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CAN COVID-19 BRING ABOUT 20/20 ACUITY IN EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICA?

ABSTRACT

This leading article to this special issue on “COVID-19: Opportunity to rethink and to restructure education in the world” is an overarching position paper, drawing on contributions made in papers in this issue, to argue the case that there is a compelling need to overhaul education research, in South Africa in particular, and that the COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity to do so. The South African education scene is surveyed and the survey reveals enormous challenges along all three dimensions of education supply: quantitative, qualitative and equality. The education sector in South Africa is clearly in need of guidance from the education research community. Education research activity, globally and in South Africa in particular, is surveyed and found to be seriously wanting in terms of the lack of theory, autochthonous and a unified, coherent theory, the small scale and fragmented nature of many research projects, the lack of practical impact, education scholars eschewing subscription to and building a normative superstructure in their research and the concrete problems of the education faculty regarding heavy teaching loads and difficulty in attracting funding for education research. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ravages it has brought to education have created the need and the opportunity to urgently and enthusiastically attend to these desiderata in Education scholarship.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic; education; education research; education theory; South Africa.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This leading article to the special issue on “COVID-19: Opportunity to rethink and to restructure education in the world” is an overarching position paper, drawing on contributions made in papers in this issue, to argue the case that there is a compelling need to overhaul education research, in South Africa in particular, and that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated both a renewed imperative and an unprecedented opportunity in this regard. This article first surveys the education landscape of South Africa, identifying the most compelling challenges. Then the current state of education research is assessed, especially in view of its assignment to guide the endeavour to address the identified challenges in education. The state of



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education research is found to be seriously wanting. Subsequently, what the epistemological theory and the history of scientific development have to say about scientific progress and scientific revolutions are invoked to come to a more precise formulation of the change needed in the development of education research. Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic is explicated and its potential to serve as catalysator of the desired change in education research is evaluated.

2. THE DIRE STRAITS OF EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

In the run-up to the creation of the current (post-1994) socio-political dispensation, one of the main rallying points of the current government was education (the slogan was “The doors of learning shall be opened to all” [see Legodi, 2001]). In line with this, the post-1994 restructuring was predicated on the much-proclaimed principles of access, equality, desegregation, multiculturalism, decentralisation and democratisation, and on the belief that education would be the instrument to attain an assortment of societal objectives from economic growth and the eradication of unemployment to the creation of a non-racial, non-sexist, equal-opportunity society (Wolhuter, 1999).

Yet, the picture emanating from the scholarly and public discourse is that education in South Africa is, at present, in dire straits. Commentators in the public discourse use expressions such as “schools of shame” to describe South African schools (Mthethwa, 2020). A report by Amnesty International (2020) typified the South African education system as “broken and unequal”.

The following is an assessment of South African education, using as analytical framework Wolhuter’s (2020b) model of assessing an education system or project. According to this model, an education system should be assessed along the following three dimensions:

- Quantitative dimension: This refers to physical access and participation in education (enrolments).
- Qualitative dimension: This refers to the quality of learning and teaching of those who participate in education.
- Equality dimension: This refers to how evenly the quality is spread among all participants.

To commence with the quantitative dimension, while gross primary and even (though less so) secondary education enrolment ratios are impressive, the problem lies with high attrition rates and the low tertiary education enrolment ratio. UNESCO (2020d) gives the gross primary and gross secondary school enrolment ratios of the country as above 100% (the figures of over 100% can be ascribed to the presence of large numbers of overage learners), although the net primary and secondary school enrolment ratios amount to 87,01% and 71,93% respectively. Concerning the first problem – that of attrition – out of every 100 learners entering Grade 1, 60 write matric (the secondary school termination examinations), 37 pass the matriculation examination, 14 pass with university admission granted, 12 enter university, six eventually finish a degree and four finish in six years with a degree (Council for Higher Education, 2017). With regard to the second problem, while impressive higher education enrolment growths have been recorded in the past 30 years, the current gross higher education enrolment ratio of 22,37% pales in comparison to that of other upper middle-income countries, for example, Mexico 40,23%, Malaysia 45,13% and Brazil 51,34% (UNESCO, 2020d).

Turning to the quality dimension, “education quality” is a term that defies attempts at a simple definition (see Wolhuter & Van der Walt, 2018). Rather than attempting to encapsulate

“education quality” in a one-sentence definition, Wolhuter and Van der Walt (2018) contend that it is more meaningful to enumerate the constituent components of education quality and distinguish between the following four components of education quality: input quality, process quality, output quality and product quality. The situation in South African education is that while, in terms of the per-student public expenditure (as first indicator of input quality), South African education does compare well (much more so compared to other upper middle-income countries), the problem is that even in terms of infrastructure (as the next measure of input quality), the majority of schools are barely functional or even dysfunctional. Furthermore, at the levels of process quality (quality of teaching and learning) and output quality (as is evident in test and examination results), the problems are compounded (see Wolhuter & Van der Walt, 2018).

In education and political discourse, the equality dimension also figures – justifiably – prominently. In the socio-political and historical context, inequality along the lines of race occupies the prime position, also not unjustifiably. To cite one example, of an aspect very pertinent to the topic of this article, taking the research cadre as the pinnacle of the education system, the racial division of the pool of rated researchers of the National Research Foundation is as follows: white researchers 68,25%, Indian researchers 7,85%, coloured researchers 4,62% and African researchers 19,27% (National Research Foundation, 2020b). This is at gross variance with the demographic composition of the population, namely 8,4% white, 2,5% Indian, 8,8% coloured and 80,2% African. However, the other universal dimensions of education inequality, that is, gender, socio-economic descent and geography (see Wolhuter, 1993) are by no means absent on the South African education scene.

On top of these intra-education system difficulties, the South African education system is embedded in a societal context that has a debilitating impact on education. These debilitating factors include the following: geographical factors: many parts of the country have warm or very warm and humid mid-summers, while others have severe winters; demographic factors: a high population growth rate; economic factors: high unemployment rates and a stagnating economy; social factors: a socio-cultural diverse population (complicating the supply of education), a high incidence of crime and other forms of social pathologies, a high unemployment rate and widespread poverty; and political factors: a weak state and experiencing difficulty with implementing policy and service delivery.

This concern-raising state of education clearly represents a cry for help to the body of scholarship on education.

2.1 Education as field of scholarship globally and in South Africa

The field (or, more accurately, fields) of education research in South Africa and globally is beset by a series of mutually reinforcing problems. Firstly, a holistic survey and interrogation of the education field or fields are in very short supply. The first (extensive, of book length) history and stock taking of the entire field(s) of education scholarship was Ellen Condliffe Lagemann's (2000) *An elusive science: The troubling history of educational research*. In South Africa, the one and only all-encompassing survey and study of the state of scholarship of education, that of Deacon *et al.* (2009), already is more than a decade old. Secondly, education has long suffered from a problem in terms of credibility – being perceived by scholars of other fields as being an inferior field of scholarship. This perception, obviously degrading to scholars of education in university settings, if not accepted as equals by their peers, is present globally, first brought to the fore of scholarly literature by Larrabee's (1998) article, but also frequently

encountered elsewhere (e.g. see Brock, 2010: 293; King, 1965) as well as in South Africa (e.g. see G3 Business Solutions, 2005; Herman, 2020: 185; Kannemeyer, 1990). In Tony Becher's (1989) trailblazing study of the cultures of scholarly disciplines, no field of education is included in his 12 disciplines selected for the study (this despite the fact that in most countries in the world, the faculty attached to faculties or schools of education constitutes a large, if not the largest, segment of the academic profession).

In as far as these perceptions as to education as field of scholarship are true, it can be related to a number of interrelated factors. In the first place, a point of criticism often brought against education as a field(s) of scholarship is the absence of structure, also formulated as the lack of coherence or the absence of accumulative scholarship. There is no universally uniform manner in which knowledge in education as a discipline or field of scholarship is organised or ordered. In a recently published pioneering international comparative study edited by Whitty and Furlong (2017) of how education as a field is constructed, it is shown from the seven countries included (France, Germany, Latvia, Australia, China, England and the United States of America) that in each country, education is organised in a different way. This finding is echoed by the portrayal given by Richmond *et al.* (2019) of a lack of coherence in teacher education programmes in the world. This amorphous state of the body of education knowledge can be related to a second problem, namely that theory and theory construction do not figure high on the agenda of education scholars (see Wolhuter, 2020c). Indeed, the central criticism that Lagemann (2000) – in her publication mentioned earlier – levels against the field of education is that research is driven by narrow problematics and that research takes on the form of a technicist exercise, unconnected to a broad theoretical framework.

It has been pointed out that the fields of education scholarship lack autochthonous theory (see Wolhuter, 2020c). The inadequate attention to theory in education research has been pointed out earlier in this article. In as far as theory does figure, it is theory developed in fields other than education – developed for purposes other than to elucidate and explicate education as the object of study. Scholars such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Sam Bowles and Harry Gintis, who figure strongly as reference points in the discourse among scholars of education, were never attached to any faculty or school of education and did not define their disciplinary identity as education, while scholars such as Basil Bernstein and Michael Young (also anchor points in the discourse among scholars of education) developed their theories outside education before being recruited for institutes of education research.

The original central discourse in the British (if not Anglophone) sociology of education discourse in the 1970s and 1980s was described by Michael Young as follows: "Education's knowledge wars – fought around what schools should teach children – began nearly half a century ago with three sociologists chatting in the bar of London's Russell Hotel" (Whilby, 2018). This is a far cry from the ideal of a field of scholarship where scholars work to refine and to extend a theoretical edifice that has, in the first place, been constructed by those professing to belong to the scholarly field of education. In *The critical turn in education: From Marxist critique to poststructuralist feminism to critical theories of race*, Isaac Gottesman's (2016) reconstruction of the history of how key issues in educational theory and research came to be understood, is clear on how the scholarly discourse of education has been kowtowing and got its trajectory prescribed by an avant-garde or fashionable discourse in social critique. J. Palmer's (2002) *Fifty modern thinkers on education: From Piaget to the present day* is leavened with scholars outside education, who have exerted a dominating force on the scholarly discourse of education since the beginning of the twentieth century.

While all these debilitating factors are factors in South African education scholarship too, matters are complicated by the fact that scholars of education in South Africa historically have been, and the vestiges of this are still perceivable, in three widely divergent silos. Scholars in these silos are to a significant extent insulated from each other. At the risk of overgeneralising, these three categories can be delineated as follows:

- The Afrikaner scholarly community, which has historically been strongly shaped by the European continental (especially the Dutch and German) tradition. This community harbours sentiments not present among members of the other two epistemic communities in South Africa, for example, sentiments about the preservation of Afrikaans as the language of learning and teaching.
- The white English scholarly community strongly attached to the liberal system of values and to academic traditions in the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, those of the United States of America.
- The rising generation of black scholars. This scholarly community has been strongly affected by the ideas of Franz Fanon and Paolo Freire and theoretical orientations such as classical and neo-Marxism, the dependency theory, black consciousness, Pan-Africanism, post-colonialism and the decolonisation theory (Wolhuter, 2020c).

The scholarly field of education finds itself in the position of not only a lack of adequate theoretical foundations, but neither can it boast any visible strong impact on practice. In Harold Herman's (2020: 163-164) recently published autobiography, the inspiring and captivating life history of the former Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of the Western Cape, having risen to become an internationally recognised scholar, is spiked by his observation of scholarly publications lacking a record of any social amelioration. This problem of a lack of practical impact exists despite the *prima facie* strong impression that many research papers make to be driven by a strong instrumentalist objective and that applied research is currently privileged over basic research in academe in South Africa (see Ndibuuza, 2021: 135).

The problem of a lack of demonstrable practical impact may be related to the small scale of many instances of education research, a problem that has been pointed out in the education research project globally (Lagemann, 2000) as well as in South Africa (Deacon, Osman & Buchler, 2009). Much research has shown that one of the major difficulties in theory building and writing guidelines for practice is the transfer of the findings of research made in one small-scale study to another context. This is done without factoring in the contextual similarities and differences between the one context (where the research has taken place) and the context to which the findings are applied. Richardson's (2011) publication about the determinants of success of technology in education can be cited as an example.

It has been argued that the lack of a normative superstructure in education theory (and much scholarship) is a further deficiency in education scholarship (Wolhuter, 2020c). Scholars eschewing a patent normative dimension in their publications may be ascribed to numerous factors. These include the drive – long present in the Anglo-American context – of turning education into a positivist, social science, in contrast to the continental European tradition where education commenced as one of the humanities. However, under the force of Anglo-American hegemony, even here education has changed to become a social science in recent decades. Another factor may be philosophies such as existentialism, and especially postmodernism, becoming in vogue by the end of the twentieth century. Whatever the reasons, the lack of a normative dimension seriously hampers the potency of any body of education knowledge

to guide practice. Moreover, in the face of social pathologies in the world, the ecological crisis and the possibilities of the looming fourth industrial revolution (artificial intelligence, genetic programming, surveillance capitalism, etc.) the need for such a moral dimension in education research becomes increasingly urgent. In this regard, the Creed of Human Rights, Carlos Torres's (2015) global commons, social justice and the capabilities theory have all been mentioned as worth considering as sources for the building blocks for such a dimension (Wolhuter, 2020c).

Two final problems are besetting education as a field of scholarship. The first is the relatively large teaching loads of the education faculty compared to their peers in other fields of scholarships, evident in, for example, the extraordinary high students per lecturer ratios in faculties of education globally (see Van der Walt, Potgieter & Wolhuter, 2016), leaving academics of such faculties with less time for research. Then there is the problem with funding, where scholars of education appear to have been shunted to the end of the pecking order. The faculties of other fields refusing to accept their colleagues in education as equals (as explained earlier) evidently places scholars of education in a disadvantaged position when in forums such as university senates, bargaining needs to be done for the distribution of resources, such as buildings, infrastructure and funding (see Herman, 2020: 189). Neither in the National Research Foundation's (2020a) latest strategy document nor in the book by Ramoutar-Prieschl and Hachigonta (2020) does education research explicitly appear; neither does education figure in the survey of the main research fund allocation of the National Research Foundation in the past years (Ramoutar-Prieschl & Hachigonta, 2020: 72–74). The dearth of funding stands in sharp contrast to the poor state of education in the country and to government's and society's belief in education as a major instrument to build a new society.

The gross multitude of shortcomings in education scholarship, globally and also in South Africa, invites the question as to how a field of scholarship can be changed.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: MODELS OF DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE IN SCIENCE

This article is at the level of meta-theory. Meta-theory is theory about theory (Baker *et al.*, 2012).

The conventional conceptualisation of the scientific research method and of the development or evolution of science holds forth a spiral – an uninterrupted, smooth development model of the evolution and progress in a field of scholarly endeavour. The researcher commences with a literature survey of existing knowledge, does his or her new research, and the results of the research are ploughed back into the existing field of knowledge to form the literature basis for a new round of research. The entire method of citations and footnotes of the scholarly publishing industry is based on the premise of this mode of development. This view of the operation of science and the development of science was described and extensively explicated by, for example, sociologist Robert Merton (1957; 1973).

This notion of the evolution of science was disrupted in 1962 by Thomas Kuhn when he, in his book *The structure of scientific revolutions*, distinguishes between two modes of change or progress in science (Kuhn, 1962). The first is the incremental, accumulative or piecemeal mode of development outlined in the previous paragraph. But then there is also a second, more radical mode, or a revolution. That is when a scholar brings in a totally new paradigm, that is, a new way of organising knowledge. Mulkay (1975) later pointed out a lacuna in Kuhn's scheme and identified a third mode of scientific development, namely the branching mode.

With, *inter alia*, the example of the development in radio wave theories in physics, Mulkey (1975) shows that one kind of discovery not included in Kuhn's analysis takes place when observations or theoretical inferences are made that are unexpected but not incompatible with existing scientific assumptions. Such discoveries reveal "new areas of ignorance" to be explored, in many cases by means of the extension and gradual modification of established conceptual and technical apparatus, into a new branch of an existing paradigm.

Terhart (2016: 927) describes education as being in a pre-paradigmatic phase, indicating an immature field of scholarship where there does not (yet) exist unanimity among scholars as to how to organise or package or even how to explain observed phenomena. This chimes in with the depiction of education in this article. It also means that Kuhn's and Mulkey's models are, at best, of limited value to serve as a device for analysing developments in the field. The other shortcoming in Kuhn's model is that it is oblivious to how societal-contextual factors shape the evolution and contours of a field of scholarship. But the sum total of this means that the current stock of models (both Kuhn's paradigmatic model and the model of evolutionary, incremental development, as well as Mulkey's branching model) of the evolution of fields of scholarship is clearly deficient in analysing and assessing the state of development of education theory.

This article is constructed on the premise or view of education scholar Gert Biesta, who, in his most recent publication at the time of writing this article, contends that theory and theory development (in education or any other field of scholarship) are contingent on societal context – i.e., context-driven rather than being driven by what takes place within the community of scholars – and rightfully so (Biesta, 2020: 12–23). This belief chimes in with a fundamental theorem of the field of comparative and international education (the field from which the author hails) that (national) education systems are called into existence by society to serve specific societal needs and that education systems are shaped by their societal contexts (Wolhuter, 2020a). As a research endeavour is part of an education system (in the broadest sense of the word), this theorem therefore applies to research communities as well. A major contextual disruption, such as the current outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, will therefore have implications for the construction and development of education theory.

4. THE OUTBREAK OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACT ON EDUCATION IN THE WORLD

In the first months of the year 2020, the world was caught off-guard by the unexpected and sudden outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. The earth-shattering disruptions caused by COVID-19 also included global challenges for education systems to promote and continue meaningful learning. The outbreak of the pandemic saw multiple announcements of the suspension of schools, colleges and universities in all parts of the world. Statistically, this has affected approximately 91% of the global student population (UNESCO, 2020a, 2020c). The challenges South Africa faces in education, along the quantitative, qualitative and equality dimensions of the national education project (explained earlier), are the same education challenges extant globally. The COVID-19 pandemic has instantaneously accentuated the problems experienced and the challenges faced by education worldwide.

Along the quantitative dimension, for example, even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, 17% of the 258 million children of school-going age across the globe were not attending school (UNESCO, 2020b: 6). The onset of the pandemic brought education

institutions worldwide to a standstill, affecting 91% of the global student population. Also, with poverty deepening because of the virus, it was not just a matter of a mechanic reopening of schools. When schools in South Africa reopened for Grade 7 and Grade 12 learners, attendance rates in the Western Cape (one of the better provinces) were 46,4% and 70,4% respectively by beginning September 2020 (Anon., 2020: 4). The pandemic brought about a shift towards online learning and home-schooling worldwide. But in this transfer, much – already, pre-pandemic-deficient – quality goes lost. An extensive survey under primary and secondary schools, done a few months into the pandemic-induced national lockdown in South Africa, revealed that 29% of all students had lost all contact with their teachers, 79% of schools that were dependent on school fees (from parents) could not manage to collect such fees and 51% of schools could not send any homework to their learners (Slatter, 2020: 6–7). It does not take much imagination to conclude that it is the already disadvantaged students (from poor households) suffering most, as they are on the wrong side of the digital divide, their parents are likely to be the least equipped to offer home-schooling assistance and their households do not contain aids such as books. Thus, inequalities in education are exacerbated (see MacDonald, 2020).

As education finds itself thus rendered rudderless in the storm created by the COVID-19 pandemic, unfortunately, practitioners and leaders in education cannot look up to the scholarly field of education for guidance as to how to navigate out of the storm. Here, the narrative of the earlier mentioned recently published autobiography of Herman, lamenting the state of education research, comes to mind. In glaring contrast to the inspiring life story of the author of the autobiography, forming a central, ascending line throughout the book, stands the end of the book, in which the author paints a picture of the ravages brought about in the education system by the COVID-19 pandemic and how impotent the scholarly community of education is to come forward with any guidance or alleviation (Herman, 2020: 320–323, 328–343).

5. CONCLUSION

It seems unfortunate, but a foregone conclusion, that by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, South Africa is finding itself in an education crisis. This education crisis manifests along all three dimensions of the national education project: the quantitative, the qualitative and the equality dimensions. To aggravate matters, as it has historically developed, education scholarship does not give clear guidance as to how to get out of this quagmire. The deficiencies regarding education scholarship, globally as well as in South Africa, relate to the lack of theory, autochthonous and a unified, coherent theory, the small scale and fragmented nature of many research projects, the lack of practical impact, education scholars eschewing subscription to and building a normative superstructure in their research and the concrete problems of the education faculty regarding heavy teaching loads and difficulty in attracting funding for education research. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ravages it has brought to education have created the need and the opportunity to urgently and enthusiastically attend to these desiderata in education scholarship.

It is the wish of the editors of this issue that the papers contained therein will contribute to igniting a serious collective effort of scholars in the education research community, in South Africa in particular, to use the occasion and imperative precipitated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic to redo their corpus of scholarly knowledge and to reshape their ways of producing such knowledge to supply education practice and the clear, worthy and credible guidance of which they are in dire need.

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