Insights into Attempts at Using Action Research in a Collaborative Work in a Policy Review Exercise in Botswana

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Abstract

In this paper I embrace the thinking that writing on one's experiences in the use of qualitative educational research strategies and principles could potentially contribute to furthering knowledge in the field. In adopting an action research framework to guide collaborative work in a policy review exercise in Botswana, I found that collaborative work is itself a challenge. Similarly, given the political nature of policy formulation, significant effort and attention is required to facilitate broader reflection and debate on the adoption and use of qualitative research strategies in policy matters in Botswana. Generally my experience suggests that the strictures of underlying political life could be a powerful framework that profoundly shapes and constrains the perspectives and choices in policy review. I conclude with some statements concerning some lessons learnt during the policy review exercise.

Keywords

Action Research, Collaborative Work, Teaching Practice Internship, University of Botswana, Policy Review, Lessons Learnt

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In this paper I embrace the thinking that writing on one's experiences in the use of qualitative educational research strategies and principles could potentially contribute to furthering knowledge in the field. In adopting an action research framework to guide collaborative work in a policy review exercise in Botswana, I found that collaborative work is itself a challenge. Similarly, given the political nature of policy formulation, significant effort and attention is required to facilitate broader reflection and debate on the adoption and use of qualitative research strategies in policy matters in Botswana. Generally my experience suggests that the strictures of underlying political life could be a powerful framework that profoundly shapes and constrains the perspectives and choices in policy review. I conclude with some statements concerning some lessons learnt during the policy review exercise. Key words: Action Research, Collaborative Work, Teaching Practice Internship, University of Botswana, Policy Review, Lessons Learnt.

The University of Botswana (see http://www.ub.bw), the largest single tertiary institution in Botswana, has an enrollment of approximately 12,000 students. The Faculty of Education, entrusted mainly with training pre-service teachers for high schools in Botswana, is amongst the oldest. In March 2006, the Office of the Dean in the Faculty of Education established an *ad hoc* committee, with 12 lecturers from diverse disciplines such as mathematics, social sciences, science, and languages, to review the Teaching Practice (TP) internship program that has been in place since the 1970s. Teaching practice internship, referred to in the literature as field-based internship (Boone, Arbaugh, Abell, Lannin, & Volkmann, 2007), is a school-based teaching induction exercise that is integral to any pre-service teacher-training program. Its main purpose is to give prospective teachers a chance to apprentice teaching in real school settings (Stones & Morris, 1981) and to help them move from their pre-service teacher to beginning teacher status (Sweitzer & King, 1999). In Botswana, pre-service teachers serve in local high schools where they teach various science disciplines for 14 weeks under the mentorship of a suitably qualified and experienced teacher. The school-based mentors, together with tutors from the University, observe and assess teaching sessions by pre-service teachers; those who fail their internship do not graduate in their teacher-training program and have an opportunity to repeat the exercise.

However, the teaching internship program has remained virtually unchanged in terms of content, structure, and intentions since its inception in the 1970s. This means that the internship program failed to grow with both the local and international trends in teacher development. The trends often link with the wider curriculum reforms and paradigms for teacher development in which a teacher is more of a reflective practitioner than a technician (Zeichner, 1983; Zeichner & Ndimande, 2008) in learner-centred

environments. For instance, as Tafa (2001) asserts, teacher-training models in Botswana are within the behaviourist paradigm, which, as Zeichner and Ndimande note, focuses on producing teachers at a minimal cost. However, past reforms in TP in 2003 and 2006 at the University addressed mainly logistical and operational issues of the internship program. The reforms were generally inconsequential in terms of its philosophy, direction, and outlook of TP. TP hence became fossilised resulting in the loss of its coveted role, status, and prestige in teacher-training; it became synonymous with the *status quo* and it was appreciated narrowly more in terms of what people do and experience than it being a holistic curriculum policy issue worthy of serious attention. Consequently, there emerged concerns about the efficacy and efficiency, outcomes, and returns on investment from the model that had become highly resource-centred and capital intensive with time.

This scenario necessitated the review of the internship program by a committee starting in March 2006 and the work concluded with the release of a report in February 2007 (University of Botswana, 2007). The review was to focus on several areas, including, but not restricted to the following: identifying the weaknesses and strengths of the existing model; comparing the model with other models in the Southern African region and beyond, and identifying some best practices and benchmarks appropriate for quality assurance purposes in the quest to revamp the internship program. Under the circumstances, the convenor of the committee promoted the ideal review strategy as one that is participatory and with a high prospect of unearthing substantive issues for consideration through reliable research processes. This view gets support from some two considerations. The first consideration is that which implores teachers, even those working in tertiary education settings, to justify the validity and claims of their knowledge and professional practice. As Olson (1992) notes:

> Teachers have always been under pressure to demonstrate the source of their professional knowledge. Social scientists have always been critical of teachers for their lack of social science knowledge. Teachers lacked expertise, critics said, because they could not show how their *practice* [pedagogy] flowed from something more reliable than common sense. (p. 10)

I perceived that TP was suffering a similar fate as it is seemed to be based largely on common sense theory.

> Until quite recently the term *teaching practice* has been accepted almost universally and uncritically by all concerned with the preparation of teachers. . . It seemed such a "commonsense" concept, completely accepted by the teachers, the college tutors and students. . . But the concept itself was rarely questioned. (Stones & Morris, 1981, pp. 6-7)

Against this background, and as a member of the faculty acting as a facilitator in the process of review, my thinking was that the TP review exercise was essentially within the realms of policy review context and it had to be more robust and rigorous in terms of its outlook, approach, and outcomes. I advertised to fellow committee members the idea that

action research held promise for collaborative work, as that (i.e., action research) encourages self-exploration of issues by individuals. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to narrate my experiences in the sojourn, as I believe that it could be of some potential use to other novice action-research practitioners. Consequently, this paper revolves around two questions, namely:

- What are some of my experiences in promoting the adoption of participatory action research strategies in the review of TP at the University of Botswana?
- What lessons emerge from the exercise?

In answering these questions, I start by providing some theoretical framework for my work, before turning my focus onto my experiences and some lessons I learned from the exercise.

Theoretical Framework and Methodological Considerations

The nature of the ad hoc Teaching Practice (TP) Review Committee needs to be understood to appreciate the broader operative context of the review. The membership of the committee included teacher educators with diverse educational backgrounds, interests, motivation, research backgrounds, and orientation. As a facilitator, I envisioned my priorities as emerging from two inter-related principles, namely strategic influence and impact on group processes and outcomes within the context of a tertiary education setting where the functional interplay between policy, research, theory, teaching, practice, and innovation is fundamental, and, perhaps, unquestionable. The ideal was to encourage group members to think broadly on ways in which the review of TP sits within and connects with life in academia. Within such a view, and in this paper, an academic is someone who participates in the totality of university activities covering, *inter alia*, governance, research, and teaching (Nixon, 2004, as cited in Clegg, 2008). Hence, in aligning the policy review process with these three areas, through collaborative action in a review of TP I sought to promote purposeful engagement in research, analysis, professional development, and capacity building.

Against such a background, participatory action research seems to be justified in the logic of the situation and the need for a theoretically grounded framework for collaborative, inclusive, and participatory action. The general and broad understanding of TP is that it is comprehensive curriculum policy in pre-service teacher development. A policy is to be a declaration of intent, as it is a summary statement of vision, values and goals (Jansen, 1995). As curriculum, TP is "a concept spanning the production and control of knowledge, its delivery, structuring and exchange, within a wider socio-political and socio-economic context" (Levy, 1993, p. 159); "it represents commitments on the part of certain individuals to act in a certain way" (Orpwood, 1985, p. 479). However, for purposes of review, and as justification for adopting a qualitative action research strategy, Teacher Practice (TP) comes across as a contemporary curriculum policy and phenomenon entrenched within real life and institutional contexts, the review of which requires the teasing out of holistic and contextual understanding of practices, values, attitudes, and views.

Consequently, the long history and legacy of Teaching Practice (TP) over the last three and a half decades and defining "action research as a process for emancipating practitioners from the often unseen constraints of assumptions, habit, precedent, coercion and ideology" (Carr & Kemmis, 1989, p. 192), appeared appropriate, since established practices are socially constructed and historically embedded (Carr & Kemmis). Thus, participatory action research is an "intervention in personal practice to encourage improvement in oneself and others" (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003, p. 19). Where participatory and collaborative engagement is attempted, it becomes "a process in which social actors understand the rationality of their very own practices, and the social conditions that determine them" (Fosas, 1997, p. 222). Overall, in this paper, "action research implies adopting a deliberate openness to new experiences and processes and, as such, demands that the action of educational research is itself educational" (McNiff, 1988, p. 9); it also "involves making public an explanatory account of practice" (McNiff et al., p.12).

However, in seeking to clarify and foster some understanding of the status quo in TP, while simultaneously seeking and driving new policy directions, participatory action research, as an analytical tool and operational framework, rested on four inter-related concepts. The methodological notion of self-reflexive practice (e.g., Denzin, 1978; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) and the importance of grounding policy on theoretical considerations and empirical data (Luke & Hogan, 2006) are two of the principles. The other two principles relate to seeking a holistic view of TP as a narrowly defined issue (cf. Robinson-Pant, 2005) and being critical thinkers:

> When we become critical thinkers we develop an awareness of the assumptions under which we, and others, think and act. We seem to pay attention to the context in which our actions and ideas are generated. We become skeptical of quick fix solutions, of single answers to problems, and of claims of universal truth. We also become open to alternative ways of looking at, and behaving in, the world. (Brookfield, 1987, p. ix)

The underlying assumption in collaborative work was that critical thinking held prospects for forging cooperation between committee members with different educational backgrounds, research interests and research focus, and paradigms. Through a process of socialisation, my intention was to create a supporting environment where collegiality and democratic principles of participatory action research subsist:

> During the process of socialisation an individual comes to appreciate the values, expected behaviours, and social knowledge essential for assuming a role in the organisation and for participating as an organisational member. (Albrecht & Bach, 1997, pp. 196-197)

The process of socialisation itself was legitimized by the very nature of the task, which required some possible major policy and paradigm shifts in which all concerned must be in agreement. The broader strategy of a participatory action research cycle, as conceptualised to guide and to induct the committee (Carr & Kemmis, 1989; McKernan, 1991; Zuber-Skerritt, 1982), comprises five key inter-related processes, namely:

a) Problem identification, conceptualisation, and solving;
b) Diagnosis and prognosis of the activities of the committee;
c) Participatory reflection and analysis;
d) Accounting through written reports and live presentations to promote participatory self-evaluation within the committee; and
e) Adoption of decisions by the ad hoc committee.

This framework of participatory action research seemingly aligns well with the suggestion that qualitative educational research has the potential to influence decisions on policy matters (Vulliamy, 1990) and research capacity building (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997) in developing countries.

Getting Started with Work

At the inaugural launch of the committee by the Dean of the Faculty of Education, the committee agreed on conducting a base-line study such that the culture, meanings and processes of TP are emphasized (cf. Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997) and unearthed through observation and theorisation. The committee then engaged in the search for a proper conceptualisation of the concept, *teaching practice,* and process, *review of teaching practice,* through problematizing – a process for encouraging open-mindedness through debates and dialogue. The process involved a simultaneous socialisation activity, in which committee members searched for and defined the modus operandi comprising theoretical orientation, material conditions, language, and terminology in the review process. It was within such a socialisation process that I made three seminal presentations (Koosimile, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c) as a facilitator. The preface to one paper notes that:

> The intention of the document is to help the Committee brainstorm and reflect on Teaching Practice (TP) and the process of reviewing it. . .The purposes of the presentation are. . . to *problematize* the concept of TP in order to stimulate some debates on its meaning; to adopt a position informing the TP Committee Review of some preliminary challenges and issues in the execution of its work. . . [and] to propose the way forward in light of the problems, issues and challenges. (Koosimile, 2006a)

This led to my second presentation, which focused exclusively on analysing some anecdotal data solicited by the committee from departments in the Faculty through a questionnaire. The impetus for the presentation, derived in part from proactive focussing within the broader heuristic, involving deciphering any emergent directions and messages for presentation to and debate by the committee. As noted in the preface, the presentation attempted an insightful analysis of data:

> Some data from departments were presented at the previous meeting of the TP Review Committee on Monday 10th of April 2006. The Committee members suggested that, *at face value,* the data 'fitted' the same mould (i.e., data is repetitive and confirms some concerns on TP) hence the

Secretariat was delegated to summarize them. This inspired this briefing, as it appears there is a need to promote the wider participation of Committee members in data analysis, and in understanding the meaning of the findings from a "*policy review*" perspective. (Koosimile, 2006b)

Nonetheless, there were two nagging problems as far as inclusive participation was concerned, since no other committee member made a presentation as a distinct form of contribution to the process of review. Also, attendance at meetings became highly erratic with only five out of the 12 members being regular attendees. The situation forced the Chair on two instances to inform members of their right to resign from the committee without penalty (cf. Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Eisenhart & Howe, 1992). Four concerns informed the Chair's stance. First, the fundamental desire to engage in and produce quality work as a collaborative activity was a priority. Second, the need to secure the commitment and services of those keen to stay the course was imperative. Third, the composition of the committee itself was seemingly anomalous – all but four members were in another ad hoc TP committee comprising departmental representatives acting as liaison officers between their departments and the substantive TP Coordinator. Fourth, in line with the political nature of policy review, the Chair wanted to establish an inclusive *interpretive zone*, despite this being problematic. Wasser and Bressler (1996) (as cited in Gerstl-Pepin & Gunzenhauser, 2002) describe the interpretive zone as:

> The place where multiple viewpoints are held in dynamic tension as a group seeks to make sense of fieldwork issues and meanings. . . In the interpretive zone, researchers bring together their different kinds of knowledge, experience, and beliefs to forge new meanings through the process of the joint inquiry in which they are engaged (p. 142)

However, some committee members contested the idea of making presentations as they felt that the mandate of the committee was straightforward and transparent.

Nonetheless, an important milestone in the socialisation process was reached when the committee, following a typical action research cycle, formulated and adopted a work-plan with the following four broad inter-related iterative processes, summed up and presented for discussion as though they were stages:

> *Stage 1: Awareness raising stage* – Within a broader participatory framework, the committee discussed major conceptual issues as an important part of the initial socialisation process, helping Committee members to foster some preliminary understanding of their place, roles, and mandate.
>
> *Stage 2: Fieldwork and data collection* – The data collection phase was planned to coincide with the actual TP fieldwork for pre-service teachers. The idea for the arrangement was to ensure that data collected could be verified and triangulated in the field. The committee was to meet on

weekly basis to report on their assignments, to facilitate progressive focussing, continual data analysis, and to attend to any emergent issues.

Stage 3: Write-up – The committee sought to consolidate findings into policy priorities and directions to shape up any emergent model of TP. The stage entails benchmarking the emerging model with others in the region and from further afield.

Stage 4: Preliminary review by departments – The idea here is to consult further and seek further input before the report is finally submitted to the Dean of the Faculty.

Thus, on the surface, the committee appeared ready for work of sufficient complexity to unravel the critical concerns, issues, and challenges in TP as a policy issue. However, as Gerstl-Pepin and Gunzenhauser (2002) note insightfully, "due to our unconscious thoughts and assumptions, we often only share a partial understanding of each other's interpretations" (p. 141). This occured even though we worked collaboratively in meetings, communicating our interpretations across the interpretive zone. While we achieved some tremendous progress, a sneak preview of what was tossed into the interpretive zone suggests the existence of some deep undercurrents, and a committee that was fragmented in both spirit and purpose. A number of incidents, recounted below, appear to substantiate this assertion.

At a time when the committee had agreed to collect data, it became apparent that some committee members viewed the exercise with a high degree of skepticism and ambivalence. Suspicions surfaced that the Chair and myself (the facilitator) were manipulating the committee for our own ends, in order to publish in international peer-reviewed journals. The view supported an earlier incident in which my presentations were labeled as academic. With hindsight, it would appear the label, academic, was an expression of self-doubt, not used to show appreciation, but rather as an expression of rejection. In this case "academic" might mean reasoning by analysis, or might be seen derisively to mean irrelevant in practice, and possibly too theoretical to be of any practical relevance. This was probably a source of apprehension and an aversion for unknown methods and practices.. Quite clearly, it appears the understanding of TP and its review was not shared in the committee – we were operating from different vantage points. This became even clearer when some committee members rejected qualitative approaches in data collection, arguing that qualitative research in general is too demanding, time consuming, cumbersome, and is a preserve for experts. While the view is echoed by Delamont (2002), it seems my approach seemingly amounted to an overt affront on the mainstream culture of the committee. In rejecting qualitative action research, the committee moved swiftly to an approach using a survey questionnaire. In Delamont's view, the committee had possibly reached a point where members could not extricate themselves from what they knew already, clouding any approaches to policy review that sought to depersonalize views. This marked the end of an eight-week long socialisation process during which time committee members dealt with diverse conceptual issues appropriate for the policy review exercise.

Reflection on and an Interpretation of My Experiences

In reflecting on the turn of events, one question that comes to the fore is: Why did the committee jettison participatory action research after working so tirelessly on it with me as the facilitator? It seems the answer lies in the fact that committee members to change from what they know and start searching for new perspectives in understanding and appreciating themselves, their practices, and their conceptualisation of Teaching Practice (TP) by participating in Action Research (AR) processes. This cast doubt onto assumptions that I made from the onset. For instance, aligning the review with core areas of academic life was regarded with pessimism; instead, the committee chose to rely on intuition and tradition when the expectation was to the contrary. Out of naivety, I had assumed that my personal interpretation of logical progression in review would appeal to all group members. Furthermore, apart from the fact that "the literature on collaborative team research is sparse" (Gerstl-Pepin & Gunzenhauser, 2002, p. 140) my main weakness was in treating the relationship between adopting qualitative action research strategies, decision-making, and policy formulation as politically and methodologically unproblematic in group work. Nonetheless, I regard the abrupt change from qualitative participatory action research to questionnaires as pivotal in giving insight into some realities in collaborative work in policy review and formulation. This incident is regarded as significant and is explored in this article. The focus on the incident hinges on three concerns, namely the political nature of policy formulation, critical thinking, and socialization. The three areas are inter-related and give qualified insights into my experiences.

Reviewing Teaching Practice (TP) with a view to changing it provokes, in gatekeepers, some renewed interest and nostalgia for TP politics and the historically-legitimised traditions of its meanings and status. Thus, no matter the extent to which TP is perceived as redundant, it represents different viewpoints and a negotiated package associated with specific individuals at particular times in life, and perhaps that of the university. Within this view, collaborative work is itself an inherently political activity. According to Luke and Hogan (2006) "policy formulation in many educational jurisdictions. . .is often made according to arbitrary blends of precedent, political pressure and established ideology – independent of any systematic research or data, however defined" (p.173). The "adhocratic nature of policy process" comprises "a series of negotiations, power plays and misunderstandings" (Scott, 2000, p. 41), and does not necessarily lend itself to an orderly form of scientific rationality. It would seem that a lack of reciprocal relationships and polarised views among TP committee members failed participatory action research; one was either a leader or being led, posing a challenge to collaborative effort in a policy review exercise. Furthermore, as Ball, Maguire, and Macrae (2000) argue, "policy cannot be divorced from interests, from conflict, from domination or from justice" (as cited by Joseph, 2006, p. 147). Overall, the political nature itself may imply that outcomes of policy review may not have any intrinsic authority and power for adoption. However, an analytical and methodical approach in policy review was attempted, and my work as a facilitator was not itself apolitical in as far as it represented a particular view and perspective. Thus, the act of promoting the adoption of participatory action research strategies was itself value-laden and politically inclined:

> Deciding to take action is itself a political act, because what one person does invariably has consequences for someone else. Action researchers need to understand that they are frequently in potentially contested scenarios. When practitioners begin to question the current and historical contexts of a situation, and perhaps begin to reveal injustices, they have to make decisions about whether they wish to follow their own value commitments and try to improve the situation according to what they believe in, or go along with the status quo. These are difficult decisions to make, and can involve personal discomfort. (McNiff et al., 2003, p. 15)

Thus, the Teaching Practice (TP) review process and the proposed adoption of qualitative research strategies attracted the emergence of informal gatekeepers within the committee. However, as Morril, Buller, Buller, and Larkey (1999) might suggest, my problems began when I failed to think analytically about how my approach related to the broader political context. Thus, one needs to view gate-keeping as a practical and analytic problem. Similarly, one needs to recognize and analyse whether resistance to qualitative research was at a methodological or methods level (Robinson-Pant, 2005). Furthermore, and with hindsight, the label, academic, coined with respect to my brainstorming sessions, and the subsequent adoption of questionnaires, highlights conflicting ideological and political perspectives within the committee:

> What continue to be of interest are the attitudes of researchers working in the different traditions. While most people get along amicably, serious hostilities can break out when people feel their territory is threatened, understandably enough, because for many people territory symbolizes intellectual and physical property, and therefore status and income. (McNiff et al., 2003, p. 16)

The political nature of policy review and formulation, and the role and status of socialisation and critical thinking, the two strategies that sought to drive and influence the work of the committee, were probably questioned and contested in as far as they sought to work towards a hegemonic belief system that would render some gatekeepers relatively voiceless and weak. As noted by Albrecht and Bach (1997), the socialisation process exerts its own pressure towards conformity resulting in non-conformity being inconvenient and stressful for individuals.

The point here is that while the committee conceded the theoretical and conceptual basis of the work, there were possibly some personal and professional difficulties in accepting the modus operandi that essentially challenged their values and positions regarding TP and the instruments that could be used for its review. A related challenge emerges from the fact that critical reflection implies a socialisation process, and when viewed as "a process of examining the nature of those power relations in which we are positioned by the discursive and institutional arrangement in existence" (Scott, 2000, p. 126), it is not only philosophical but is also inherently divisive and political. With hindsight, it had never become apparent that socialisation would fail to provide an inclusive agenda in committee work—it seems that pragmatism and questionnaires

provided sufficient stimulus for the new group activity. Nonetheless, with the rejection of socialisation and critical thinking as defined in the policy review exercise, the broader literature shows some striking commonalities with my experiences, which are recounted and discussed below. In doing this, the attempt is to reconcile the use of questionnaires by the committee with practices and views noted in the literature.

The adoption of questionnaires appeared to be institutionalised, and perceived to be consistent with practice that appeals to administrators such that the perceived interest of the audience is the key guiding principle in the policy review exercise. Further, as Robinson-Pant (2005) suggests, the adoption of a qualitative research approach is not necessarily an "academic decision as to which kind of data or analysis might be appropriate to one's research question" (p. 63), but as a decision fraught with political implications, there could be some resistance—both practical and ideological—at the level of research methods:

> Qualitative research tools present(ed) a potential threat to the established status of traditional educational researchers who did not understand the terminology, or the purpose behind activities such as group discussion. Open dissatisfaction was thus expressed by colleagues and informants about unfamiliar research tools. Their criticism of the research methods came across less directly, yet lies behind many of their comments about research tools, for example, the insistence about one correct way of doing research through questionnaires. (Robinson-Pant, p. 66)

Nonetheless, the use of questionnaires suggests a more fundamental issue in that it possibly makes apparent that the assumptions and philosophy on TP as a policy issue were problematic in fostering agreements on its review. It is clear that the assumptions were not to be challenged, even though TP as practice and praxis was likely to be re-tooled. However, it might be the case that questionnaires were cultural and democratic tools in the exercise— they seemed to allow everybody some recognizable input, without much questioning, at formative stages of the review. Furthermore, seeking approval of such input from group members seemed to give legitimacy and prima facie basis that their activities are worthwhile. Also, when it comes to analysis of data from questionnaires, as captured succinctly by Robinson-Pant (2005),

> Presenting oneself as a technical statistician is far less of a risk (politically and personally) than a researcher deliberately setting out to initiate change and reflection, as in action research. In many academic institutions too, the right to express criticism (*or take a leadership role*) is associated with status. (p. 67) (*italicised addition is mine*)

This may offer little or no respite when judged against strong views that suggest that while policy formulation is ideologically situated and generally intellectually nonmethodical (Luke & Hogan, 2006), it must be informed by research. Nonetheless, while acknowledging the political nature of policy review, the exercise itself is a myriad of conflicts and tensions that needs reconciling and balancing with the desired outcomes. As Scott (2000) notes:

> A policy text, for example, is less concerned with reliable and valid forms of knowledge established through rigorous processes of research than with construction of coherent and persuasive messages which change practice at classroom level in ways that are intended. A research text seeks to conforms to those criteria which underpin good research; indeed, it is the faithful adherence to those criteria (whether they are accepted by everyone or not) which gives these texts the authority they have. (p.11)

The challenge here would have been to harmonise research activities in academia with the nature of policy outcomes that was implied in the terms of reference; this presents another challenge pertaining to:

> The tension between wanting to present recommendations or definite conclusions and the recognition that *the review* [case study] necessarily involves presenting complexity and uncertainty. . . [*thus, there is a question relating to*] how far their research problem had been decided by the employer or sponsor. If they were asked to go out and find the answer to a specific question, it would be much harder to come back armed with *findings* [case study] that led to more questions or uncertainty. (Robinson-Pant, 2005, p. 75) (*italicised addition is mine*)

In retrospect, and in trying to reconcile my approach with my activities, it turns out that participatory action research imposed on the committee the unenviable task of confronting the implications of their discoveries to the formulation of Teaching Practice (TP). However, the emergent tensions and conflicts were not necessarily counterproductive, but intellectually and professionally challenging to warrant full understanding in a policy review context.

Lessons Learnt and Concluding Thoughts

The primary purpose of this paper is to give a narrative overview of my attempt to use participatory action research to guide collaborative work in a policy review exercise in Botswana. While it appears clear that significant effort went into preparing ground for action research to have effect and impact in group dynamics, it is undoubtedly clear that the realities on the ground circumscribe the success or otherwise of the strategy. It would appear that an unwritten institutionalised culture upheld by some committee members is not only a form of resistance to say, domination and knowledge (cf. Carson, 1997), but also masquerades as some form of entrenched competitive rivalry to other approaches to policy review.

Thus, the assumptions on which my work and the adoption of action research were modeled were challenged. Aligning a policy review exercise with life in academia, where theories and research interlink in practice, was perhaps detested. The assumed relationship between a review of Teaching Practice (TP) and academic life was possibly not politically convenient and practical. The assumption that the structuring of the

activity itself would be the basis for group cohesion, unity, and identity was also short-lived and never materialised into a sustainable basis for group action.

It became apparent that while policymaking was inevitably based on group consensus, it was not envisaged that consensus will be defined as the consent of the majority rather than systemic thought. This was contrary to the idea that systemic thinking as embodied in research would become the dominant collective value. Given the scenario, it would seem the committee emerged more as a mere mobilization structure than a framework for collaborative learning, interrogation, research, and publication. Another challenge emerges from a policy perspective. The resistance to policy reform can emanate from committees which, instead of being a lever for change, unwittingly sponsor and perpetuate the status quo. Clearly, the intervention potential and the practical judgment implied in the action research strategy had presumed that challenges would not emanate from committee members.

Two important lessons are worthy of note here. One is that the complex and contested nature of Teaching Practice (TP) as theory, practice, policy, and praxis is not only political, but is also potentially divisive. Another lesson from my experiences is that at the confluence of theory and methodical practice exist some challenges that could be the real test for group cohesion and faith in participatory action research.

It appears, as in this paper, that group identity can be a powerful driving force in policy review, but there might be a problem in not knowing how far group identity can successfully drive and sustain a key initiative in policy review. However, the wider implications are three-fold. First, an empowerment agenda through action research must deal with the structural and institutional challenges in ways that might provide an alternative model for collaborative work in policy review. Second, there appears to be a need to establish a forum to look into and unravel the nature, functions, mandate, and conceptualisation of ad hoc committees as critical instruments for policy review in Botswana. Third, while the prospects of qualitative educational research strategies to inform policy and foster capacity building (Crossley & Vulliamy, 1997; Vulliamy, 1990) in Botswana are hitherto unknown, there appears to be a need for qualitative research to embed meaningfully in the mainstream academic life at the University. This will ideally help in the realisation of the functional interplay between policy, research, theory, teaching, practice, and innovation.

In conclusion, I think it pays to rethink and reflect on what one has engaged in—it can be very revealing. Even though I emerged hugely disappointed and emotionally bruised in failing to use action research to influence policy review and policy-making, I have learnt the seemingly obvious: policy formulation is seemingly adhocratic, and yet I tend to believe that qualitative research holds the promise of a systemic and informed way forward on certain policy matters in education!

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