

Johannes L van der Walt

The Birth of a “New” Theory of Education and Its Application in Comparative Education Studies

Abstract

Educationists are constantly in need of theory to help them explain the phenomena with which they concern themselves, in this particular case, with education systems. In the early stages of their careers as scholars, education system experts avail themselves of existing theories to explain the phenomena observable in education systems. At a later stage in their careers they begin developing the need to develop their own custom made theories since they find their own theories to serve their purpose more accurately. This paper relates how such a relatively “new” theory, the social space and ethical function and/or action theory, has recently emerged, and how it has so far been applied in practice.

Keywords: education, comparative education, education systems, theory, social space and ethical function and/or action theory

Introduction

Apart from being a full-time lecturer in the period 1976-2000, I have also been involved to this day in the presentation of an induction course in basic Philosophy of Science for newly appointed academics, i.e. for around four decades now. Since my early retirement as university lecturer in 2000 I have also been involved in presenting article writing seminars (around 130 of them over the last 17 years).

In many of these presentations I have been observing some serious shortcomings in the training of young academics, particularly their lack of insight into the role of theory construction in scholarship (science) as a lens for examining scientific conundrums and also the role of the “tools” available to the scholar for testing the validity and reliability of a theory. I have discovered that in many cases, young academics are happy to operate with a “literature review” instead of a fully developed conceptual and theoretical framework in terms of which a research problem or question can be examined.

In view of these observations I have set myself the task of enlightening less experienced colleagues attending the various workshops about the role and function of theory (construction) in the process of scholarship. The basic outlines of my view about this issue and how it could be relevant to the practising of Comparative Education as a science appear in the following section.

The role and function of theory (construction) in scholarship

My point of departure is that if we as human beings (academics, scholars) possessed a God’s eye view of reality and of phenomena in reality such as education systems, we would not have had need for theories about the phenomena that we encounter. We would have had full and detailed knowledge of, for example,

education systems: their cosmic law-subjected structures, roles and functions, and we would not have need for theorizing about any of these issues. As human beings we unfortunately do not possess this kind of knowledge about reality and hence are compelled to theorize about (i.c.) education systems.

Our theories should be robust and powerful since they have to withstand examination and critique. We therefore have to ensure that they possess the following four key characteristics. Firstly, they should be able to explain the phenomenon under scrutiny; secondly, they should allow us to make reasonable inferences about the phenomenon; thirdly, they should enable discourse about the phenomenon, and finally, they should allow application of our knowledge in practice (for instance improvement of a national education system) (Halverson, 2002, p. 245). In addition, a good theory is sufficiently robust to withstand refutation (Popper, 1962, p. 28), which may come in various forms: the power of argument against argument, logic and rational proof, historical evidence, document analysis, conceptual analysis, ethnography or empirical investigation (in the shape of true experiment or ex post facto survey). Empirical investigation as well as all the other techniques can be regarded as tests, each in its own way, for the trustworthiness, reliability and validity of the theory with which the scholar is operating. Empirical investigation and the other tests are never done for their own sake but always for the purpose of attempting to refute or to improve (a) theory.

These insights into the role and function of theory and of its refutation brought me to the realization that I had to elevate my own theorization about education and education systems to higher scholarly levels.

The evolution of a “new” theory of education

Analysis of a research problem usually commences with an analysis of the key concepts associated with the problem. Put differently, for a problem to become analysable and examinable it has to be reformulated in verbal, symbolic or abstract terms that would make sense to experts in the particular field. Analysis of the key concepts not only provides access to and deeper insight into the problem and associated phenomena but also facilitates literature (particularly computer) searches about the problem and associated phenomena and problems. Such searches in turn provide access to literature that covers the standard theories about the subject or the problem under scrutiny. It is unsatisfactory, however, to end the analysis of the literature with a “literature review”. The analysis should go further in that it should reveal the roles played by the respective theories in casting light on the problem under scrutiny or in general on the typical problems in the discipline. Put differently, this initial review of the literature should reveal the “standard” or widely accepted theories in the field and/or regarding the research problem under scrutiny.

The next step is to examine the relevant standard theories in the field in order to reveal both their strengths and shortcomings as lenses through which the problem under investigation may be viewed or analysed. The purpose of this step is precisely to attempt to refute these theories, as Popper envisaged. A theory that has successfully withstood such efforts at refutation can be considered for application in yet another round of analysing the problem or finding answers to the research question. If, however, as Kuhn (1962/1970) indicated, extant theory experiences so much criticism that it collapses in crisis, the time has come for the development of

new theory. Efforts at refutation also might bring a scholar to the realization that none of the extant standard theories complies with his or her requirements and therefore has to be replaced with a “new” or further theory. (Note that “new” is a relative concept here; no theory is ever completely new – scholars tend to stand on the shoulders of their predecessors to see further than before.)

The next section deals about the “birth” of a new theory of education.

A “new” theory of education

During my own investigations into a variety of educational problems, phenomena and issues I employed a variety of theories as lenses for examining the problematics in question. Two theories, in particular, appealed to me, namely the capability theory as developed by Amartya Sen (2010, p. 231 ff.) and Martha Nussbaum (2000, p. 4 ff.), and the cultural historical activity theory as developed by Lev Vygotsky (cf. Yamagata-Lynch, 2010 for an overview), Engeström and Sannino (2010) and others. The former was particularly useful since it cast light on education as an instrument for the development of youngsters’ innate capabilities and also on the nature and function of their capabilities. The latter was useful in that it offered a view of how (education) systems work and function. However, I found these theories restrictive in that they operate with conceptual systems that either explain more or less than what I would wish them to do, or in terms that did not quite agree with my views on education (both as teaching-learning and as formation in the widest sense of the word).

My reflections on these issues led me to the formulation of the *social space and ethical action and/or function theory*. This theory appeals to me because it flows organically from the philosophical systematic in which I have had my schooling as a philosopher of education, namely the philosophy of the cosmomic idea, while allowing me to expand and augment it with ideas from other philosophies or theories.

The “new” theory revolves around two key notions, namely social space and ethical action and/or function. The theory is appropriate for examining educational phenomena since pedagogical engagement or interaction usually occurs within a definable social space such as a parental home, a classroom in a school, or an education system. The societal relationships that we encounter in life constitute social spaces in which education in the wider, formative sense could occur despite the fact that the primary aims or functions of the societal relationships are not educational in themselves. To illustrate: the primary function of a school is to concentrate on teaching and learning. In this process, however, education in the wider formative sense can also be expected to take place. The primary function of churches, mosques or synagogues is religious worship of a deity. However, education in the wider formative sense can also occur in these societal relationships. The primary function of the state, in turn, is to ensure law and order and to dispense juridical justice. Education in the wider formative sense can also occur in this relationship.

Although the theory singles out the social aspect or modality of reality for special attention, it is by no means the only or the most important aspect. The theory also attends to another aspect of reality, namely the ethical that relates to the relationships between people, as well as recognizes the coherence between the social

modality and the other aspects of reality such as the physical, juridical, economical, to mention only a few. All these functions cohere in different ways through ante- and retrocipations. The social aspect is singled out because of the fact that many philosophers have through the ages concentrated on this aspect. The reflections of Bourdieu (1995, especially p. 82; also Strauss, 2009; Sullivan, 2002, who does not refer to Bourdieu’s theory of social space as such but nevertheless discusses the dynamics of such a space in education) is a case in point. Another aspect of this theory that flows from the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea is the recognition of the twin principles of sphere sovereignty and *enkapsis* (interwovenness), the intricacies of which cannot be discussed here. Suffice it so say that these two principles encapsulate the idea that the relative autonomy of a social space in which education in the formative sense of the term occurs should be respected. Put differently, the principles of the parental home, for instance, cannot be imposed on the school. The school as a social space differs from the parental home as a social space, and that of the state differs from that of an education system, and this difference should be respected.

As mentioned, the theory also emphasizes another aspect or modality of reality, namely the ethical or moral aspect. The fact that there are so many definitions and views of ethics and morality provides educationists with enormous scope and instruments for examining and evaluating the behaviour of individuals and groups. Taking loving care of the interests of others, irrespective of how loving care is defined in practice, plays a key role in education. The core issue for educationists is to determine the extent to which ethical/moral norms find recognition and expression in the many social spaces where education occurs, as in an education system.

Application of social space and ethical action and function theory in comparative education

As the saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The value of a theory can only be established when it is applied in practice for the purpose of understanding a particular situation, phenomenon or issue. The first application of the theory occurred at the Education and New Developments Conference held in Lisbon in June 2017 (Van der Walt, 2017). In that particular case, the theory was applied to an examination of neoliberalism and its impact on education. The second application followed soon after that in an article in the *HTS Theological Studies* (Van der Walt, 2017b) in which it was employed to examine the various responses to neoliberalism and their impact on education. The theory was subsequently applied, albeit in passing, in an article on forgiveness education in *LitNet Education* (Van der Walt, 2017c). The theory itself was then discussed and expanded in an article in *In Luce Verbi* (Van der Walt, 2017d) and also applied in an article submitted to the *Journal for the Humanities* to the issue of forgiveness education as a possible solution to the violence and anomie currently experienced in the world (currently in press). In conjunction with co-educationist Wolhuter it was subsequently applied in two further publications currently under review. It was also applied in a book chapter with co-author Andressen on the issue of TVET in England (in process of publication). In all these cases, the theory proved to be useful as a conceptual-theoretical lens for examining educational issues. Generally

speaking, the theory was favourably received by the reviewers of these publications. The most recent application of the theory (at the time of writing this paper) was in a paper for the Education and New Developments Conference, to be held in Budapest at the end of June 2018.

All these applications proved the theory to serve the purpose for which it was developed. It assists the researcher in demarcating and analysing the pedagogical space in question and to evaluate the moral and ethical acceptability (or not) of the behaviour of the actors in that particular space.

It could be useful as a comparative education instrument in that it provides the researcher with analytic instruments such as:

- (1) What is typical of the social space occupied by a particular education system, such as that of Iran? To what can the uniqueness of this education system be ascribed?
- (2) What are the constituent parts of the education system that occupies this particular social space? How do these parts cohere? What are the respective functions of these parts?
- (3) How does this particular system cohere with other systems in Iranian society, for instance the political and economic system?
- (4) How, and to what extent, does this system provide in the needs of the Iranian population; in other words, how and to what extent does this system comply with the ethical imperatives associated with education systems; put differently: to what extent does it show care for the interests of the community and the public that are served by it?

The theory could provide an endless list of analytical instruments such as these. The theory furthermore provides the researcher with a number of analytic tools (the modalities of reality, ante- and retroceptions, sphere sovereignty and universality, for instance) for a proper analysis of social spaces such as those occupied by education systems and the ethical compliance of such systems within those spaces. It is clear from the above that the theory could be an appropriate research instrument for examining education issues in the modern world (the theme of our Conference this year).

Another strong point of the theory is that it is neither prescriptive nor restrictive. Put differently, it allows the researcher to decide on the width and depth of analysis of both the social space and the behaviour of the actors therein.

Conclusion

The development of a scholarly theory is an ongoing task that involves a number of steps:

- A survey and critical evaluation of extant theories about a particular state of affairs, educational problem or phenomenon.
- The conception of a theory that would enable the researcher to circumnavigate (some of) the shortcomings of extant theories.
- The collection of building bricks for a “new” theory (while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of eclecticism).
- The exposition of the key notions of the theory.
- Tentative application of the theory.

- Constant attempts at refuting and fine-tuning the theory.
The development of a “new” theory of education remains a work in progress.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1995): *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Engeström, Y. & Sannino, A. (2010): Studies of expansive learning: Foundations, findings and future challenges. *Educational Research Review*, 5, 1-24.
- Halverson, C. A. (2002): Activity Theory and Distributed Cognition: Or what does CSCW need to do with theories? *Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, 11, 243-267.
- Kuhn, T. S. (1962/1970): *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Volumes 1 and 2. International Encyclopaedia of Unified Science. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2000): *Women and Human Development: The capabilities approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Popper, K. R. (1962): *Conjectures and Refutations. The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. New York: Basic Book Publications.
- Sen, A. (2010): *The Idea of Justice*. London: Penguin Books.
- Strauss, D. F. M. (2009): Social Space: Philosophical reflections. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 23(4), 760-792.
- Sullivan, A. (2002): Bourdieu and Education: How useful is Bourdieu’s theory for researchers? *The Netherlands’ Journal of Social Studies*, 38(2), 144-166.
- Van der Walt, J. L. (2017): The neoliberal revolution in education: Three instruments for diagnosing and addressing the problem. International Conference on Education and New Developments, Lisbon, Portugal. June.
- Van der Walt, J. L. (2017b): Some recent responses to neoliberalism and its views on education. *HTS Theological Studies*, 73(3), a4493. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4493>
- Van der Walt, J. L. (2017c): Vergifnisonderwys: Is dit (voor-)teoreties toereikend begrend? *LitNet Opvoedkunde*. <http://www.litnet.co.za/vergifnisonderwys-dit-voorteories-toereikend-begrend/>
- Van der Walt, J. L. (2017d): Vergifnisonderwys: Die sleutel tot die ontlonting van sosiale onreg. *In Luce Verbi*, 51(1), a2256. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v51.12256>
- Yamagata-Lynch, L. (2010): Understanding Cultural Historical Activity Theory. In Yamagata-Lynch, L. (Ed.) *Activity stems analysis methods: Understanding complex learning environments* (pp. 13-26). Dordrecht: Springer.

Prof. Dr. Johannes (Hannes) L van der Walt, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa, hannesv290@gmail.com