration, delegation and devolution – and omits privatisation. An attempt will be made here to define his concepts:⁴²

- *Devolution* is the most extreme form of decentralisation, involving the transfer of power and authority from the centre to local units. These then function as surrogates of the centre, as independent and autonomous units that may or may not seek to inform the centre of their decisions.

³⁵ J Lauglo, Forms of decentralisation and their implications for education (*Comparative Education*, 31[1]).

³⁶ *ibid*, p 5.

³⁷ *ibid*.

³⁸ M Bray, Centralisation versus decentralisation in educational administration: regional issues, *Educational Policy* 5(4), 1991.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 372.

⁴⁰ W Rideout and I Ural, *Centralised and decentralised models of education: comparative studies* (Development Bank of Southern Africa and the Centre for Policy Analysis, 1993).

⁴¹ Bray, Centralisation versus decentralisation ...

⁴² *ibid*.

- *Delegation* implies a lesser degree of autonomy for local units than devolution. When a central authority decides to ‘lend’ certain decision-making powers or functions to local or regional units, it has delegated them. Basically, power continues to reside with the central authority.
- *Deconcentration* results in the least autonomy and decision-making power away from the centre. It is used mainly to increase the ‘reach’ of a central authority. It involves establishing local field units to strengthen the power of a central authority or to ensure greater central responsiveness to local needs.
- *Privatisation* is the process in terms of which a sphere of government relinquishes its powers and functions to a private firm. Although it is not commonly identified with decentralisation in the international literature, it is certainly worth noting in the South African context, where it is a contentious issue.

Thus, while the literature mentions three and sometimes four distinct types of decentralisation, they are not mutually exclusive, and more than one could occur in any given organisation.⁴³

Why decentralisation?

A means to an end, or an end in itself?

Decentralisation has become common in developing countries during the past decade, not least because of the support it has gained from the World Bank and IMF; the multilateral development community has supported the fiscal and administrative decentralisation of the social sectors, and often specifically of primary and secondary schooling.⁴⁴

To the question, why decentralisation?, many developing states would respond: ‘because these are conditions set by the international funding community for receiving funds’. External pressure has instigated many decentralisation policies, perhaps to the detriment of implementing countries, because the distinction between using decentralisation as a means to an end or an end in itself becomes blurred. To recognise it as an end in itself is to acknowledge that it has intrinsic value. Most administrative motivations for decentralisation assume that decentralised systems have value in themselves and are thus worth implementing because of their positive impact on management systems. Critics argue that governments use decentralisation to further their political ends or to appease donors. It is difficult to determine whether governments using this strategy are motivated by a genuine desire to improve governance and delivery, or use decentralisation to further their own ends. However, a fundamental question emerges: do states that are committed to improving their education systems via decentralisation fare better than states whose commitments are instigated by other socio-political reasons? While the answers are

⁴³ An analysis of Bray’s article and that of Rideout and Ural reveals that they ascribe different meanings to these concepts. For instance, in Rideout and Ural’s article, deconcentration implies greater autonomy for lower-level units, whereas for Bray it implies the opposite.

⁴⁴ A Gershberg, Education ?decentralisation? processes in Mexico and Nicaragua: legislative versus ministry-led reform strategies (*Comparative education*, 35[1], 1999).

highly subjective, it is nevertheless important to identify the nuances within the debates around the concept of decentralisation.

Administrative motives

The justifications given for decentralisation are manifold; according to the literature, they are either administrative or political.⁴⁵ However, while the literature broadly distinguishes between administrative and political motives, these distinctions are often blurred. For instance, one argument for decentralisation is that it paves the way towards greater responsiveness to local needs. Given the varied manifestations of decentralisation, this could happen in two ways: bringing the centre closer to the ground, for example by putting up field offices (an example of deconcentration), or increasing the power of an institution that is closer to the ground, such as a regional or local government (an example of devolution). Such a strategy could have positive political consequences, as the needs of various constituencies are being met. Yet it could also have positive administrative consequences; decentralisation results in more flexible and adaptable education systems that cater for a heterogeneous clientele, thus amounting to a more appropriate and effective management system.

Another argument is that decentralisation increases the efficiency of management. Devolving decision-making power to smaller units and catering for smaller constituencies implies that decisions can be taken more quickly, lines of communication are more direct, and response times shorter than in highly centralised bureaucracies that have to deal with much larger constituencies.

Another rationale for decentralisation in education is that it improves quality, because decisions are more likely to be informed by local realities.⁴⁶ Thus, it is assumed that because decentralisation 'empowers' levels 'closer to the people' to decide, they make the right decisions. This, however, assumes a certain level of capacity in the decision-making structure.

Decentralising education systems is also a means of reducing the fiscal burden of central governments. Decentralisation is part of a broader neo-liberal strategy which, when applied to developing states, has been couched in structural adjustment programmes that have promoted fiscal discipline and the withdrawal of the state from providing social services. Therefore, in many instances, decentralisation has been unavoidable, as donors have made this a precondition for releasing further development aid. Some forms of decentralisation are aimed at reducing government expenditure by devolving fiscal responsibility to regional or local authorities. By doing this, governments hope that local resources can be mobilised to help finance education.

⁴⁵ See Lauglo, *Forms of decentralisation and the implications for education*; Bray, *Centralisation versus decentralisation in educational administration*.

⁴⁶ N London, *Decentralisation as and for education reform in Trinidad and Tobago* (*Educational Studies* 22[23], 1996).

Political motives

Political motives arguably create greater impetus for decentralisation than administrative ones, particularly in some developing countries. Research findings in Trinidad and Tobago indicate that decentralisation there has been spurred by a political agenda rather than a preoccupation with administrative efficacy.⁴⁷ Recent decentralisation initiatives in countries such as the Philippines, Solomon Islands, Sudan⁴⁸ and Nicaragua⁴⁹ were also largely politically motivated, with administrative efficiency being a marginal consideration only.

Political motives for decentralisation vary, and include:⁵⁰

- **Compromise:** when faced with secessionist movements, a government may decide to decentralise in order to appease the opposition and dilute dissent. (Political polarisation can also lead to greater centralisation when a government acts to contain opposition.)
- **Expediency:** a government may relinquish some of its responsibility for social policies with regional, local or private institutions, so that they can share the blame for failures of delivery. Some cynics argue that governments tend to decentralise when they find they are unable to cope with the burden of providing social services; in these cases they often use terms such as ‘community participation’ and ‘privatisation’ to disguise the fact that they have reneged on their promises.
- **Protection:** decentralisation can also be used to protect small minority groups.

A high level of political consensus around the objectives and methods of education facilitates decentralisation. Although ruling groups rarely willingly relinquish power, in circumstances where they have shared ideas with other groups they are more willing to ‘give up’ some of their authority because they believe their concerns will be addressed.

Perhaps the biggest misconception about decentralisation is that it automatically results in administrative and political efficacy – that, by setting up a decentralised institutional framework, its positive values will be guaranteed. Decentralisation only creates the conditions for greater political and administrative efficacy; it does not ensure them. Evidence suggests that it takes more than setting up a decentralised institutional framework to accrue its benefits. Political commitment; institutional capacity; and, ironically, a strong, well-managed central institution with the ability to co-ordinate, monitor, and support local units are essential.

The notion of decentralisation raises two key issues pertinent to this study:

⁴⁷ London, Decentralisation as and for education reform in Trinidad and Tobago.

⁴⁸ See Bray, Centralisation versus decentralisation in educational administration, who argues that secessionist movements in these countries forced central governments to relinquish power in order to keep the movements within the national framework.

⁴⁹ See Gershberg, Education ‘decentralisation? processes in Mexico and Nicaragua, who writes that the decentralisation of education in the 1990s was used to effect ‘radical social change’. Ironically, the Sandinista rulers of 1979-90 used the same argument to create a highly centralised education system.

⁵⁰ For a more detailed analysis, see Lauglo, Forms of decentralisation

- Firstly, is decentralisation having a positive impact on the education system; is it really improving policy responsiveness, administrative efficiency, efficacy, and the quality of education? Is it helping to realise the intentions behind education policy?
- Secondly, does the goal of decentralising education tally with the government's overall objective to ensure redress and equity – that is, that does it fit in with the government's broader intentions? Using these questions to guide the direction and scope of the enquiry, South Africa's education decentralisation policy will now be analysed.

The South African model

As noted previously, a major component of education policy is to decentralise control over schools, and increase their autonomy. The second education white paper sets out the framework within which decentralisation is meant to occur. It summarises the goals of the new policy framework as follows:

grated, flexible national system which advances redress, the equitable use of public resources, an improvement in educational quality across the system, democratic governance, and school-based decision-making within provincial guidelines. The new structure must be brought about through a well-managed process of negotiated change, based on the understanding that each public school should embody a partnership between the provincial education authorities and a local community.⁵¹

A recurring theme in the white paper is that the new system should address the inequalities created by the apartheid regime by ensuring the equitable distribution of resources. Two important aspects of the policy are referred to here. The first is redress, which implies compensation for the imbalances created by apartheid – or 'levelling the playing fields'. The second is ensuring that the funding system is fair, and treats everyone equally based on poverty levels and needs. In addition, given that South Africa has emerged from a period in which education was fragmented among 19 administrations, a related task facing policy-makers is to integrate these administrations into a single system operating in a single, coherent, and equitable national framework. At the same time, national policy must be flexible enough to cater for a wide range of 'clients' and ensure responsiveness to local education needs.

According to the white paper, the new system of school governance must:

1. ensure national coherence and promote a national sense of common purpose, while retaining flexibility and protecting diversity;
2. enable a disciplined and purposeful school environment to be established, dedicated to a visible and measurable improvement in the quality of the learning process and learning outcomes;
3. enable the main stakeholders in schools to assume responsibility for school governance, in a framework of regulation and support by the provincial education authorities;

⁵¹ Department of education, *Education white paper 2*.

4. ensure that the involvement of government authorities in school governance is the minimum required for legal accountability, and is based on participative management;
5. enable school governing bodies to determine the mission and character or ethos of their schools, in the framework of constitutional provisions affecting schools and national and provincial legislation;
6. ensure that the decision-making authority assigned to school governing bodies is coupled with the allocation of an equitable share of public (budgetary) resources, and the right to raise additional resources for them to manage;
7. recognise that governing bodies' rights of decision-making are not linked to the ability of their communities to raise resources;
8. ensure both equity and redress in funding from public (budgetary) resources, in order to fairly distribute public funds and eliminate backlogs caused by past unequal treatment; and

improve the efficiency of school education via the optimum use of public financial (budgetary) allocations as well as publicly funded staff resources.⁵²

An analysis of the principles underlying the restructuring of the school system reveals some noteworthy issues. The first is that certain aspects of the system will be decentralised; this includes the devolution of decision-making authority to school governing bodies, the decentralisation of governance, and financial decentralisation. Objective 4 makes it clear that government intervention in school governance is to be minimised, while objectives 3 and 5 give stakeholders and governing bodies the mandate to assume responsibility for school governance.

Secondly, attempts to realise these objectives may lead to tensions; for example, trying to achieving 'a sense of national common purpose' and protecting diversity at the same time may prove to be difficult. This will require carefully considered programmes. It is essential that the objective of protecting diversity is not misconstrued to mean protecting privilege, or excluding members of certain communities. Such misconceptions will weaken programmes encouraging a common national purpose and vision. Therefore, in order to ensure that both these objectives are achieved, the department will have to send the right messages to schools and carefully monitor their results.

In addition, goals of equity, coherence and integration are more easily achieved within a centralised system, while decentralised systems are better able to achieve flexibility and responsiveness.

In many systems, especially those that are highly devolved, financial structures seem to maintain and reinforce inequality '... In general, it is easier to reduce regional inequalities in centralised systems than in decentralised ones. In the former, central authorities are able to extract financial and human resources from well-endowed regions and then redistribute those resources to regions that are poorly endowed. In decentralised systems this is more difficult.'⁵³ Evidence shows that centralised management systems are better able to bring about equity, redress and coherence, while decentralised ones are more capable

⁵² Department of education, *Education white paper 2*, p 11.

⁵³ Bray, *Centralisation versus decentralisation ...*, p 371.

of creating flexible and responsive systems. Given that both these sets of objectives are priorities in transforming the education system, the department faces the arduous task of creating a system that has the right mix of central and local control – that is, ensuring that the system is not too centralised to be responsive to local needs, or too decentralised to ensure equity.

Governance

The white paper defines ‘governance’ as ‘policy determination, in which the democratic participation of the schools’ stakeholders is essential’.⁵⁴ Governing bodies – comprising parents, teachers, secondary school learners, non-teaching staff, members of the community, and the principal as an ex officio member – are responsible for making school policy in a democratic manner. But, according to the white paper, their decision-making powers need to be commensurate with their capacity, implying that those governing bodies with capacity problems may have less powers. This points to new inequalities that may emerge among schools – some school governing bodies will have more functions and powers than others.

Financial management

Some aspects of financial management will also be devolved down to governing bodies. Objective 7 says they will have the power to raise additional resources, and will be entitled to an equitable share of public resources which they are responsible for managing. Again, this raises questions of equity among schools. Perhaps one of the greatest indicators of autonomy is the ability to raise funds. Arguably, schools unable to raise their own funds will be more dependent on public funds and perhaps less autonomous from provincial structures than those able to raise substantial funds from the community. But this is not necessarily so, particularly if governing bodies are given leeway in deciding how they wish to spend the funds they receive from the province. This is another area that needs to be investigated: how much scope do governing bodies, particularly those that are not well-resourced, have in deciding on the expenditure of funds received from government?

How centralised is decentralised?

The South Africa Schools Act provides a list of functions which can, with the permission of the provincial head of department (HoD), be allocated to school governing bodies. The HoD can withdraw or allocate functions depending on various criteria, the most important being a governing body’s capacity. Most of these functions involve administrative duties and defining the school’s curriculum within guidelines provided by national and provincial regulations. The functions, as stated by the act, are to:

- maintain and improve the school’s property, and buildings and grounds occupied by it, including hostels if applicable;

⁵⁴ Department of education, *Education white paper 2*, p 16.

- determine the extramural curriculum and the choice of subject options in terms of provincial curriculum policy;
- purchase textbooks, educational materials, or equipment;
- pay for services rendered to the school; and
- other functions consistent with the act and any applicable provincial law.⁵⁵

Governing bodies also have some financial autonomy⁵⁶ – they are able to take some decisions about school maintenance, book purchases, and other services. But their policy-making powers seem to revolve around housekeeping issues. They have some leeway in determining the school curriculum, but only within a framework decided by the national and provincial authorities. Therefore, the level of governing body autonomy to really determine school policy is limited to very local decisions in non-critical areas. For ardent advocates of decentralisation, the level of powers given to governing bodies may be too low; arguably, governing bodies have not been given enough decision-making powers on crucial policy issues.⁵⁷

But this argument can be countered by claims that all stakeholders, including schools, negotiated the new system and were given the space to influence national legislation. The involvement of local units in determining national policy implies that schools have greater control than is evident at first glance – although this view is contested by some actors, including schools which claim that they were not adequately consulted on new school policy. Also, given current capacity in some schools, greater autonomy may not be feasible. Moreover, it is easy to understand the rationale behind the department's decentralisation policy. On the one hand, South Africa's education system requires a highly regulated, integrated, and uniform policy framework in order to reduce the inequalities that existed under apartheid. On the other, there is a need to recognise the diversity of the population and local contexts. The tension between these two requirements seems to create a policy framework in which vital decisions are made by national and provincial spheres, leaving extremely local issues such as discipline and school maintenance to governing bodies.

He who pays the piper calls the tune

Education policy seems to be a constant balancing act between regulation and decentralisation. One example is the regulations that lay down the parameters within which governing bodies can spend school funds. The Schools Act stipulates that, although governing bodies will control school funds, they can only use them for educational purposes and to

⁵⁵ Republic of South Africa, *South African Schools Act, 1996* (Government Gazette 377 [17579], Cape Town), p 16.

⁵⁶ Except governing bodies that lack capacity whose funds will be administered directly by the provinces.

⁵⁷ One of the sources of dissatisfaction with this stems from governing bodies themselves. CPS researchers have found that some governing bodies around Gauteng are resentful of being used as 'rubber stamps' and want greater decision-making powers. See C Kihato, with Mogudi Maaba and Paul Thulare, *Building in power: problems of community empowerment in a Gauteng development project* (Johannesburg: CPS, 1998).

enhance their own performance. Should they want to spend school funds for any other purpose, this has to be ratified by the HoD.⁵⁸

Some form of regulation is certainly necessary to increase accountability, reduce the misappropriation of funds, and ensure that expenditure is in line with the national ministry's principles. More importantly, in order to realise its goals, the national department needs to create some form of regulation – if local units were entirely autonomous, this could militate against the objective of reducing inequality. But one could also argue that governing bodies have acquired responsibility without authority. If the provincial HoD remains responsible for allocating powers to governing bodies, and allocating funds to schools, then ultimately power remains vested in the province. These dynamics are pertinent to any decentralisation efforts, as they raise questions about the power dynamics between institutions and possible inequality among schools; some will have more capacity to raise their own funds than others.

What authority is given to decision-makers at the schools level, and to whom are they accountable? Generally, authority will gravitate towards the centre because that is where funding originates. Thus, inherent in the logic of decentralisation is an understanding that 'he who pays the piper calls the tune'.⁵⁹

Administrative efficiency is also a key policy concern. The department hopes to increase efficiency in schools by means of efficient resource allocation. And, by implementing both political and administrative changes, it is hoped that the quality of the education system will be improved.

Lastly, the underlying principles of decentralisation imply a close partnership between provincial authorities and local schools. This interface is central to the success of the system, as it is via this that information is exchanged between schools and the state, thereby creating a strong foundation for developing and implementing school policy. But this may be difficult to achieve in practice. Co-ordination within departments and among spheres of government remains one of the biggest challenges facing South Africa. The recent introduction of a cluster system at the national level may help to improve co-ordination among line ministries, which will hopefully infiltrate other spheres of government. But whether this will work remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

This preliminary study has raised various issues around the implementation of education policies, and the discrepancies between policy and practice. When OBE and the decentralisation of school governance are examined, certain key research hypotheses emerge which will be tested in the course of empirical research during the next phase of the project.

⁵⁸ Kihato, *Building in power*

⁵⁹ London, *Decentralisation as and for education reform*

⁶⁰ It has been proposed that districts should serve as the primary education authorities responsible for interacting with local schools. The rationale for this is that provinces have to deal with too many schools, and are therefore unable to establish meaningful contact.

Given the education policy's overall objective to ensure an equitable education system across racial groups, the policy to decentralise school governance is hindering rather than enhancing equality, both financially and socially. Moreover, inequality is most pronounced between rural and urban schools.

One of the central purposes of decentralising school governance is to enhance responsiveness. However, it is questionable whether the new system is actually more responsive to local needs and priorities.

The government introduced OBE as a progressive teaching method that attempts to improve the quality of education and equip learners with skills appropriate to the labour market. However, OBE has fallen short of policy expectations because it is overambitious and fails to consider the capabilities of the government and the school system to implement it. OBE cannot be successfully implemented when the resources to train teachers properly or improve the infrastructure in schools do not exist. As such implementation will remain inadequate, with urban schools having a better chance of improving the quality of their intervention.