

Reflections on educational research in South Africa

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A definition of educational research is proposed: Educational research is a particular mode of social service, using rigorous scientific endeavours for the continuous improvement of educational practice. The key components of this definition are used to reflect on educational research in South Africa as (1) a particular mode of social service (with discussion of an ethical code for educational research and national educational research priorities), (2) scientific endeavour (with reference to the nature of educational research, dissertations, scientific articles and research programme reports), and (3) role players in the continuous improvement of educational practice (with reference to policy making and operational practice). It is evident that educational research in South Africa has a noteworthy record of national and regional impact. Present threats to its academic stature and praxiological impact can only be overcome by taking appropriate and timely research management action.

Introduction

During the period when I was teaching German, I completed a dissertation in German literature on the topic *Die Problematik der Wissenschaft im modernen Theater* (Kamper, 1974). This study was inspired by an interest in scientific work, and an interest in theatre. The study provided an apt way to combine these interests by investigating three plays on the antics and scruples of scientists. The plays in question were *Leben des Galilei* by Bertolt Brecht (Brecht, 1969), *Die Physiker* by Friedrich Dürrenmatt (Dürrenmatt, 1962) and, for comparative purposes, an Afrikaans play, namely *Plaston: DNS-kind* by PG du Plessis (Du Plessis, 1973). These plays depict the world of science as alien to the everyday world, and scientists as fallible, tragi-comical figures, who are also potentially very powerful and dangerous. The latter renders them particularly prone to targeting and manipulation by political powers. In each of the plays, the scientist's dilemma of social responsibility versus the passion of scientific enquiry is skilfully dealt with, possibly epitomised by one of the 21 theses which Dürrenmatt states at the end of his play: *Was alle angeht, können nur alle lösen*. (Issues which concern all, should be solved by all.) This study has influenced my thinking on science ever since, and forms the basis for the following definition of educational research: Educational research is a particular mode of social service, using rigorous scientific endeavours for the continuous improvement of educational practice.

The key elements of the definition will now be used to reflect on the position and future of educational research in South Africa. As will become evident, such reflections are long overdue.

Educational research is a particular mode of social service ...

Human science may be described in a nutshell as the quest for verified knowledge about humans for the benefit of humankind (cf. HSRC, 1997). On account of this description, human science is essentially a form of social service with a strong client-centred ethic. This applies particularly to educational research. However, there appears to be no reassuring relationship between the magnitude of research documents on education on the one hand, and the perceived limited impact of educational research on education practice on the other (cf. already dated sources such as Engelbrecht, 1988; Botha, 1996, but still highly relevant). How, then, can the social accountability of educational research be founded and continuously improved? Points of departure which appear to be meaningful in dealing with the social accountability of educational research are:

- an ethical code for educational research, and
- national educational research priorities.

An ethical code for educational research

An ethical code for educational research is desirable for three reasons. Educational research deals with a corpus of knowledge that is of social importance, and which can be misused/abused without the subjects of

the research knowing it; or they may be incapable of resisting its application. An ethical code is therefore necessary to regulate the collection and application of educational knowledge. Secondly, as already indicated, educational research is a mode of social service, and as such an integral part of the teaching profession. One of the features of a profession is that it wants to serve, and does not seek its own enrichment (Van der Walt, 1979:7). The service motive of a profession may be reflected effectively in an ethical code which guides the professional activities of the members and which emphasises the well-being and interests of the client. Finally, the existence of a variety of codes of conduct for professions and other service industries may be taken as indicator of the potential and established value of such codes.

It is important, however, to avoid unrealistic expectations regarding ethical codes. As Van der Walt (1979:8) points out, an ethical code can do no more than provide certain guidelines for professional conduct, which aim to

- leave the professional practitioner in no doubt about the course of action in sometimes highly problematic situations which he or she may encounter; and
- lay down standards of conduct which will gain the confidence of the general public, and establish professional autonomy (through societal confidence that the profession is capable of running its own affairs responsibly and for societal benefit).

The research code of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC, 1997) could serve as a good example of an ethical code of research. It deals with ethical issues in human sciences research concisely, but comprehensively, when compared with similar and other professional codes of conduct (cf. Van der Walt, 1979:11-13; Raffe, Bundell & Bibby, 1989:15; Watson (ed.), 1985:1-8; Sammons, 1989:39-46; Sieber, 1992:18-19; Simons, 1989:134-135. Significantly, the code has a direct, personal approach (mentioning "the researcher", rather than "research" or "science"). It is written in accessible language and the text design is reader friendly.

In short, the HSRC research code (HSRC, 1997) commits the human sciences researchers to upholding and respecting the principles of participation, transparency, professionalism and accountability in their research through, *inter alia*

- scientific integrity and excellence, social empathy and responsibility, and the recognition of the dignity of the individual;
- safeguarding the confidentiality of data, and
- doing research which serves the interests of society as a whole (rather than sectional interests), and which deals noticeably with the improvement of quality of life.

These commitments are essential in an educational research code. In addition, an educational research code should:

- Have a national focus. A proliferation of regional and institutional educational research codes will hardly serve any purpose.
- Be drawn up by an organisation which is positioned in South African society as influential human sciences research agent. The

HSRC seems to be the logical choice. Obviously, the compilation of the code should be done with proper academic, professional and societal input.

- Be endorsed by all educational researchers, including masters and doctoral students.
- Be concise, reader friendly and available in all major South African languages.

The establishment of a national educational research code on the basis of these considerations and guidelines will provide the much-needed parameters for ensuring ever-increasing social accountability in educational research in South Africa.

National educational research priorities

The notion of social service implies that focused attention should be given to the relevance of actions which are planned and exercised. In the context of educational research, this involves continued attention to the research agenda, essentially to national educational research priorities. Determining and following such priorities is essential for visionary policy making in education (*cf.* Engelbrecht, 1988:15).

In the previous political dispensation, and especially since the De Lange investigation into the provision of education in South Africa (HSRC, 1981), the HSRC did major work in continuously setting and revising national research priorities for educational research, derived from the work of the 18 Work Committees of this investigation. Since the university sector was to a greater or lesser degree represented in the work committees (my experience), the national research priorities were identified and pursued in this sector, even in the work of masters and doctoral students. In recent years, the situation has changed. The National Research Foundation (NRF) was established in 1999 through the NRF Act (NRF, 2003) and sets the research scene in South Africa. Particular focus areas for research have been identified, and research programmes and projects are funded accordingly. The focus area for education is phrased as "Education and the challenges for change" and, within it, seven provisional research issues have been set, covering themes such as restructuring in higher education and further education and training; science, technology and mathematics education; language issues and literacy, and HIV/AIDS in education (NRF, 2003). These research issues, although important, are broad, and at present there is little evidence to show that supervisors and promoters take pains to locate masters and doctoral studies particularly within these areas. More conspicuous is the need to do meta-analyses (*cf.* Engelbrecht, 1988) of all the projects undertaken within a particular focus area in order to facilitate policy and practical impetus.

In the light of its key role as national human sciences research agent, the HSRC (HSRC, 2003) is in the best position to set national research priorities and to initiate national research programmes in the human sciences. It could, for example, embark on a comprehensive research programme on the alleviation of poverty (locally, regionally and on the continent), a programme which would *inter alia* involve a meta-analysis of all poverty-related NRF-registered projects. Evidently, educational research will make a major contribution to such work, giving unmistakable evidence of its accountability and relevance *vis-à-vis* national social issues.

... using rigorous scientific endeavours ...

This part of the definition poses the question: How should educational research be conceptualised, and what renders such research scientifically rigorous? To start with attention will be given to the nature of educational research, then the quality of educational research will be discussed with reference to dissertations/theses, scientific articles and national educational research programme reports.

Nature of educational research

There is an ongoing debate about the nature of educational research (*cf.* Engelbrecht, 1988; Hay 2000; Lageman 2002). Is it a discipline or a field of study? What paradigms can be distinguished within it? Can one understand it in terms of qualitative and/or quantitative research?

What role does theory play? More disconcerting are critical questions about the significance of educational research. Do policy makers and practitioners really heed research findings to any meaningful extent? These questions are legion. The following three points are raised in an attempt to reach clarification:

- The nature of educational research can best be understood by realising that teaching is a profession, and that any profession has and needs "usable knowledge" as part of the profession (*cf.* Lagemann 2002). Educational research is therefore "use-inspired" (*ibid.*) with potential application in a wide variety of contexts. Importantly, this view of educational research does not compromise or restrict the menu of research methods usable in educational research. Nor is the notion of use necessarily linked to immediacy. Educational research should include theory building, design experiments, and follow-up research and even extended longitudinal studies.
- Following on the above, educational research cannot be understood as a discipline in itself. Lagemann (2002:1) aptly states: "[E]ducation research must translate and combine understandings from the disciplines about all the factors that may affect a particular educational situation ... It is this function of combining knowledge of many sorts and thereby providing evidence about the changes of accomplishing one's goals that should distinguish education research from other kinds of investigation".
- This description implies the following key features of academically accountable educational research: it is transdisciplinary (*cf.* Hay 2000:55), rigorous (in terms of professional quality assurance), open (in terms of stakeholder involvement) and praxiological (contributing to continuous improvement of practice by linking the academic context with the context of application).

This view of the nature of educational research has distinct implications for the NRF rating of educational researchers (*cf.* Wright & Murray 2002:86-87). For many years, researchers in the natural sciences have had the opportunity to apply for formally acknowledged peer rating of their scholarship at the former statutory Foundation for Research Development (FRD — now replaced by NRF). NRF rating has distinct benefits, especially for the acquisition of research funds. The opportunity for peer rating has recently been extended to social researchers. It is disconcerting that, according to a presentation made by a senior NRF official (Nevhatalu, 2003), the rating criteria seem to be narrowly discipline-orientated, making it difficult for transdisciplinary researchers (as in educational research) to achieve proper rating. Another concern is the heavy emphasis on international publications, ignoring the essential praxiological feature of educational research.

It is perfectly possible to sit in the study and develop article after article, position after position, publish this work in high-powered journals, disseminate it at international conferences, and still have a negligible impact on educational transformation. Is this "A"-rated research behaviour? (Wright & Murray 2002:87).

Representatives from education faculties in higher education institutions should urgently debate this matter with the NRF.

The scientific quality of educational research, as reflected in its most common forms of reporting, namely, masters dissertations, doctoral theses, scientific articles, and national research programme reports, will now be briefly discussed.

Dissertations and theses

From the in-depth research done by Lessing and Schulze (2002), as well as from data on supervision as summarised by Schulze and Kamper (2003), it is evident that the quality of educational research is compromised by factors which inhibit proper supervision and quality control. These include the following: poorly prepared students (in terms of language proficiency, knowledge of research methodology, work experience, project-planning capabilities), inexperienced and/or unavailable (often absent) supervisors, and questionable examination practices (such as nepotism in examiner selection; and lack of generic examination guidelines). One questions what a comprehensive audit

of a representative sample of completed dissertations and theses in the various Faculties or Schools of Education would reveal?

Scientific articles

My observations on scientific articles in the educational research domain are based mainly on my own experience in the editorship of two academic journals. Trends which compromise the quality of educational research articles are the following:

Locally, a limited number of accredited educational journals have to cope with an avalanche of articles. Due to publication pressure, many submissions are poorly prepared and impede the work of reviewers. The latter do the work voluntarily as part of academic citizenship, but are becoming increasingly overburdened and consequently unwilling to continue this crucial work. Journal editors are increasingly battling to keep the peer review process afloat and on course. The results are inevitable: poor work can slip through, contributing to critical questions which are sometimes asked about the general standard of research writing in the social sciences and humanities in South Africa (*cf.* Pillay, 1997:50). On the standard of research proposals, for example, Stumpf (1998, as quoted by Hay, 2000:55) remarks:

Many research proposals in the social sciences and humanities do not meet international scholarly requirements. Common defects are sloppy proposal writing, a lack of methodological rigour, poor research design, inadequate acquaintance with new developments and the latest literature in the field, a poor capacity to conceptualise, and difficulty in achieving a high level of intellectual rigour.

When one examines the content of three prominent South African education journals — *Perspectives in Education* (2001–2003), *South African Journal of Education* (2001–2003), and *South African Journal of Higher Education* (2000–2002) — over the past three years, it appears that most articles are rather isolationist, revealing little discourse on previously published articles in the same journal. Moreover, there are few instances of co-authorship which transcend institutional or national boundaries. Only *Perspectives in Education* regularly features contributions from abroad. Articles on meta-studies of educational research in South Africa are scarce, contributing to the paradigmatic malaise educational research finds itself in, as alluded to earlier.

The overall impression (which is certainly not confined to educational research) is that everybody writes, but nobody reads — a dichotomous oversimplification indeed, but nevertheless to be taken seriously. Evidently, educational practice does not benefit from this situation, which is regrettable in view of the fact that educational Rome is burning in various places.

Solutions to these problems are without doubt possible: for instance it would be possible to negotiate with the NRF to provide much needed support in the peer reviewing of articles. This could entail the appointing and funding of groups of peer reviewers per study field or discipline on a contractual basis. Journals can then make use of these peer reviewers and be assured of quality, consistency, and timeliness of feedback.

National educational research programme reports

National educational research programme reports are arguably the best showpieces of high quality educational research, because such reports usually reflect the collective research effort of top specialists in the field. Two examples come to mind, namely the 1981 HSRC investigation into the provision of education (HSRC, 1981) and the National Education Policy Investigation in 1992 (NEPI, 1993). As already mentioned, the former produced 18 comprehensive research reports on key aspects of education provision, followed in ensuing years by numerous subreports. The NEPI was smaller in scope, but produced 12 comprehensive reports which set an education policy framework which the new government could use, and stimulated further research including that of masters and doctoral students.

Educational research programmes of this magnitude have not been undertaken in recent years, although the potential and need for

such undertakings have certainly been there, especially in view of national dilemmas such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic and ever-increasing poverty (Kamper, 2003a). National educational research programmes currently being undertaken by the HSRC in its Education Policy Research programme cover high priority areas such as education in rural schools, school integration, and gender in education (HSRC 2003).

In most higher education institutions a number of highly experienced educational researchers are involved in regional projects, undertaken with the aid of overseas sponsorships. The South Africa–Netherlands Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD, 2003) serves as a good example of the extent of these projects. Strict peer review measures (per contractual agreements) usually ensure that the quality of project reports is beyond question.

To sum up the issue of "rigorous scientific endeavours" in South African educational research: notwithstanding the concerns expressed, educational research in South Africa can boast a strong base of expertise and scholarship. As indicated, however, the available expert capacity is overtaxed, with negative consequences for educational research quality and impact. In the short and medium term, there are evidently two priorities, namely,

- thorough training of supervisors and promoters. In a recent article, Van der Westhuizen and De Wet (2002) give an outline of the required training, and this applies equally to educational research. The argument is simple: a good supervisor will ensure good research training (of student and mentoree), quality research, effective dissemination, and eventually a dedicated and respected academic citizenry;
- fostering the academic writing skills of prospective and new researchers (*cf.* Henning, Gravett & Van Rensburg, 2002).

... for the continuous improvement of educational practice

It is important to note that the notion educational practice has a **policy**, as well as an **operational** dimension. Both will be briefly discussed *vis-à-vis* educational research.

Policy dimension

One of the most intriguing issues in educational research is the question: to what extent, and under which circumstances, can there be a constructive interaction between educational research and education policy making? Put more bluntly, under the cloak of scepticism: is it not true that most education policy-making happens in the realms of politics, i.e. without any meaningful inspiration and direction by academic educational research?

In a thought-provoking article, Jansen (2003) introduces the model of Reimers and McGinn (1997) which specifies the prerequisites and procedures to be followed for meaningful educational research influence on education policy-making. Jansen then discusses education policy-making in South Africa by identifying several policy orientations towards research as manifested since 1994. He points out that the main orientation has been "research to justify a policy decision already taken" and he cites research initiatives to justify the controversial outcomes-based education as an example. He concludes that, in South Africa at present, there is a distinct disjunction between education policy and educational research, simply due to the primacy of politics in bringing about rapid and radical changes. This "leaves little room for the logic and discipline of research in an environment where policy symbolism outweighed practical considerations" (Jansen 2003: 91). Jansen (2003:92-93) closes the article with five prerequisites that should be fulfilled in terms of the Reimers-McGinn model to ensure meaningful educational research influence on education policy-making in South Africa, namely,

- the research must deal with immediate problems facing the authorities;
- the research has to be linked to dedicated research structures within government departments;
- government officials need to be convinced of the value of research-based information for policy-making;

- stakeholder groups should be constructively involved (not simply to give the impression of legitimacy) in both research and policy making;
- capable leadership, which allows space for quality policy-related research to be undertaken detached from day-to-day problems.

These prerequisites cannot be discussed here in detail, but one consideration seems to be of particular importance, namely, the establishment of a research culture in officialdom through dedicated research structures, and, most importantly, the appointment of trained researchers in such structures. At present the situation is that very few officials

have ever worked in sophisticated policy environments where information is critical in allocative or programmatic decisions.

Few have engaged in advanced study in higher education, let alone policy studies (Jansen, 2003:93).

Jansen's observations concern the dispensation since 1994, but what happened earlier? The HSRC investigation into the provision of education (HSRC, 1981) has already been referred to. In this case, the government of the day instructed the HSRC to conduct an in-depth investigation into all facets of education provision in South Africa. Within 12 months, the HSRC had to make recommendations on guiding principles for a feasible education policy, as well as on wide-ranging managerial and organisational aspects of education provision. The investigation had to cover all levels of education, i.e. pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary education. This initiative created a hive of research activity (my own experience), steered by the 18 work committees mentioned earlier. What was its eventual effect on policy making?

To answer this question, Van Zyl (1991) did an extensive retrospective study of the aftermath of the HSRC investigation. This study was done in 1991, exactly ten years after the release of the original HSRC findings and recommendations. In her report, she lists 54 key recommendations of the HSRC investigation, and then indicates the extent to which these were taken up in government policy (Van Zyl, 1991:125-145). The results are illuminating: of the 54 key recommendations, 16 (30%) were fully implemented, 21 (39%) were partially implemented, 10 (19%) were not implemented at all and the remaining seven (13%) disappeared into oblivion. Van Zyl warns against clear-cut conclusions. The manner in which legislation, as well as recommendations, is operationalised in practice is a "diffuse and subjective field of study" (Van Zyl, 1991:120). She also highlights the overarching power of politics as follows:

History has shown how the report and its recommendations were drawn into the political arena, because decisions on educational provision are, after all has been said and done, made by politicians within an existing or changing political framework" (*ibid.*: 121).

On the whole, however, it appears from Van Zyl's work (Van Zyl, 1991), as well as from the very existence of the Reimers-McGinn model (*cf.* Jansen 2003), that constructive academic research impact on education policy is indeed possible. But, as Jansen states pointedly, there is a prerequisite:

Policy-orientated research cannot simply be the handmaiden of the state; it also needs to retain a critical distance and space which enable studies to emerge that show how policies might in fact be implicated in deepening racial divisions or class inequalities or spatial (urban/rural) differences (Jansen, 2003:94).

The key future challenge for educational research in the realms of education policy is indeed to maintain this critical distance and space jealously.

Operational dimension

The operational dimension of educational research in the continuous improvement of educational practice can best be understood in terms of (metaphorically speaking) the "democratisation" of educational research, that is by breaking down the academic ivory towers of educational research. I shall start by discussing the rationale for this and

then provide some practical guidelines for democratising educational research.

The following reasons may be given for democratising educational research:

- There is a dire need to investigate the potential role of indigenous educational knowledge, especially in utilising indigenous technologies, and in empowering educators and learners to have confidence in their own capabilities and a sense of pride in their own ways of being (Higgs & Van Niekerk, 2002:39;46).
- It has already been indicated that educational research is a particular mode of social service. As with any service, the scope of the service will correspond to the number of service providers: the more service providers, the bigger the scale of the service.
- In view of the above, the intrinsic role of stakeholders in educational research must be emphasised, based on the principle that the user of educational research findings belongs to the research community (Engelbrecht, 1988:17).
- Le Grange (2002) makes the illuminating point that educational research should be perceived as a process that embodies democratic values, that is it empowers participants through democratic processes. In this sense, educational research should be contextual, responsive, emergent, participatory, critical, and praxiological (Le Grange, 2002:39). These features are explained as follows:
 - Contextual. The research process respects and relates closely to the workplace issues of the participants.
 - Responsive. The issues explored are those of interest and concern to participants themselves.
 - Emergent. The knowledge contributes to the knowledge base of the particular study.
 - Participatory. All participants are involved as equitably as possible in all dimensions of the research process.
 - Critical. The research looks beyond the surface layers of what is being investigated.
 - Praxiological. The research represents an interplay between theoretical and practical considerations.
- As in other professions, action research (or operational research) should be part and parcel of teaching and tutoring. Action research is generally understood as workplace-based research that is undertaken by professionals to improve aspects of their work or to solve immediate problems in the work situation (*cf.* Neuman, 1997:23-25).
- The acceptance of an ethical code for educational research (as discussed already) can provide the basis for common understanding of educational research irrespective of the context in which it is done.

Some practical guidelines for democratising educational research are the following:

- In educational research, there could be a distinction, but not a division, between academic and action researchers. The former are masters and doctoral students, as well as academics and professional researchers; the latter come from the ranks of excellent teachers and officials (e.g. circuit managers, subject advisors).
- The following scenario is perhaps idealistic, but gives an idea of what could happen as part of continuous improvement of education practice:

Action researchers work together in 'research guilds' (research fellowships) which are constituted on a regional or local basis. These guilds meet periodically to discuss suggested research topics, and to establish research project teams. The emphasis is on research and development. The product is mostly a new programme or an innovative procedure, rather than a new publication. Educators who are involved with action research use innovative ways of data gathering (e.g. teacher narratives — see Paola, 2002) and report writing (divorced from the conventions of 'academic writing'). Moreover, action research enjoys the unrestrained support of institutional management, and it entails career credit for those involved.

It must be accepted that developments will be slow and evolutionary. There can, however, be no doubt that, notwithstanding the initial existence of perhaps only a few educational research guilds in the whole of South Africa, the initiative will be worthwhile as a step towards unleashing the vast potential of educational research in an innovative and unconventional way for the benefit of learners, teachers, and society as a whole. It is worth mentioning that the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) started a laudable action research initiative a few years ago (Wickham & Bailey, 2000), but it would appear that it did not take root as expected. The reasons for this deserve an in-depth investigation.

- The distinction between academic and action researchers is purely practical, and not meant to be degrading towards the latter, as if action research cannot be rigorously academic. It could be, but not necessarily so. Furthermore, the distinction should never be regarded as absolute. It could happen, for instance, that someone is an action as well as an academic educational researcher (e.g. as a masters or doctoral student).
- Academic institutions and educational research guilds should liaise closely. This can best be arranged at local or regional level. It is also important that educational research guilds should have a national forum, supported by an appropriate publication.
- Effective democratisation of educational research implies the need for a clearing house which includes the following functions:
 - maintaining a database on educational research projects, comparable with (for example) the educational research database of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER, 2003);
 - dissemination of information on academic and action research projects and findings through appropriate media;
 - provision of guidelines on the establishment and functioning of educational research guilds, and serving as a national forum for these guilds;
 - facilitating educational research discourse through information technology and other appropriate media; and
 - close liaison with the HSRC and NRF on national educational research priorities and programmes.

Clearing-house funding should be provided by the NRF. The actual placement of the clearing house could be determined by the NRF on a tender basis.

From the discussion it is evident that educational research is indeed a *sine qua non* for the continuous improvement of educational practice in both the policy and operational dimensions. However, this role must be meticulously prepared, planned, structured, and managed in both dimensions.

Closing remarks

The closing remarks link up with the earlier discussion of an ethical code for educational research, and the notion of professionalism which underpins such a code. In recent years, a particular threat to professionalism in education has come to the fore, ironically from teacher unions. In an inaugural lecture at Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), Davies (2003) gave a disturbing account of a new culture of workerism amongst many teachers, brought about by the adversarial and opportunistic vantage points and acts of teacher unions. He indicates conclusively how this is endangering the status of teaching as profession. The implications for educational research are grave, bearing in mind that the academic status of educational research depends directly on the professional status of teachers and lecturers. A conceivably controversial and elitist remark seems appropriate here: professionals are by definition intellectuals. The key role of educational research, then, appears to be the development of intellectuals in education. Intellectuals can also be adversarial, but in a way which differs fundamentally from typical union demands. Said (1974:11) describes an intellectual as follows:

The central fact for me is, I think, that the intellectual is an indi-

vidual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publically to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by government or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behaviour concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously.

In this vein, educational researchers represent the conscience of educationists, a conscience which should nowadays be fully activated in the light of signs that an educational disaster is looming in South Africa through the neglect of individual learner responsibility, as well as basic numeracy and literacy skills in the new curriculum. Eventually and essentially, intellectuals' conscience concerns values (Molnar, 1994:xvii):

We live, alas, in an age of "communication", and communication becomes a cancerous growth when little is worth communicating. The race of communicators in schools and the media will die out when the awareness of this civilisation's emptiness hits consciences. The rebirth of the intellect will take place when the thinkers wake up to the depth and marvels of existence and its fullness of meaning.

I return to Bertolt Brecht. In *Leben des Galilei* the main character eventually finds himself in dire straits. In fear of state reprisals and death threats, he betrays the truth and the positive societal impact of his research. His student, Andrea, asks him (freely translated): "Do you still believe that a new dispensation has dawned?" Galilei answers with a single word: "Indeed." This answer is the crux of the play, and denotes unwavering belief in the constructive societal role of scientists. Reflections on educational research in South Africa indicate that this belief is indeed appropriate in view of the potential and real impact of educational research on the philosophy and practice of education in South Africa.

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