DRAFT ONLY

DEFINING THE REAL:
CONTEXT AND BEYOND

Terri Seddon

Faculty of Education,
Monash University
Clayton, Vic 3168

DEFINING THE REAL:
CONTEXT AND BEYOND

Context is a very frequently used term in education. In everyday talk, in policy,
pedagogy and research, we are told about `the context of ...', `contextual influences on ...'.
Researchers report on `contextual analyses' and note the trend to `contextualism' (Poole,
1980). In some tertiary institutions there are even administrative groupings and courses
called `Contextual Studies'.

`Context' is also central to many current discussions of educational restructuring.
The controversial US book Politics, Markets and America's Schools (Chubb and Moe,
1990) for example, targets the context of schooling. The authors reiterate the claims that
American schools are failing and must be reformed. But, they argue, the current
movements for reform can only fail because they tinker with the practices of schooling
instead of tackling the fundamental cause of ineffective schooling:

It is our view that all schools are shaped in pervasive and subtle ways by their
institutional settings, and that the kind of organisations they become and how
effectively they perform are largely reflections of the institutional contexts within
which they operate.

(Chubb and
Moe, 1990:2)

Their case is that the context of US schooling must be changed in order to change the
performance of schools. Tear down the existing institutions of educational governance,
the institutions of democratic politics It is not clear in their account how the institutions of democratic politics differ from
the institutions of democracy, nor whether the dissolution of the former would also mean
a dissolution of the latter. and the coercive power of public authority, which
constitute `the one best system' and produce stifling bureaucracy. Replace them with a

market system which will create autonomous, decentralised and effective
schools.

The everyday significance of context is echoed in educational
research. The
impression that there is now more attention to `context' is born out in the
literature.

A search of material published in three five year periods, 1966-70,
1976-80 and
1986-90, listed on the ERIC data base on CD-ROM shows that context has been
used
increasingly over the three publication periods. Table 1 shows the
percentage of entries
in different fields that used `context' either in the entry as a whole, or
in the title. There
is, of course, substantial scope for error in these frequency counts
because of the way the
data base is constructed, but it does give some indication of a research
trend.

_____

TABLE 1 IN HERE

_____

The table shows that firstly, across all fields over the
publication periods the use of
`context' has increased and most markedly in the 1980s. Secondly, the
increased use of
`context' is greater in titles where the challenge is always to carefully
select a small
number of key words which best capture a significant feature or orientation
of the
publication. The implication is that authors are flagging a quite
conscious focus on
`context', although the scope of this focus is difficult to define.

Finally, in some fields of educational inquiry, comparative
education, language and
to some extent psychology, there has been a long history of using
`context'. However, the
trend has now been generalised well beyond these `early user' fields. Now,
no field is
exempt from the use of `context'. The trend is evident even in philosophy
which tends to
be abstracted from day to day educational issues.

As these examples suggest, there seems to be something about the times we live in
which makes `context' significant; central to the experience, research and politics of
schooling and crucial to the practice of educational transformation which is now sought
by so many people. But what is it about context which is important? What indeed, is
context? And how is context implicated in the politics of reforming schools?

In the last year I have been revisiting `context', a theme I first considered in 1983
(Seddon, 1984; 1986). By drawing the disparate threads of my subsequent work together
I hoped to better understand `context' this time round. These reflections have helped to
crystallise `context' as a problem, as well as raising questions and issues for both
educational research and the practical politics of education (Seddon, 1992). I am now
almost at the stage where I can define `context' as a research question, although it has
also left me with an overwhelming sense of all that I don't know.

The purpose of this paper is as a kind of end-of-year intellectual stocktake. I want
to summarise my current thinking on `context' and begin to articulate some of the
implications for educational politics and research. The paper is organised around the
questions above: What is context? Why is it significant? What are its implications?

What is `context'?
In 1991 I conducted an interview with Sharan Burrow, then senior vice president of
the New South Wales (NSW) teachers federation, the state school teachers
union I am grateful to the Australian Research Council for funding this research and to
Wendy Muller who assisted with other interviews.. In
answer to a question about the impact of the NSW government's restructuring of
schooling she replied:

... you would sell the history of the public education system through its symbol, that
is the (head office) building. You would scatter people to the four winds in terms

of breaking down the old traditional power structure and set about up front
changing the culture. That's what this government has done ... they have
turned a
Department of Education which services 70% of the students and was
responsible
for curriculum development and delivery for the bulk of the students really
in NSW
... into a government department which really only is a -- well it's a
management
bureaucracy which has the status of that of the Catholic Education Office.
I mean
you now have education systems which equate with each other irrespective of
whether there are five schools or there are the 2,200 that exists in our
system.
That's a big role in reshaping education.

(Burrow, 1991)

        Burrow, talks with frustration and outrage about these recent
changes imposed by
the conservative, Liberal Party government. What she rails at is
`context'.

        As Collins (1992) notes, there has been a conservative putsch which
has
reconstructed the traditional universal system of state funded education as
a sectoral
model oriented to market niches: the state sector, the Catholic sector, the
independent
(private) sector Catholic schools and independent schools are fee paying
and both in a sense, private.
But the majority of Catholic schools in Australia are systemic schools.
Independent
schools include private religious and community schools. In both sectors
there are a
number of very elite institutions, with high fees which cater to an
affluent and/or
established clientele.. Parents have always been able to choose to send
their children to

schools in these different sectors, but only the first was a free public
system of education.

        This contextual change in NSW schooling has occurred because a
change in
government has been accompanied by an explicit jettisoning of traditional
liberal, social
democratic keynesian practices of public policy. In its place is the

economic reductionist
discourse of neo-classical market choice, liberal political theory and its administrative
rationality, corporate managerialism (Marginson, 1992). The educational restructuring
therefore marks broad changes in social organisation which arise well beyond schooling,
but are having a profound impact on its practice and lived experience. This milieu of
schooling, the external realm beyond the object of interest, is captured by the notion
`context'.

        But the quote also suggests that `context' is more immediate. As Burrow notes, the
Liberal government's sale of the old imposing Education Department building in Bridge
Street, Sydney, was a symbol of the change from old to new regime. The traditional
pattern of educational governance in NSW which, for almost 100 years, had been
centralised, paternal and bureaucratic is being overturned in favour of the new
decentralised model in which physical and intellectual property is bought and sold in the
marketplace. The state's role is simply to guarantee the conditions within which market
choice can proceed. It means ensuring through legislation and other administrative
practices that the marketplace exists and that unfettered exchange can occur. The
functions of the old Department are being divided up. Some are contracted out, for
example, schools must now buy their inservice courses from service providers within and
beyond the public sector. Other functions, such as policy and administration, are
differentially allocated to central, regional and local levels of educational governance and
relocated to disparate offices scattered through the State I use State
capitalised, to refer to a geographical administrative unit such as the State
of NSW, Victoria or California. When state is uncapitalised, it refers to the abstract
theoretical category, the state. .

        All these changes reorder the institutional and discursive setting which shapes and
constrains educational practice and they simultaneously symbolise the new order and the

destruction of the old. The context is then, both actual and symbolic; it is a matrix for
action and a textual medium which gives meaning to the changes in NSW schooling and
constitutes the outrage and frustration so evident in Burrows expostulations.

In a sense then, `context' as a concept captures or represents a reality at a very
abstract level of analysis. More concretely, `context' can be understood as a setting.
Education can be set in its `social context(s)', `institutional context (s)', `discursive
context(s)' and experiential or subjective context(s). These contexts can be analysed in
more detail. But a question arises: What is the relationship between the object or event
of interest and the context(s)?

The inside/outside conception of `context'
In earlier work (Seddon, 1986) I examined different conceptions of `context' in
educational literature covering a range of different fields of inquiry Sociology of education, history of education, educational change, and social psychology. What was striking
was that the commonest conception of `context' rested upon an `inside/ outside'
metaphor. The context was the external reality, the backdrop, the source of outside
influences which impinged on whatever was really important.

The roots of this spatial conception of context lie in positivism. This approach to
research appeared in its purest form in educational psychology, where contextual
influences `Contextual influences' was an ERIC descriptor, first used in 1968. The scope note
showed a psychological orientation and emphasised that contextual influences were
external to the object of study. In the most recent ERIC Thesaurus, this descriptor has
been replaced by `Context Effects', introduced in 1989. Its scope note has been
broadened in ways which parallel the argument of this paper. It states:

Context Effects: The impact or consequences of an encompassing situation or the
functions and performance of something -- in education, the effects of situational
variables (eg. physical setting, psychosocial condition, expectations) or

perception,
cognition and experience

(Houston and
Barnett, 1990:53) were understood to distort and bias the pure functioning
of the

experimental subject. In comparative education, another `early user'
field, attention
focused upon the study of national systems of education in themselves. But
in
comparative education the contextual (outside) influences on national
systems, such as
colonialism, capital and labour flows and international relations, could be
less easily
dismissed as insignificant impediments to research.

        This `context-stripping' approach to research of the then dominant
`educational
psychology paradigm' (Mishler, 1979) was rooted in a form of positivism
known as the
`standard view' (Outhwaite, 1987:6) developed by philosophers such as
Popper, Carnap,
Hempel and Nagel.

The premises of the standard view established natural science as an ideal
for the social
sciences. This practice of science assumed that:

there is an external world which can in principle be exhaustively described
in
scientific language. The scientist, as both observer and language-user,
can capture
the external facts of the world in propositions that are true if they
correspond to
the facts and false if they do not. Science is ideally a linguistic system
in which
true propositions are in one-to-one relation to facts, including facts that
are not
directly observed because they involve hidden entities or properties, or
past events
or far distant events. These hidden events are described in theories, and
theories
can be inferred from observation, that is, the hidden explanatory mechanism
of the
world can be discovered from what is open to observation. Man as scientist
is
regarded as standing apart from the world and able to experiment and
theorize
about it objectively and dispassionately.

(Hesse, 1980:vii)

The aim of scientific research was to develop general laws which were assumed to
be universal. They were divorced from the constraints of any specific context by
methodological procedures aimed at context-stripping. Psychology, for example, used
experimental conditions and control groups in an effort to excise the distorting effects of
context in order to reveal the true `uncontaminated' nature and workings of the object of
study. Having stripped the context from the object of interest, the results of
experimental procedures could be taken as context-free, applicable to all contexts and
therefore the basis of universal laws (Mishler, 1979).

The social project of positivist research was the production of scientific statements
about the social and natural world, which, being tested, universal, and therefore, true,
could be used to explain and predict the way that world worked. `Science' could provide
an objective guide in social life.

Over the last thirty years this `standard view' has come under increasing attack on
a number of levels (eg. Keat and Urry, 1975; Outhwaite, 1987), but particularly for its
neglect of context.

One dimension of critique stressed the interconnectedness of the social and natural
world. This `holistic turn' (Outhwaite, 1987) arose out of the recognition that positivist
research was failing to generate universal laws. The ostensibly `distorting effects' of
context were increasingly seen as significant parts of the reality requiring explanation.
Critics argued that observations and experimental results were context specific and could

not be abstracted in context-stripping procedures (Mishler, 1979). Rather, `distortions'
were expressions of the interrelationship of context and experimental subject.

This holistic turn in positivism converged with the critiques of Quine, Hesse and HarrÇ which challenged the scientific language of positivism. Scientific statements, they argued, neither exist, nor can be tested, in isolation. Their meaning depends upon the networks of meaning and metaphor in which they are located. All observation is therefore theory-laden (Hesse, 1980).

Studies in the history and sociology of science pressed this critique further. For example, Kuhn's (1970) analysis of scientific change presented a view of science developing through a succession of disciplinary matrices or paradigms. Truth therefore, could not be judged in terms of logical coherence or correspondence with empirical observations because the practice of science, its analytic style, and observations were dependent on social and discursive contexts (Hesse, 1974; Outhwaite, 1987).

This snowballing critique set positivism in its linguistic, theoretical, social and institutional context and undermined its key premises - naive realism, universal scientific language and a correspondence theory of truth. Its effect was to erode positivism in favour of conventionalism (Hesse, 1980) and particularly pragmatism.

Truth, the facts, standards of assessment and reality are increasingly seen to be relative to theory and theory depends upon the conventions established in particular intellectual communities to govern the use of words, logic and rationality. The practice of `science' therefore depends upon agreement about conventions, it is relative to time, place, and the socially constructed rules of language games (Keat and Urry, 1975). Lacking faith in `science' as a foundation for knowledge, the turn is to an instrumental epistemology in which pragmatic `usefulness' becomes the criterion of valid knowledge.

The aim of research is now to develop explanations which are simultaneously tested in practice and used as a guide to action. But these explanations are not `true' in some privileged sense, rather they are the best explanation based upon the

best
experiential data and best conceptualisation available.

The conventionalist turn in positivism has been one effect of the collapse of
standard view positivism. The revival and development of hermeneutics as a significant
intellectual tradition has been another. This has stimulated forms of interpretivist
research concerned both with the analysis of texts and social action.

Toward a figure/ground conception of `context'
These challenges to positivism depend substantially on the recognition of `context'
as a necessary feature of any inquiry. It encourages a consideration of a wider range of
issues than either the object of study or obvious proximal issues. Attention turns toward
more distant (distal) issues (Kallos and Lundgren, 1979).

But increasingly, `context ' is understood not just as a constraining external realm,
but as constitutive of the object of study. We are pressed beyond a mere spatial
metaphor for `context' toward a more integrated and ephemeral notion of socially
produced figure and ground.

What ensues is a reformulation of the contextualist metaphor from inside/outside
toward figure/ground. As the preceding discussion suggests, this conceptual shift fuels
major challenges to the ontological and epistemological assumptions which underpin
research. But research practice is also pressed more and more toward social, cultural
and historical analysis with implications for theory, method and what counts as `data'.
These substantive trends are clearly evident in education research.

The following discussion is far from being an exhaustive literature review and
analysis of research trends. I have limited this immense project, which is well beyond the
scope of this paper, by making heavy use of the International Encyclopedia for
Educational Research (Husen and Postlethwaite, 1985; 1989; 1990). The entries in these

volumes provide useful overviews of research which begin to reveal the patterning of
research in education.

        The first trend is a move from a quite discrete focus on an object of study to a
more extended consideration of the circumstances within which that object exists. This
holistic turn has been associated with a methodological trend away from input-output
studies of education in which schooling was a black box where inputs were processed,
toward more detailed, ethnographic research on the nature and processes of schooling
(Woods, 1979). In curriculum studies for example, there is increasing interest in
localised study of curriculum building (Goodlad, 1985), and in qualitative and
ethnographic studies of curriculum contexts (Jenkins, 1985). Other analyses have
examined the way curriculum practice is shaped by social forces, such as ideology, the
state, the organisation of textbook publishing and teacher preparation (Marjoribanks,
1985; Apple, 1986; Musgrave, forthcoming).   Educational administration has shown
greater attention to context too. Its structural functionalist orientation is being revised as
system and organisational perspectives (Campbell and Newell, 1985) are challenged by
approaches which stress the subjective (Greenfield, 19**) and the political and cultural
(Bates, 1985) contexts of administrative practice.

        Secondly, there is a trend to query the delineation of the object of study and
context. One form of this debate appears as recurring questions about the appropriate
unit of analysis in research. In comparative education for example, the traditional unit
of analysis is the nation state. It provides the framework for analyses of national
education systems (Eckstein, 1985) and allows for the development of explanatory
concepts such as `national character' (Kay, 1981). But increasingly, the nation state has
proved to be both too narrow and too broad a basis for analysis. Influences impinged
upon national systems of schooling from the world beyond the nation state. These

included the influences of other nation states, international agencies such as OECD and
multinational corporations, as well as the forces emanating from capitalism as a world
system (Altbach and Kelly, 1989). Problems arising in one part of a system, affect other
parts and the interactive effects have to be explained (Holmes, 1981).

Taking the nation state as the unit of analysis also neglects the diversity within
nation states between rural and urban populations, men and women, and ethnic
majorities and minorities (Altbach and Kelly, 1989). These issues of internal diversity
are also central to feminist research which reveals the systematic neglect of women in
research, in history and in science (Acker, 1990). Their marginalisation in educational
practice (e.g. Miller, 1990) shows `context' to be experienced in different ways by women
and men, girls and boys.

Thirdly, querying the delineation of object of study and context raises questions
about the relationship between them. Mainstream experimental psychology has for
example, used `context' to refer to outside influences on experimental research which
distort experimental procedures and confound experimenters efforts to produce
predictable and replicable outcomes. The finding that experimental subjects manage
their image in research procedures because they interpret what is expected of them, or
what seem to be the appropriate or respectable response (Hales, 1985), is a challenge
which creates a complex methodological and philosophical dilemmas for research.   Does
psychology experiment on `subjects' or `persons' (Seccord, 1990)? What are the
implications for theorising behaviour (Gergen and Davis, 1985; Sampson, 1986)? Is the
individual an appropriate unit of analysis for psychological research (Llewlyn and Kelly,
1980; Sampson, 1983; Lee, 1988). The dilemma here is whether a spatial metaphor in
which context is external to what is of real interest is an adequate basis for analysis. Or

is context interactive with the object of study?

Fourthly, the nature of interaction is another key debate relevant to the relation of
object and context. Language education for example, is concerned with the relationship
between text and context. The trend has been to move from a view of this relationship
which understands `context', in the form of structures of grammar and syntax, as a
constraint on linguistic performance to another more fluid, social constructionist, view.
Language is created in the interplay of speech acts and socially constructed rules of
language use. Context becomes, not an external realm, but a part of the speech act
itself; its medium (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992).

This trend to understand context as the medium of meaning has become important
in cybernetics. Computers can work with messages, but not symbols whose meaning
depends upon their context (von Glaserfield, 1989). It has also developed in pedagogical
studies, especially in languages (Fillion, 1985), science (Gunstone, 1985; Jenkins, 1985;
White, 1988) and maths (Davis and Goffree, 1985) education. In these fields individuals'
contexts are seen to be both the matrix for action and the medium within which they
construct understandings of the world. These `constructivist' notions of individual
learning and action have significant implications for curriculum, pedagogy and
assessment practices because `context' is not only a constitutive medium, but also a
socially produced outcome (von Glaserfield, 1989; White and Gunstone, 1992).

Fifthly, the exploration of interactions between context and object has raised the
question of change. Does context or the object of study provide the active force which
brings about change? Or is there an interplay between the two? The trend in
educational research, as in other fields, is to increasingly stress the dynamism of the
object of study. For example in psychology, the view that people participate in
experiments as passively responding experimental `subjects' is increasingly

discredited
because it is said their response is not mechanical, but a creative act
which depends upon
the meaning they make of the situation (Hales, 1985). Sociological
research on for
example, the development of educational systems (Archer, 1979), policy
formation (Ball,
1990) and implementation (Rizvi and Kemmis, 1987) and teachers' work (Lawn
and
Ozga, ***) also stress the active agency of participants, providing a
valuable counter to
earlier work which presented participants as compliant role players or the
passive
bearers of social structures.

        The debate about change and agency has further problematised the
delineation of
context and object of study. If there is an interplay between context and
object, then one

might expect both to change. But if both change, is it realistic to see
context and object
in the same way as before. This development is clear in research on
constructivism.
Individuals interact with their contexts to create understandings,
learnings, which inform
their action in and on the world. The result of the interplay of
individual and context is
therefore a changing context and a developing individual (White, 1988).
But given this
interplay is it still appropriate to talk of individuals and contexts as if
they were
discretely bounded entities? This problem has been addressed in for
example, social
psychology where research has addressed the social construction of the
person (Gergen
and Davis, 1985).

        The logical consequence of the analysis of agency and change is an
increasing
suspicion of categories, including the category `individual'. We
understand social life
through a series of discursive categories which name social phenomena. But
if social life
is constantly constituted and reconstituted through people's agency within
the constraints
of social organisation, the products of those processes of social
construction have no
essential features. Fragments of social life might be named as categories,

but the
categories are constructions; products of the discursive practices of
objectifying,
representing, defining, naming, ordering, and valuing. These social
products are the
consequence of social and political practices which may or may not bear a
resemblance
to actuality, but which can only be known through these constructions.

From `categorical' to `practice-based' contextualism
        Connell (1987:54-64) describes these research trends which give
rise to the shift
from an inside/outside to a figure/ground metaphor of context as a
departure from a
`categorical' approach to practice-based theories. Categoricalism
specifies categories. It
focuses on the category as a unit, rather than on the processes which form
and constitute
it. The category is therefore taken as the starting point for analysis,
rather than being
understood as a complex social product which requires explanation. `The
individual' in
education, and psychology, is probably the most striking example. Research
centres on
examining the effects on, or responses of, the individual, rather than
exploring the social
processes which have constructed the individual in socially and
historically specific ways.

        Where social analysis is undertaken, categoricalism assumes that
the social order
can be explained in terms of major categories which are defined by their
interests and
related to one another by conflicts of interests and power. Gender for
example, becomes
the struggle of women against men; class is equated with the relationship
of capital and
labour. Categorical analyses of class, gender and race ends up as an
additive cross-
tabulation of variables.

        Categorical analysis can be useful in analysis, and is particularly
powerful in
political mobilisation. Chubb and Moe's (1990) characterisation of `the
one best system'
is a good illustration and partly explains the persuasive power of their
book. But as
Connell notes, such categories are only ever a first approximation in
analysis.

The trouble starts when the first approximation become the end of the
analysis;
when the categories `women' and `men' [or `one best system', `individual',
`education' or `context'] are taken as absolutes, in no need of further
examination
of finer differentiation.

<div align="right">(Connell, (1987:57)</div>

        Practice based theories move beyond categoricalism by focusing on
practice and
the social processes which constitute, shape and constrain social
phenomena. It is well
illustrated in more relational action theories which attend to the
interrelation of
biography and social structure, not just as a categorical struggle between
interest groups,
but in practical politics which encompass `choice, doubt, strategy,
planning, error and
transformation' (Connell, 1987:61). Of course, such research profoundly
problematises
the `individual'. This is because it uncouples the usual equation of
individual as
biological organism and unit of social action, and leads to an examination
of the
relationships between social practices and the body (eg. Foucault, 1977).

        However, the retreat from categoricalism is not always complete.
It recurs,
implicitly or explicitly, at particular levels of analysis, appearing as a
slide back to
individualism and to the analysis of discrete spheres of practice, such as
neo-marxism's
economy, politics and ideology, and critical theory's technical and
discursive realms.

        In summary, `context' has been important in research because it has
profoundly
challenged positivist hegemony. But in the course of this challenge the
conception of
`context' itself is changing, from a metaphor of inside/outside toward a
metaphor of
figure/ground. The trend is not to understand features of social life as a
core with
spatially organised `contextual' shells around it, like the shells of an
onion. Rather, we
are increasingly pressed to see both objects of interest and contexts as
aspects of social
and historical formations which show different salience at different times

and in relation
to different practices. The relationship between context and its object is
no longer
spatial, but perhaps understood better as a kind of ongoing, immensely
complex cultural
encounter which constantly constitutes and reconstitutes social products.

There is then nothing essential about `context' or its object. We
`chunk' up the
world as a basis for research and everyday practice. But this chunking is
a
methodological procedure shaped by distinctive frames of explanation, both
formal or
informal. It does not reveal a pre-existing ontological fragmentation.
There is no such
thing as unproblematic phenomena, like `education', `schools',
`individuals', which can
simply be observed and understood. `Chunking', and the delineation of
`context' as
ground to some figure, is a discursive practice.

Why is `context' significant today?
The significance of `context' lies in its character as a discursive
practice which
delineates inside/outside and/or figure/ground. It marks out something of
salience from
its backdrop. What is therefore important is the way `context' is used.

One way that `context' is used is to capture or represent a reality
and a lived
experience of change in abstract terms. One reason that context is
significant today is
because the contemporary experience of schooling is of `contextual change'.
It is not so
much that the face to face relationships of teachers and students are
changing, nor that
the practices around those relationships are very different to what they
were in the past,
but that the milieu, matrix and medium of meaning within which educational
practice
occurs is shifting dramatically. What we experience is not what we expect.

Such contextual change is a lived reality which impinges on the
participants of
schooling as a quite tangible force. It is experienced as new sets of
constraints, and new
opportunities. Context is no longer something simple and take for granted,
a backdrop

to whatever is important. It is palpable and present. It is forced to the front of
educators attention and is central to their lived experience.

        Talk of `context' provides a way, albeit loose and metaphorical, of getting hold of
all this. To talk of `contextual demands' gives a sense of being beset by external pressure
and helps to explain the institutional misbehaviour we experience when every precedent
seems to be violated. Recognising the changing context allows us to account in some way
for the disempowerment we feel when our usual understandings of the world no longer
seem to hold and when we are rendered speechless because our words no longer seem to
fit the situations we find ourselves in. Using `context' as a category enables us to begin
to grasp the way the ground is changing under our feet.

        `Context' is therefore understood to be a reality.  But this `reality' is discursively
constituted through practices which re-presents and therefore, defines the `real' and what
is `relevant'. Such discursive practices are significant politically because they objectify a
sphere of action and its limits.

        The definition of teachers' work provides a useful example. A number of recent
reports on the reform of teachers and teaching argue that the classroom, student-teacher
relationships and the teaching learning process are central to teachers' work. By
implication `real' teachers' work is classroom based. The classroom is the context of
teachers' work. Decision making related to pedagogy, curriculum delivery and student
management is `relevant' to `real' teachers' work. But other decision making about, for
example, the definition of curricula, resource allocation and working conditions, lie
beyond the parameters of the `relevant'. Teachers' participation in classroom based
decision making is relevant and therefore, legitimate. Whereas teachers' participation in
decision-making beyond the classroom is delegitimated (Seddon, 1992b).

        Very often `context' is used abstractly to indicate some generalised `outside' or

`ground' for the object or event of interest. But this abstract context
can also be worked
up as a more concrete ideology or narrative which is used to construct a
story of the
past, present and/or future.

        In NSW for example, the shift from the old to the new educational
regime is
represented as an attack on `Public Education'. As one representative of a
parent
organisation noted:

... Public education is the big overriding issue because there is obviously
a
redefining of what public education is going on ... that's a hard one to
tackle
because it is a big one. You've got to try and identify where you think
there's an
erosion in the notion of what public education is and should do, and then
tackle
those things.   (Allen ,
1991)

        `Public education' as a concrete context of education is worked up
to crystallise the
hopes and fears, possibilities and constraints of the present. Sloganising
the regime
change in this way plays an important part in mobilising people for or
against certain
practices. The defence of `Public Education' provides a theme - opposition
to the NSW
government's `reforms' - around which parents, students and teachers can
work together
and a loose principle which can guide their political action.

Chubb and Moe's (1990) ideology of the `one best system' is a parallel
discursive
practice. It mobilises people against the institutions of `democratic
politics', but is
particularly powerful because it is embedded in the discourse of liberalism
(arising from
the liberal Brookings Institute) and science (with heavy, albeit
reductionist, use of
statistics).

        `Context' can therefore be used politically to promote and defend a
particular
social, institutional and discursive setting. It becomes a mobilising focus

for practical
politics because of the way particular understandings of `context'
represent and cement
relations of power and solidarity by capturing the disparate changes we
experience and
linking them to affective responses to change. The construction of a
narrative, which
gathers up our sense of loss or gain, our view of the past, and aspirations
for the future,
is central to this politics of context. It is politically significant
because of the parameters
it sets on what we think and do and because this delineation of a sphere of
legitimate
action creates distinctive patterns of winners and loosers.

        In understanding `context' as a discursive practice which
constitutes the `real' and
`relevant' what emerges is the fluidity of `context'. It appears
subjective, the `reality' from
the perspective of participants in any setting (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992).
However, it
is important not to overstate this.

        Individually experienced `contexts' are constituted by differently
positioned
individuals who exist within commonly experienced social, institutional and
discursive
settings. But these settings have a long history and have relatively
enduring social effects
which are sedimented in our contemporary practice. While there is fluidity
and
discontinuity, there are also continuities which structure our practice.
This is evident in
current educational debates where the advocates of vocationalism represent
contextual
changes outside education as a basis for simple institutional reforms.
Their narrative of
context neglects the institutional and discursive history of education and
is therefore
blind to significant issues which obstruct change (Seddon, 1992c).

        The definition of `context' as the real and relevant is also used
in research.
Choosing a research topic involves selecting an object of study and the
things relevant to
it. Discursive `lines' are drawn around the research because the
researcher cannot do
everything. But how those lines are drawn and how the relationship between
object of
interest and its relevant backdrop are understood is important. It has

major implications
for the mode of inquiry, the acceptability of experience as data, the
epistemological and
ontological assumptions made, the social project to which the research
contributes and its
social effects.

        For instance, if one researches `education in context' using the
onion shell model of
context, one is likely to accept the objects of experience as things to
work with in an
unproblematic way. What is significant is the spatial arrangement of these
objects and
hence, their influence on education.

        By contrast if context is understood as a more integrated figure
and ground, using
a cultural encounter model of context, one is likely to see everything as
constitutive of
education. The challenge is not to identify a spatially limited chunk of
reality to study
(picking a small topic), but to construct a frame for analysis and
explanation which
enables the researcher to grasp significant aspects of reality (making
explicit a way of
seeing the world).

        `Education' or whatever is studied cannot be unproblematically
accepted but is
understood as social and historical practices which contribute to the
formation and
reformation of what we take to be `education'. Furthermore, education is
not just an
object of study, but is also a constitutive context of other practices or
`objects of study'.

        Educational research is therefore reformulated. It is no longer
the study of
`education in context', but the study of practices and processes of
educational formation
and reformation and of the contribution of educational practice to the
formation and
reformation of other social forms: individuals, workers, nations,
societies.

        What constitutes educational practice distinct from other social
practices is an
important question. I think it is something to do with self and social

formation -- the
constitution of a transformative force, either individual or collective,
which acts not just
to understand the world, but to change it.

Who said the paradigm wars had ended?

References

Acker S 1990 Feminist critiques of educational practices and educational
research in T
Husen & T N Postlethwaite (Eds) International Encyclopedia of Educational
Research, Supplement 1 Oxford Pergamon pp.236-239

Allen S 1991 Interview

Altbach P G and Kelly G P 1989 Comparative Education: Alternative
Approaches, in T
Husen & T N Postlethwaite (Eds) International Encyclopedia of Educational
Research, Supplement 1 Oxford Pergamon pp.137-144

Apple M W 1986 Teachers and Texts London Routledge

Archer M 1979 The Social Origins of Educational Systems London Sage

Ball S 1990 Policy and Policy Making London Routledge

Bates R J 1985 Administration of education: towards a critical practice in
T Husen & T
N Postlethwaite (Eds) International Encyclopedia of Educational Research,
Volume 1 (A-B) Oxford Pergamon pp.63-73

Burrow S 1991 Interview

Campbell R F and Newell L J 1985 History of Administration in T Husen & T
N
Postlethwaite (Eds) International Encyclopedia of Educational Research,
Volume
1 (A-B) Oxford Pergamon pp.51-59

Chubb J E and Moe T M 1990 Politics, Markets and America's Schools
Washington DC
Brookings Institute

Collins C 1992 Upper secondary education in Australia: differing responses
to a common
challenge Journal of Curriculum Studies 24(3) pp.247-260

Connell R W 1987 Gender and Power Sydney Allen and Unwin

Davis R B and Goffree F 1985 Mathematics: Elementary school programs in T Husen
& T N Postlethwaite (Eds) International Encyclopedia of Educational Research,
Volume 6 (M-O) Oxford Pergamon pp.3240-3244

Duranti A and Goodwin C 1992 Rethinking Context: Language as an interactive
phenomena Cambridge Cambridge University Press

Eckstein M A 1985 Comparative education: concepts and theory in T Husen & T N
Postlethwaite (Eds) International Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Volume
2 (C) Oxford Pergamon pp.855-858

Evers C E 1990 Ethics in educational administration in T Husen & T N Postlethwaite
(Eds) International Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Supplement 2 Oxford
Pergamon pp.216-220

Fillion B 1985 Language across curriculum in T Husen & T N Postlethwaite (Eds)
International Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Volume 5 (I-L) Oxford
Pergamon pp.2878-2883

Foucault M 1977 Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prision Harmondsworth
Penguin

Gergen K E and Davis K E 1985 The Social Construction of the Person New York
Springer Verlag

vvon Glaserfeld E 1989 Constructivism in education, in T Husen & T N Postlethwaite
(Eds) International Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Supplement 1 Oxford
Pergamon pp.162-163

Goodlad J I 1985 Curriculum as a field of study in T Husen & T N Postlethwaite (Eds)
International Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Volume 2 Oxford Pergamon
pp.1141-1144

Greenfield T B 1985 Theories of educational organisation: a critical perspective in T

NZARE Conference, Geelong, 1992

Australian Association
for Research in Education

Husen & T N Postlethwaite (Eds) International Encyclopedia of Educational
Research, Volume 2 Oxford Pergamon

Gunstone R F 1985 Science Education: Secondary school programmes in T
Husen & T
N Postlethwaite (Eds) International Encyclopedia of Educational Research,
Volume 8(S) Oxford Pergamon pp.4461-4465

Hales S 1985 The rediscovery of self in social psychology: theoretical and
methodological
implications Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour 15 (3) pp.227-232

Hesse M 1974 The Structure of Scientific Inference London Macmillan

Hesse M 1980 Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science
Brighton
Harvester

Holmes B 1981 Comparative Education: Some considerations of method London
Allen
and Unwin

Houston J E and Barnett L 1990 Thesaurus of ERIC descriptors, 12th edition
Pheonix,
Arizona Oryx

Husen T and Postlethwaite T N 1985 International Encyclopedia of
Educational
Research, 10 volumes Oxford Pergamon

Husen T and Postlethwaite T N 1989 International Encyclopedia of
Educational
Research, Supplement 1 Oxford Pergamon

Husen T and Postlethwaite T N 1990 International Encyclopedia of
Educational
Research, Supplement 2 Oxford Pergamon

Jenkins D 1985 Curriculum research, in T Husen & T N Postlethwaite (Eds)
International Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Volume 2 (C) Oxford
Pergamon pp.1257-1263

Jenkins E W 1985 History of Science curriculum in T Husen & T N
Postlethwaite (Eds)
International Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Volume 8 (S) Oxford
Pergamon pp.4453-4456

Kallos D and Lundgren U 1979 The study of curriculum as a pedagogical

problem in
Curriculum as a Pedagogical Problem Stockholm GWK Gleerup

Kay W 1985 National character -- concept, scope and use in K Watson and R
Wilson
(Eds) Contemporary Issues in Comparative Education: A festschrift in honour
of
Professor Emeritus Vernon Mallinson London Croom Helm pp. 20-29

Keat R and Urry J 1975 Social theory as science London Routledge

Keeves J 1989 Social Theory and Educational Research in T Husen & T N
Postlethwaite
(Eds) International Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Supplement 1
Oxford
Pergamon pp. 698-706

Kuhn T S 1970 The Structure of Scientific Revolutions Chicago University of
Chicago

Lee V 1988 Beyond Behaviourism Hillsdale NJ Erlbaum

Llewelyn S and Kelly J 1980 Individualism in psychology: A case for a new
paradigm?
Bulletin of the British Psychological Society (33) pp.407-411

Marginson S 1992 Economic rationalism in education Paper presented to the
`Rationalising Australia conference' Flinders University February 1992

Marjoribanks K 1985 Sociology of education, in T Husen & T N Postlethwaite
(Eds)
International Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Volume 8 (S) Oxford
Pergamon pp.4680-4700

Miller J L 1989 Gender studies: impact on school curriculum in T Husen & T
N
Postlethwaite (Eds) International Encyclopedia of Educational Research,
Supplement 1 Oxford Pergamon pp.371-374

Mishler E G 1979 Meaning in context: Is there any other kind? Harvard
Educational Review 49(1) pp.1-19

Musgrave P W 1992 The history of curriculum in T Husen & T N Postlethwaite
(Eds)
International Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Second Edition Oxford
Pergamon (forthcoming)

Outhwaite W 1987 New Philosophies of Social Science: Realism, hermeneutics

Paper Presented at the Joint AARE/
NZARE Conference, Geelong, 1992
Australian Association
for Research in Education

and
critical theory London Macmillan Educational

Ozga J and Lawn M 1988 Schoolwork: interpreting the labour process of
teaching British
Journal of Sociology of Education 9(3) pp.323-336

Phillips D C 1985 Philosophy of education in T Husen & T N Postlethwaite
(Eds)
International Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Volume 7(P-R) Oxford
Pergamon pp.3859-3877

Poole M E 1980 Challenges facing educational researchers in the 1980s
Australian
Educational Researcher 7(1) pp.15-31

Rizvi F and Kemmis S 1987 Dilemmas of Reform: The Participation and Equity
Program in Victorian schools Geelong Deakin Institute for Studies in
Education

Sampson E E 1983 Deconstructing psychology's subject Journal of Mind and
Behaviour
4(2) pp.135-164

Sampson E E 1986 What has been inadvertantly rediscovered? A commmentary
Journal
for the Theory of Social Behaviour 16(1) pp.33-40

Seccord P 1990 `Subjects' versus `persons' in social psychological research
in R Bhaskar
(Ed) Harre and his Critics: Essays in honour of Rom Harre with his
commentary
on them Oxford Blackwells pp.165-188

Seddon T L 1984 Reviewing education and context - with hints from early
twentieth
century NSW educational reform Paper presented to the Australian
Association for
Research in Education conference Perth November 1984

Seddon T 1986 Education and social change: towards a critique of
contextualism
Australian Journal of Education 30(2) pp.150-167

Seddon T 1992 Context and Beyond: Studies in the theory and politics of
schooling
London Falmer (forthcoming)

Seddon T 1992b Teachers' work: how is it changing and who's changing it?
Education

Australia (16) pp.9-12

Seddon T 1992c Education and training reform: reckoning in historical terms
Education
Links (44) (forthcoming)

White R T 1988 Learning Science Oxford Blackwell

White R and Gunstone R 1992 Probing Understanding London Falmer

Woods P 1979 The Divided School London Routledge and Kegan Paul

Notes