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The Development of a ‘New’ Theory in Education: The Subsequent Steps

Abstract

This paper is a sequel to the author’s 2018 BCES presentation in which the rationale was explained for developing a ‘new’ theory for analytically and critically examining problems in (comparative) education. An outline is given of the steps subsequently taken to develop the theory in more detail. It also sketches practical / pragmatic and theoretical possibilities for the future of the theory.

Keywords: scholarship, theory, science, education, social space and ethical / moral function / action theory, comparative education

Introduction

At the previous BCES Conference (Van der Walt, 2018a), I related how I came to the conclusion that I should begin to purposefully expound the scholarly theory that I had been applying for years though not under any specific name or banner. I shared how, in my article-writing seminars I kept insisting that article writers go beyond the inclusion of a mere literature study, survey or review in their articles but should also reflect on the results of their literature reviews and empirical studies by harnessing a suitable scholarly theory as analytical and critical instrument. I also advised that one should consider developing your own scholarly theory if extant theories were found to be unsuitable or inadequate for the current purpose. I concluded the BCES presentation with an outline of what it entailed to develop such a potentially workable ‘new’ theory. The purpose of the present paper is to share some of the developments in connection with the further development of the theory.

How the theory unfolded so far

Pre-2018 developments

As a philosopher of education, I was schooled in Education as well as in pure Philosophy. My studies in the latter acquainted me with systematics such as ‘the philosophy of the cosmomic idea’ and of ‘the creation idea’. Their ontologies and cosmologies differ only regarding some detail issues. Both of them operate with the modal structure of reality which encompasses the social and the ethical modalities or functions of reality (in addition to some 13 others). These modalities of reality cohere in several ways and hence are inextricably interwoven (cf. Strauss, 2009, pp. 67-103). The ‘new’ *social space and ethical action or function theory* that began crystallizing in 2017 centered particularly on the social and the ethical modal functions or aspects of reality. I realized, however, that I could not only focus on the ethical side (compliance with values and principles imposed from *outside* a person,

such as a code of conduct) of the ethical function, but should also concentrate on the moral side (compliance with moral principles that are imposed from *within*).

The growing impact of post-modernism (Thompson, 2017, pp. 173-176) and later of post-post-foundationalism (Olthuis, 2012) gradually caused systematic approaches to the analysis of educational phenomena to become less fashionable; thematic and problem-based analyses of phenomena were regarded as more appropriate. This new approach to education problems, however, did not and still today does not detract from the importance of viewing an educational problem in its social context (space) and to evaluate the morality of behavior and actions within that social space. Insights gleaned from social action theory (Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2018a) and from cultural-historical action theory (Engeström & Sannino, 2010) gave impetus to the conclusion that understanding of the social space in which an event or a particular behavior occurs is important. I therefore began to purposefully flesh out and apply the social space and ethical / moral behavior / action theory on education issues from 2017 onwards.

After having produced several journal articles on neoliberalism as a possible philosophical approach to education, I decided to also critique neoliberalism as a potential philosophy of education from the vantage point of the social space and ethical function or action theory. In an article discussing some of the more salient responses to neoliberalism in education (Van der Walt, 2017a), I demonstrated how several anti-neoliberal movements were taking up social space in our life-world, their criticism of neoliberalism as well as that in some ways also their particular principles and actions could not be defended on ethical / moral grounds. That article represents a turning point in that it contains a brief formulation of the social space and ethical / moral function theory, though only in a footnote, and also in the form of application of the theory.

The second opportunity to put the theory to work was at the Education and New Developments Conference of 2017 where I employed the theory as one of three philosophical-methodological instruments for critiquing the neoliberal approach to education (Van der Walt, 2017b). A third opportunity for doing so presented itself in an article in the journal *LitNet (Opvoedkunde)* (Van der Walt, 2017c) where I harnessed the theory for deciding whether forgiveness education was theoretically appropriately grounded or not. The final opportunity in 2017 for applying the theory came in an article in *In Luce Verbi* (Van der Walt, 2017d) in a further discussion of forgiveness education. The problematic of this article offered an opportunity for a fairly detailed exposition of the theory.

All the publications mentioned below either contain further outlines, elements or applications of the theory on theoretical-pedagogical issues.

Applications of the theory in 2018

The theory found a wide range of application during 2018. I followed up the discussion about forgiveness education in an article in the *Journal of Humanities* (Van der Walt, 2018b) where the social space and ethical action theory played a background role in mooted forgiveness education as a strategy for the possible prevention of emotional pain in those suffering from not being forgiven or from not forgiving others. The theory was subsequently employed for a critical evaluation of TVET in England (Andresen & Van der Walt, 2018). The theory enabled us to show

where TVET policy had gone wrong under the impact of neoliberalism and how the situation could be addressed to make it morally justifiable. In collaboration with another co-author, the theory was then used in a discussion about how a researcher could go about creating a theoretical framework for research (Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2018b). Another article in which the theory played a role was produced in collaboration with four co-authors (Van der Walt, Wolhuter, Potgieter, De Muynck & Broer, 2019). This article centred on the imperative of addressing immorality and anomie in violent and violence afflicted societies. An important further step in the development of the theory was taken in this article; the notion of ethical action was expanded to also embrace moral considerations. In other words, the behaviour of actors in their particular social spaces was from this point on viewed not only in terms of how they complied with external values and expectations but also with their own personal values and principles.

Further unfolding of the theory in 2019

The research done by myself and co-researchers in 2018, the results of which were reported in the articles and book chapters mentioned below, is currently under review. In each of the following research reports (articles, papers, chapters) the social space and ethical / moral action / function theory played either a prominent or a background role in explaining a situation or critiquing positions taken in the various discourses. Among these publications counts an article regarding a parental perspective on school indiscipline in South Africa (Wolhuter & Van der Walt, 2019). Our conclusion in this case was that parents contributed in various ways to the current indiscipline in schools in South Africa and hence had a detrimental impact on the social space of their children, particularly on the school as a societal relationship. Parents have to be urged to review their actions so as to render them more morally and pedagogically justifiable.

Over the years, our research focus shifted from religion and spirituality, forgiveness and hospitality education to educational and moral problems associated with citizenship and citizenship education in increasingly diverse social spaces such as caused by the influx of foreigners (resulting in xenophobia and other atrocities), societies in the throes of social and political transformation having to grapple with anomie and violence. A result of this shift was an article on the moral and other problems faced by Citizenship Education as a school subject in the current space of “flows”, a space in which everything is in constant flux and change, and in which national borders are increasingly permeable (Van der Walt, 2019a). Another article examined the moral and other difficulties experienced in Greek education due to its social space having been detrimentally affected by economic reforms since 2008 (Kalerante, Eleftherios, Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2019). This was followed by a paper prepared for the Berlin Wall Symposium (Van der Walt, 2019c) in which I examined the extent to which the social space in South Africa afforded room for Christian education to be revived after the collapse of the Wall, of the Soviet Union and of Communism. Wolhuter, Van der Walt, Potgieter and Janmaat (2019) subsequently produced an article centring on the question whether South Africa could learn from international experience in coping with increased diversity in society. 2018 ended with an article on the imperative that citizens in deeply divided societies / nations (social spaces) should enter into a new social contract with one

another, thereby accepting the direction-giving of a moral compass (Van der Walt, 2019b).

Lessons learned so far

I concluded the 2018 BCES paper by stating that the development of a 'new' theory was an onerous task. The research that we did in the past year proved that conclusion to be correct. Not only does the development of a 'new' theory demand attention to detail but also dealing with (and learning from) the responses of reviewers of manuscripts submitted to scholarly journals. Reviewers can be negative and obstructive (by offering unhelpful criticisms) when confronted with a 'new' theory or they can be positive and constructive. I will concentrate on the latter. A well-known South African philosopher contributed significantly to the unfolding of the social space and ethical / moral function / action theory by not only working meticulously through the article submitted to him for review but also by giving helpful advice about how the theory could be improved, particularly as far as the notion of social space (one of his areas of philosophical interest) was concerned. He supplemented his review of the article with electronic copies of 12 of his own articles on the subject and pointed to elements in his publications that might be useful for the further development of the theory. A perusal of those publications led to several deeper insights regarding the social space element of the social space and ethical / moral function/action theory.

This reviewer provided an example of how scholarly work should be reviewed, namely by playing the 'publication game' in accordance with the 'rulebook' offered by the author of the article (not one imposed on the manuscript by the reviewer), and by helping improve insights and arguments proffered in the article. This was achieved by this particular reviewer without thereby neglecting the task of academic gate-keeping. Inputs such as these and others have led to improvements in the development of the theory and in the effectiveness with which it can henceforth be applied as an analytical-critical instrument.

The way forward

What will the future hold for the further development of the theory? At the time of the writing of this paper (December 2018), there seem to be two possibilities, one practical and the other of a theoretical-scholarly nature. As far as the former is concerned, we have committed ourselves to further research on aspects of citizenship education, particularly to a reflection on how the ideals for citizenship and citizenship education could relate to new developments in the social-time space of the 21st century. The following research question will be addressed: How should we see the future, particularly as it unfolds regarding the issue of citizenship (education)? Subthemes such as the following flow from this question regarding the late(r) 21st century as a social space: how should we approach an unpredictable future (a futurological issue); how will new technological developments (faster internet connection, the social media, false news, for instance) impact on how citizenship is developed and seen by citizens and authorities; how will climate change affect the migration patterns of people across the world, and how will this impact on citizenship and on citizenship education? Other factors that might impact

on citizenship and citizenship education are developments regarding religion and religious diversity, developments in society and the issue of globalism.

All of these envisaged changes and developments point to a deeper theoretical issue that is expected to impact on the further unfolding of the theory. As Veugelers (2011, p. 474) correctly concluded, the concept of citizenship and therefore of citizenship education, is far from univocal. It might aim at socialisation or adaptation, at subjectification (Biesta, 2011, p. 151) or the forming of democratic attitudes. Whatever the case, it is already clear that citizenship is not something static, something that everybody, also newcomers, has to conform to. Citizenship, we already know, is dynamic and subject to historical developments and human interpretation and construction, and also to developments worldwide, which explains its 'glocal' aspect. Veugelers (2011, p. 475) created a nexus between moral functions or actions and the social space in citizenship education by arguing that morality should be connected with the political; moral values also function in political power relations; moral values are only meaningful in concrete social and political relations. These observations of Veugelers and others offer a window of opportunity for the social space and ethical / moral function / action theory to play a key role in future research.

Conclusion

The development of a 'new' theory remains an ongoing task; it is never concluded. The social space and ethical / moral function / action theory took a number of years to come to such a level of maturity that it could be given a workable name. Much remains to be done regarding the further development and application of the theory. Two tasks are envisaged regarding the further unfolding of the theory, namely continued application thereof in issues of a practical and pragmatic nature, and the continued theoretical development thereof as an instrument for scholarly analytical-critical activity (an undertaking in the philosophy of pedagogical science).

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