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Illusion or Reality? Policy and Process in South African Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the current African National Congress education policy in South Africa using a methodological tool derived from critical theory (Jay, 1973; Wellmer, 1971; O'Neill, 1977; Held, 1980; Guess, 1981; Roderick, 1986; Kellner, 1989; McCarthy, 1978, 1991) since it has an emancipatory rather than a manipulative interest in critical inquiry. While much has been written on South African educational policy after the African National Congress victory in 1994, (African National Congress, 1994a; African National Congress, 1994b; Asmal and James, 2001; Carrim, 1998; Chisholm and Fine, 1994; Council on Higher Education, 2000a, 2000b; Department of Education, 1997; Maharaj, 1999; National Commission on Higher Education, 1996) but little, if any, has focussed on critical theory as a methodological tool.

This paper examines the current African National Congress education policy in South Africa using a methodological tool derived from critical theory (Jay, 1973; Wellmer, 1971; O'Neill, 1977; Held, 1980; Guess, 1981; Roderick, 1986; Kellner, 1989; McCarthy, 1978, 1991) since it has an emancipatory rather than a manipulative interest in critical

inquiry. While much has been written on South African educational policy after the African National Congress victory in 1994, (African National Congress, 1994a; African National Congress, 1994b; Asmal and James, 2001; Carrim, 1998; Chisholm and Fine, 1994; Council on Higher Education, 2000a, 2000b; Department of Education, 1997; Maharaj, 1999; National Commission on Higher Education, 1996) but little, if any, has focussed on critical theory as a methodological tool.

Unlike positivism which applies “scientific” criteria to establish whether the social world is rationally ordered, critical theory adopts a historical and social understanding of knowledge making it possible to explore the relationship between policy and political-historical-economic development such as that of South Africa. Critical theory assumes that knowledge of the social and cultural world is not so much a “science” in the positivistic sense but is a form of consciousness about the shifting boundaries of reality and the on-going distillation of meaning from social existence (Watson, 1982, p.236).

Similarly, interpretive approaches fail to theorise the larger social system or to recognize the ways in which specific events are shaped by features of the larger system. As such, interpretive approaches like positivist approaches are no less emancipatory. In transcending the implicit absolutism of positivism and the implicit relativism of interpretivism, critical theory, concentrates more on relating the object of knowledge to the constitutive activity of the subject within an historical context. For South Africans who need to affirm their own histories through the use of a language and a set of social relations, the body of knowledge that emerges from a critical theory perspective has the potential to help them reconstruct and dignify the cultural experiences that make up the history of their daily lives. It would be possible then for those who were traditionally voiceless, to learn skills and knowledge that will allow them to critically examine the role society has played in

their own self-formation and to understand the construction of their identity in class, gender, race, disability and cultural terms. Such a realisation will enable the great mass of South African society to understand how its previous uncritical compliance served to preserve contemporary South African society rather than challenge or transform it (Fay, 1975, p.109; Held, 1980, p.245; Marcuse, 1964, p.120).

The critical interest of the inquiry is in knowing 'what has been done' and 'what is to be done' to change the practices of policy-makers, researchers and practitioners in an emancipatory and educative direction. Fay (1975) argues that critical theory has two tasks: the first is the educative role and the second the emancipatory. The first is achieved by helping actors see themselves in ways that are radically different from their own self-conception by showing how certain experiences can be overcome and changed if they are conceptualized differently. The second is not only by enlightening actors about the precise mechanisms that frustrate them but also about which they have been ignorant. In other words, the critique of the current state of affairs in South African education is an analytical tool that looks below the surface features to the underlying logical and conceptual character and externally beyond the boundaries of the immediate object to the formative processes and structures of history, the economy and society. Such an analysis facilitates the exercise of rational judgment to examine the internal and external character of an educational field and a set of practices.

The critical method is applied as two moments of criticism: internal and holistic or external. Since the object of critique is the education policy of the African National Congress, discourse analysis is employed as part of the moment of internal criticism as the language of the policy text signals problems of logic and concept and reveals the nature of the values embedded implicitly within it. The holistic criticism locates the education policy

within a historical, economic and social context. This external moment of criticism also considers ideological aspects of the policy and the structural character of the process implied for policy-making. Popkewitz (1984) articulates at least two senses of critical. The first is the internal criticism that comes from analytical questioning of argument and method that stresses the logical consistency in arguments, procedures and language and the second “gives focus to skepticism towards social institutions and ... considers the conditions of social regulation, unequal distribution and power”.

Critical theory therefore, as a method of critique, enables members of South African society to penetrate the education policy in South Africa to reveal ideological distortions in communicative patterns and structural connections. The distinguishing feature of critical theory is its interest or commitment to changing and improving the human condition. Critical orientations to policy would recognize the inevitability and complex role played by values in the policy process and stress the need for clear articulators of the goals of policy as well as the means. In other words, while theory guides practice, change comes about more through an increasing self-awareness of the limitations and constraints of human potential as well as the possibilities for emancipation from these. Prunty (1984, p.33) believes that from the perspective of critical theory, repression not only emanates from the socio-economic sphere, but is also mediated by human consciousness. Hence, it is necessary to explore the internal and subjective state of human existence alongside of the external and material world.

It may well be that Marx’s account of historical materialism could provide us with an underlying rationale for policy-making. Cohen (1978) believes that the productive forces Marx speaks of are fundamental determinants of the historical process. The productive forces will determine the change in the relations of production and this in turn will explain

the change in the non-economic institutions of society. There is a causal relationship therefore between the economic and political-legal realm. So at the level of forces of production, we are talking about human knowledge and human inventiveness. Such a recognition implies the implementation of policies that would weaken capitalist-class hegemony over the society, namely, the degree to which workers' have control over their places of employment, democratic rather than business control of mass media, free and universally accessible higher education, health care, inclusive education, early childhood education centers, aged care, legal aid and the like. Policies will also focus on limiting social injustices based on class, race, gender, sexuality, disability, culture and so on. Essentially, an effort would be made to equalize power within the society and to make possible in Habermas' words the existence of a "public sphere" that is essential for a truly human society (Habermas, 1974, pp.49-55).

Habermas (1979) provides an explanation of the constraint of human consciousness in terms of repressed forms of communication. Distorted communication occurs when consensus in discourse is reached through unequal or asymmetrical power relationships between the parties involved. Such a distortion was evident in the state of affairs in South Africa during the apartheid era, which was characterized by a policy of separate development for the different race groups, when the ruling Nationalist Party used education as a tool of oppression to further suppress the Black population, by providing them with an inferior education thereby entrenching the superiority and power of the "white" race. The term "black" is a generic term for all colored, Indian and black African people and does not necessarily refer to color while the term white refers to people of largely European descent. By conceding power to the "white" race, the notions of justice,

truth and equality were repressed and the ideal of communicative competence (Habermas, 1979; 1984) disabled.

Under apartheid, there was unequal provision of education across racial and ethnic lines. The education of whites had been highly privileged and self-contained (African National Congress, 1994, p.2). Black children were largely illiterate with little or no access to education. An authoritarian system of governance existed particularly for Blacks who were further marginalized by rote learning procedures in schools meant to indoctrinate learners. In addition, early childhood education and inclusive education was manipulated along racial lines and gender discrimination existed on a wide scale as management and control of education remained largely in the hands of males. In Black education, there was a high degree of administrative centralization with little parental or community ownership and control of schools.

The African National Congress education policy for South Africa (1994) had two important aims: (1) to eradicate the legacy of apartheid and (2) to build a democratic future from which race, class, age, disability and gender discrimination have been eliminated. These aims espouse a state of affairs where increased learning levels will be facilitated for individual members and for learners as members of society. They sought not to reproduce but to challenge and transform South African society from the orthodoxy of the National Party, which sought to perpetuate marked class, race and sex differences. They guaranteed equal access to basic education for all with the opportunity to develop independent, critical thought. Education and training were recognized as basic human rights that will enable all citizens to make a contribution to society. Fundamental to the pursuit of lifelong education were the principles of democracy, equality, liberty and justice. There is an underlying theme in the ANC education policy documents to emancipate individuals from the repressions

inherent in their patterns of socialization and learning. On a much broader scale it encourages the community to discursively explore their potential for increased learning levels as a necessary step towards the reconstruction of more emancipatory forms of social interaction and conditions of social life (Habermas, 1984). A study of South African Education Policy since 1994, may indicate that the policies towards inclusion in the South African Education paradigm are still a far from being emancipatory.

While the reconstructed four-tier system of democratic governance was expected to increase participation of South African citizens at the national level it did little to alleviate problems of inequalities in management, access to resources and good quality learning at the local levels. The inequalities that existed before 1994 between the urban and rural communities are still firmly entrenched; the inequalities between the newly created nine new provinces responsible for primary and secondary education still reflect the racial distribution of South African society and in fact access to resources further entrenches inequalities between the provinces. Despite the focus on education in the policy documents, the Black African students still constitute the largest group of uneducated persons with poor retention rates at school, high failure rates and unequal access to resources. This inequality prevails because the majority of Black African students continue to be schooled in African schools and while the former White schools have an 'open door' policy, on a much broader level, the integration has led to greater divisions in the social fabric of South African society. This inequality once again reinforces Habermas' beliefs that mass schooling as an institution is the potential site for change but depending on how it is structured, it can repress or emancipate learners.

The Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (2001) states that inclusive education is about empowering

learners by developing their individual strengths and enabling them to participate critically in the process of learning. To do so, learners require adequate support services, appropriately trained education managers and educators, safe and accessible environments, a flexible curriculum and appropriate community involvement. Today, a small percentage of learners who are disadvantaged are being catered for and this makes the policy of catering for ALL an illusion.

The link between education and training in the ANC policy documents, an international phenomenon, has the potential to blur the issue of education for citizenship in a democratic state. By linking education and training, the decision-making models are in danger of achieving consensus through power and technical control rather than through dialogue and as such have the potential to dominate or repress certain interests. The entire community needs to participate if the people of South Africa are to be emancipated. Furthermore the ANC education policy (ANC, 1994, p.84) asserts, the development of an indigenous technological capacity requires that we produce more scientists and technologists. To enable this to occur, science and mathematics, education and training, both school-based and work-based must be transformed from a focus on abstract theories and principles to a focus on concrete application of theory to practice.

The need to develop the sciences and mathematics implies also that there is a need to develop a technical language suitable for such a study. Habermas (1973, p.6) believes that an institution of higher learning which is enlightened with respect to the critique of science, and also politically capable of action, could constitute itself as an advocate to urge that among the alternatives or priority for scientific and technological progress, the decision is not made automatically according to the 'natural laws' imposed by the military-industrial

viewpoint, but is decided, on the basis of a general discursive formulation of will, only after weighing politically the practical consequences.

Habermas (1973) also asserts that emancipation will come through participation in open and symmetrical patterns of dialogue. From the point of view of critical theorists, learners in a society should be given the opportunity to develop “critical awareness” and an “historical perspective” thereby not only penetrating “false consciousness” but diminishing the power of legitimating forces for the status quo. Foucault (1984; 1986) is of the belief that, discourse, as a condition of communication, is inseparable from notions of power, control and struggle. Such a view then would hold that policies are unable to produce and promote freedom until the question of knowledge production is addressed. If Black South Africans have to develop knowledge of the language of science, it could lead to ‘distorted patterns of communication’ since the knowledge about science would have developed outside their culture and may not be reflected in the indigenous languages. One cannot escape the fact that our “identities are still constituted through social hierarchy and cultural differentiation as well as through those processes of division and fragmentation described in psycho-analytical theory” (Kaplan, 1986, p.63). While one has to acknowledge that the ANC policy for education in South Africa is committed to making curricular changes to incorporate all learners irrespective of race, class, sex, disability or age, one has to also concede that “what it is to live well is somehow embedded in that which makes us most distinctly who we are: language. The good life shadows our every discursive gesture” (Eagleton, 1990a, p.408).

In adopting an integrated approach to education and training so that South Africans can extend their range of knowledge, skills and competencies that will give them greater mobility, the ANC education policy has adopted a view of knowledge that is

oriented to success. This according to Habermas is “strategic action” and is compared to “communicative action” which is oriented to understandings. The former places emphasis on skills required to meet the needs of a market economy by selecting and channeling individuals into places where the economy needs them. A truly critical view would go beyond this to examine historical and structural questions. In Black schools, students are still taught in an authoritarian way by teachers who are poorly educated and under-qualified. The emphasis in these schools is not on critical and creative thinking as originally intended but on achieving an examination score. For inclusive learning strategies to work, removing the previous barriers to learning and participation would mean identifying and overcoming the causes of the learning problems. With a focus on examinations, strategies for support at both an individual and systems level are likely to be sidelined. By focusing on recall and regurgitation of knowledge, critical reflection as a tool of critical theory cannot exist since it entails the emphasis of one’s own agency so that one assumes responsibility for one’s own action and explores alternatives. To truly empower the citizens, the emphasis has to move away from content and revolve more on questions of how to learn. It is important in bringing about change in South Africa, that policies are structurally linked to the communities of those disadvantaged in the school system. In the case of South Africa, this will be the Black community. However it needs to be said that since 1994, there has been the development of a very distinct Black middle class who are particularly advantaged in the country. What the class development implies is that while the issue of race is still a consideration that of class cannot be ignored. In 1992, 96 per cent of white schools became Model C schools (Chisholm and Fine, 1994, p. 239). In 1990, Piet Clase the Minister of “White” education under the apartheid government allowed “white” schools in South Africa to choose between three models. Model A allowed white schools to close as state schools

and re-open as private schools. Model B allowed such schools to remain state schools but to have an open admissions policy and Model C allowed them to convert to semi-state and semi-private schools (Carrim, 1998, p.308). While these schools received state funding to pay teachers' salaries, the governing body (parents) determines admissions policy, religious and language character and it has the power to set school fees. As such, the majority of these schools remain almost exclusively white. In 1996, the South African Schools Act was passed which while still retaining the autonomy of the white schools meant that admission to the school could not be denied on the basis of 'race". (Department of National Education, 1996).

To succeed in school, Black students have to succeed in the classroom. Black schooling has a history of interruption that left students with under-developed levels of functional literacy and poor academic general knowledge. Critical literacy, which allows students to be critical and autonomous citizens, may be seen as a way of changing school practices to serve the interests of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. To achieve this goal there is need for a widely educated and regular supply of teachers who can change, challenge and reform schools and, secondly, there is need for a critically informed knowledge base that teachers can draw on to teach for the future. (Carrim, 1998, p.313) in his study of the "rate" of admission of black students to white schools observed that far from being a positive acknowledgement of difference, the multicultural trends in schools seem to be reconstructed forms of racism itself.....students are positioned in stereotypical ways, are assumed to be fixed to their identities, are portrayed as necessarily representative of and loyal to their supposed cultures and the prevalent understanding of culture seems to be narrowly defined as a reference to lifestyles.

To be critical, requires that actual, lived rather than imagined practice be enforced. In the context of education 'actual, lived practice' refers to the pedagogical process between teachers and students constituted as teaching-learning activities. Unfortunately the focus on lifestyles has resulted in attention being deviated away from life chances and the "actual basis of the inequalities suffered by Blacks does not receive adequate, if any, attention and the focus on the socially constructed nature of racism remains unexplored" (Carrim, 1998, p.316). The policy of multiculturalism would be a viable proposition in South Africa if, according to critical theory, it were to engage in a discourse on the power relations involved in racism and if it were to adopt a "de-essentialised conception of identity that would acknowledge and incorporate the notion of 'difference' within and among people" (Carrim, 1998, p.318.). The new program of the ANC, *Curriculum 2005*, based on outcome-based education was designed to improve content as well as the quality of teaching (Asmal and James, 2001, p.189). The government hoped to achieve this outcome by investing in resources. The policy was intended to lead to a greater understanding of education-based on human dignity, freedom, equality and justice for all but the policy failed to achieve the desired outcome because the development of rural schooling remained neglected. In addition, the under-development in Black African schooling continues to deteriorate due to poor planning, deficiencies in quality and of lack of access to resources. In assuming that resources alone could transform the experience of schooling, this program became disabling rather than empowering. What this failure illustrates is not only a lack of focus on structural forces such as socio-economic and political forces but also a lack of focus at the micro-level of the school. (Carrim, 1998, p.318) asserts that there are:

No nationally instituted antiracist programme or package, which has been put into place. There are no structured, co-coordinated programmes to help teachers cope with multiracial/cultural/lingual/ability classrooms. There are no nationally or provincially coordinated programmes for students to develop anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-discrimination awareness or consciousness in the formal workings of the school.

The ANC had also hoped that transformation could be achieved by a well-planned and integrated national system of higher education. Black African institutions and Black African students, however, continue to be disadvantaged and the achievement of integration continues to be remote given that higher education institutions in South Africa still remain as English, Afrikaner and Black. The Minister's plan for regional and institutional collaboration by consolidating higher education institution does not necessarily solve the problem of inequality or access to higher education among Black Africans. Institutions serving Black Africans, particularly those in areas away from the urban nexus, continue to be poor with low student enrolments, poorly qualified academics and irrelevant course content. The proposed merger of higher education institutions in particular regions will not address the disadvantage faced by Black African institutions and will deepen the divide between the different race groups in South Africa. In trying to ensure that more students pass, universities are equating throughput with good teaching...if there is to be real access to the benefits of higher education for the most talented people from communities outside the loop, those students have to be enabled to find their critical bearings in a culture with which most are only tangentially familiar (Ridge, 2001, p.39).

The Council on Higher Education (2000b, pp.4-5) argues that a coherent co-ordinated and integrated national higher education system... must respond to the requirements of a

society emerging from a long history of structural inequality and under-development. It must respond as best as it can to the challenges of social, economic and cultural development and encompass development across a broad range of areas of knowledge. Higher education's primary role is to develop the thinking and intellectual capabilities of our society and through such development to address the range of economic (including labor market), social, cultural, political and other challenges faced by society as a whole. It must do so at a national, regional and local level and indeed contribute in some measure to the development of the continent.

The Council of Higher Education (2000b) further suggests that it is committed to the establishment of a system which strives to achieve equity and aspires to excellence as intrinsic to the achievement of meaningful equity. It is also committed to achieving vast improvement in the quality of higher education teaching and learning, research, community service and innovation. The Task Team is aware that dramatic improvements must be achieved in regard to the efficiency of the outputs of the system as a whole and that in order for this to happen the areas of dysfunction so pervasive to the system would have to be addressed... to compete (globally) in the higher education environment.

To achieve this goal implies equality of educational opportunity to previously excluded persons. In the case of South Africa, this would refer to the Black majority. Sadly though, the South African government believes that to achieve global competitiveness means success for more students at university. This aim could work if success also meant access to educational resources, opportunities and teaching.

The National Commission of Higher Education (NCHE) (1996, p.76) report identified three features for Higher Education: increased participation in the system by a

diverse range of constituencies: increased co-operation and partnerships between higher education and other social actors; and greater responsiveness to a wide range of social and economic needs. The three mentioned features were stated to have represented a “radical departure from previously divisive and fractured social structures and a move towards new and more integrative forms of social organization”. The change from previous higher education systems was reflected in the fact that while previous systems “enrolled primarily middle class students into elite professional and scholarly pursuits”, the present recommendation gives a “wider diversity of feeder constituencies and programmes”.

The “*Education White Paper 3*” (Department of Education, 1997, p 21), makes reference to promoting equal opportunities in higher education. For example, it states that the Ministry of Education’s commitment to changing the composition of the student body will be effected through the targeted redistribution of the public subsidy to higher education. The relative proportion of public funding used to support the academically able but disadvantaged students must be increased (p 11).

And on (p 21) it states that:

Ensuring equal access must be a concern for equity of outcomes. Increased access must not lead to a ‘revolving door’ syndrome for students, with high failure and dropout rates. In this respect, the Ministry is committed to ensuring the public fund earmarked for achieving redress and equity must be linked to measurable progress toward improving quality and reducing the high dropout and repetition rates.

The Council on Higher Education (1998, p.19) in South Africa also recommended that higher education institutions be challenged to generate the competencies that will be required from all graduates during the 21st century - computer literacy, knowledge re-configuration

skills, information management, problem-solving in the context of application, team-building, networking, negotiation/mediation competencies and social sensitivity.

As such the NCHE recommended the notion of 'programs' to provide "a clear means of reducing the potential chaos of an unlimited number of courses and qualifications to a form compatible with system-wide planning, goal-directed funding and effective quality assurance" (p. 85). This implies a shift from teaching to learning, from subject-based learning to student-based learning and from knowledge to competence. It must be said however that while changes in syllabus content are called for, " they are not sufficient to produce citizens able to move from knowing to applying " (Ridge, 2001, p.41).

The final recommendation of the NCHE focused on developments in research practice. It advocated the development of a "strong national capacity across the full research spectrum [which] was more important than individual peaks of excellence on their own" (p.126). In a sense this recommendation links up with the idea of the marketisation of higher education and the shift away from the university operating as an insular institution in society. However, while these recommendations are laudable, the South African university system at present still shows a deep division between the historically White and historically Black universities. The system of apartheid has had far reaching effects to the extent that the historically Black universities by virtue of their geographical location still attract students who are academically disadvantaged and academic staff are unqualified so that the quality of that higher education does not guarantee access. The Council on Higher Education (2000a, p.11), made recommendations to address the shortcomings in higher education such as diversifying institutions of higher learning, amalgamating higher education institutions into single entities, improving the assessment

of learning, teaching and research and introducing a fourth year undergraduate degree in the Arts and Sciences.

In diversifying institutions, universities are required to offer courses that meet national and regional needs. What this change in effect implies is that the previously entrenched classification of universities on the basis of race, remains. Amalgamating higher education institutions into single entities does not provide a solution either since the mergers will be based on specific regional needs and does not necessarily transform higher education.

It is assumed that by focusing on learning, teaching and research, higher education will prepare students to be active participants in a democracy and in a global economy. However, it is a fallacy to assume that this is sufficient to give previously disadvantaged students, access to a global society. South African students have to first of all be informed, critical participants of their democracy before they can fully participate in the global society. This development requires the linking of changes in higher education to issues of social justice, access and equity. It is in the concerns for justice, that students will learn to develop their self-worth, modes of social communication and economic integration.

Furthermore, it has been established by Green (1997, p.186) that “education cannot ignore the realities of the global market. But nor can it surrender to global modification”. What this assertion shows is that market criteria are insufficient for determining educational policy and social justice. An emphasis on market values privileges the economic and disadvantages the cultural and the social. The idea of social justice is beyond economic productivity and focuses more on the right of every human to participate in social life. In the case of South Africa, market individualism will favor those

who are already advantaged and in this case it will be the historically White institutions of higher education and the White population. So in South Africa, the market view of social justice that underlies many of the recommendations of the Council of Higher Education can often mean no justice at all to the Black population.

There is need for a strong commitment to social justice at all levels of South African society. Equity and access alone are insufficient as they can often leave the institutions themselves unaltered. So, while the constitution of 1994 was based on the principles of non-racism, non-sexism and equality of access for all members of South African society, there exists today, a huge disparity between what the constitution intended and what actually exists in reality. South African higher education has to move beyond questions of curricula relevancy to questions about participatory institutions where students' 'engaged' participation is necessary to ensure social justice outcomes. To be critical requires that practice is understood and improved as a preliminary to creating more emancipatory practices and requires opportunities for reflection by all those involved in the learning process. To be reflective requires knowledge of self and others; an ability to communicate on a rational basis and it requires an understanding of the processes of discourse analysis. At the most basic level it involves the engagement of persons in an open, symmetrical and collective communication process.

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