Educational renovation in a South African 'township on the move': A social–spatial analysis

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Abstract

This article presents an account of the ways education reform has been mediated in one South African township. It suggests that the normative policy intentions of the reforming post-apartheid state have been reworked in light of the specific social configuration of the township and its schools. It employs social–spatial lenses to understand the formative interaction between the township's social configuration processes and the institutional identities of its schools and teachers. The article shows how educational reform has been renovated in light of the spatially networked processes that played out in and around the schools. It suggests that the effects of educational policy reform can best be understood by the uses to which it has been put in this localised terrain.

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1. Introduction

The focus of this article is on the ways national educational policy reforms are mediated in specific geographic contexts. Instead of viewing reforms as decisive in authorising educational practices in schools, I will suggest that they are constantly re-worked and renovated. How they are given material effect, i.e., what becomes of them and the diverse ways in which they are appropriated, depends on the specific formative dynamics operating in a context (see Hart, 2002, pp. 26–32). The conceptual question therefore centres on how education reform becomes part of the social dynamics of the context. A key concern of the article is to give analytical weight to the impact of 'context' on the institutional identities of schools.[1]

Education policy reform in the South African post-apartheid period has an ambiguous legacy. Declerq (1997) has suggested that policy has been based on a strong forward mapping approach, reflecting a decisive break with the legacy of apartheid education. This policy vision signalled a radical approach to reform. There has however emerged a gap between the intentions of policy and the state's ability to establish an equitable system. After 10 years of reform, there is broad consensus,

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acknowledged by the state, that the inequities in education have deepened and that reform initiatives have faltered. Some commentators have averred that the 'big vision' approach to reform has amounted to political symbolism that has served as cover for an increasingly unpopular technocratic approach (Karlsson, 2002).

Academic criticism of this approach to reform has focused on the gap between policy intentions and policy implementation (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005; Fiske and Ladd, 2004). The influential 'Getting Learning Right' report on teaching, learning and classroom conditions was the first major report to document the mixed reception of school improvement policies in the country's diverse range of schools (see Taylor and Vinjevold, 1999). Following this report, numerous smaller-scale studies have demonstrated ways in which the state's policy enunciations have largely discounted the mediating influences of the professional contexts of schools and teachers. This effect has been most clearly illustrated by the uneven implementation of school curriculum policy (see Harley and Wedekind, 2004, pp. 195–220; Visagie, 2005, pp. 64–103). The inefficacy of educational reform can partially be explained as the outcome of the way the material and discursive contexts of schooling, what Ball (1994) terms the 'policy recreation platform,' have reworked the initial intentions of the reform. The example of curriculum disjunctions shows how reforms have been exacerbated by new difficulties with respect to social conditions and relations in and around schools.

The trope of policy renovation in specific contexts will be subjected to analysis in this article. I will show how educational reform initiatives authorised at the national scale are reinterpreted in the local context of one particular township. My focus is not primarily on what policy does, but on how it becomes part of, and is given meaning in this specific context. I discuss the relationship between the configuring dynamics of this township and the schools within it. This refers to the formative relationship between social settlement and place generating dynamics on the one hand, and schooling processes on the other. Drawing on Ngwane (2002), the analysis is an attempt to understand the interaction between the modalities of education policy and the subjectivities that they entail when they enter specific spaces. I set out to show how the social dynamics of local processes in the township renovate policy modalities.

The case of a specific urban township in Cape Town is presented here as a lens through which to elucidate the manner in which *social–spatial processes* provide the mediating terrain for educational reform initiatives. I will argue that schooling practices do not stem primarily from policy *per se*, but as the case discussed below shows, from the localised processes arising out of networked relationships. It is networks of social relationships that lead to *de facto* policy arrangements. My ongoing research in this township exemplifies an environment in which social–spatial processes are unfolding. This article is an attempt to *illuminate the nature and theory of these processes,* and I will suggest that efforts to understand policy reforms are best derived from an analysis of sites where they are taken up and renovated by the dynamics of space and social networks.

The research material for this article is drawn from my larger ethnographic project on pedagogical identities in a township in Cape Town, which I fictitiously named Rustvale. This article is primarily based on a sub area of the township, which I called Rustvale Extension. It draws on extensive observations and semi-structured interviews carried out over a 5-month period.[2] The observations were accomplished in and around Rustvale Extension's schools. We set out to understand the impact on the schools of the area's formal and informal networks, civic processes, and neighbourhood dynamics. The observations provided an understanding of the ways the township's social dynamics flowed into and helped shape school processes. With regard to the interviews, we had extensive sessions with principals at all the schools in the sub area, and a number of teachers and parents at four schools. We interviewed a range of civic and community actors including the local ward councillor, three senior policemen, and the social worker and the health practitioner who service the schools. We also spoke to two youth community activists, three priests and an area manager in charge of some of the schools. Finally, we conducted interviews with two senior provincial educational planners and two city planners responsible for housing and recreational planning in Rustvale Extension. The interviews and observations provided textured portrayals of the ways school practices and identities were influenced by broader environmental dynamics,

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[2]The observations and interviews were shared between my research assistant, George Brink, and myself as the project leader.