



# Parameters for a Cultural History of Education in South Africa

Charl Wolhuter<sup>†</sup>

*North-West University, South Africa*

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the parameters for a construction of a scholarly Cultural History of Education in South Africa. The historiography of South African education reflects the context (demographic and otherwise) of the country. Three clearly distinguishable paradigms are evident: a conservative Afrikaner paradigm, a liberal paradigm, and a neo-Marxist conflict paradigm. At this point in time, a Cultural History (or actually Cultural Histories) of Education is urgently needed to complement these three paradigms. While the first assignment of such Cultural Histories of Education is the explication of different conceptualisations of the educational past of the country, cultural historians of education cannot be stenographers only. The explicated histories should be taken further as the raw material for an intercultural dialogue and ;while steering away from the two caveats of allowing uncritically anything to go and foisting down one hegemonic version of history; these histories should be utilised to build a humane society and education system, worthy to take note of by the international community.

## Introduction

“History” is a deceptively simple word, masking strong and serious controversies as well as the fact that it constitutes a strong force in society in terms of shaping people’s convictions and informing public discourse (Wolhuter and Seroto 2019). That such systems of convictions and meanings forms a pivotal part of cultural patterns

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<sup>†</sup> Address for correspondence: Professor Prof. C.C. Wolhuter, North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, 11 Hoffman Street, Potchefstroom 2531, South Africa. Email: Charl.Wolhuter@nwu.ac.za.

in society makes it not easier for the social science scholar, more so as the very concept of “culture” and its definition are fraught with controversies and sensitivities. Yet these historically shaped patterns meaning, forming the super structure of cultural groupings in society cannot escape the attention of the social science scholarly community, even less so in a country such as South Africa at the present point in time, as will become clear in this chapter. It is not only with the more restricted aims of advancing the scholarly field of History of Education, or guiding education development in the country, but also with the broader socio-political reconstruction of the country in mind, that this statement is made. With South Africa rightly been described as a telescoped version or micro-cosmos of global society in mind, such a project of constructing a Cultural History of South African education, assumes importance beyond the borders of South Africa.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the parameters for a construction of a scholarly Cultural History of Education in South Africa. The chapter commences with an exploration and clarification of the concepts of culture, cultural history, History of Education, and Cultural History of Education. That is followed by a survey of the South African societal context, in order to understand the configurations of historically formed cultural patterns extant in South African society. Subsequently South African educational historiography is discussed, culminating in the identification of a need for a Cultural History of Education in South Africa, and venturing a view of the problematic parameters involved in such a project.

## **Cultural History**

### ***Culture***

The term “culture” has been defined in many ways, and these divergent definitions have proved to be controversial. As a working definition, the following will be taken, synthesized from the various definitions given by Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2017):

Culture refers to an [integrated](#) pattern of human knowledge, belief, social forms, material traits and behavior shared by a group of people that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.

Mindful of the controversy the way the use of the term “culture” in the social sciences in general and in Anthropology in particular, has generated, it should be pointed out that in this chapter the term culture is used as defined by Scholtz (2006), as referring to something any person, out of own volition, could associate or disassociate with.

While some definitions and scholars use the concept culture more with material objects, with connotations of forms of artistic expression, forms of behaviour, rituals, or symbols; it can also be used in a sense of privileging ideas and the attachment of meanings. British cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1989: 4) for example, states that the maing of a culture is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experiences, contacts and discoveries. It is in this sense that the term culture is used in the scholarly discussion around cultural history.

### ***Cultural History***

Despite being highly in vogue, Cultural History is a term that has not been subjected to extensive exploration and clarification. Eley (1995: 33) describes it as referring to histories in which dominant and familiar forms of understanding (such as categories, assumptions, perspectives, as well as policies, practices, theories, programmes, philosophies and paradigms) have been shaped. Cultural History as field of scholarship typically invoke Foucaultian concepts of power relations, and emphasises values, consciousness, and regimes of truth. Confino (1997) describes cultural history as dealing with the way people construct a sense of the past. This

includes first how they have experienced an event (he cites the example of the Holocaust), secondly how they interpret the event, and how the interpretation then becomes part of the shared cultural knowledge of successive generations.

## **History of Education**

As stated above, the clarification of the concept History is no easy, straightforward task, furnishing an answer on which there is unanimity. More so when expicating the concept History of Education, and the author's view on the question what is History of Education, as outlined below, is by no means the universal, even majority view held by scholars in the field. History is a field of scholarship (that is a field of research) which focuses on the reconstruction of the past. Eminent British historian E.J. Carr (1961), in his book *What is history?* defined History as a truth-conforming reconstitution of the past and an interpretation thereof (Carr, 1961: 27-28). The past is studied and interpreted, i.e. understood from the point of view of the current or present-day situation and the exigencies of the present (*Ibid.*: 24). History writing does not merely constitute a poling-up of facts and dates. The historian interprets the past, he/she selects what appears to be important, relations and patterns are explicated, and analysed in a way that will be meaningful to his/her readers (Vanqa, 1994: 4).

Taken to the field of History of Education, the above definition of History can then be precised to read: History of Education is a reconstruction and interpretation of the education of the past. However, History of Education is a sub-discipline (or constituent field) of the broader discipline (or field of scholarship of) Education, which could be defined as the study of education (Wolhuter, 1996). This means that the objective of History of Education is the reconstruction of the education of the past, in order to attain a more complete understanding of education. Thus to have meaning within the comprehensive science or scholarly field of Education, History of Education should contribute, or have as its objective, the revealing of the principles of education (Venter &

Van Heerden, 1989: 56; Van Staden, 1989: 587; Elton & Entwistle, as quoted by Randall, 1988: 316; Talbott, 1876: 23).

Four major paradigms in History of Education can be distinguished, namely Idea history, History of Acts and Policies or a “perspective from above”, Social history or a “grassroots perspective”, and Cultural history (Wolhuter and Seroto, 2019). These paradigms also roughly define different phases in the historical evolution of the scholarly field of History of Education. In the most primitive stage in the history of the field, the ideas of great thinkers about education through the ages, were presented chronologically, as the major focus, for example in the publications of Ulich (1947) and Power (1962). In the next phase the history of policies and Education Acts, and the institutional types created by these, the purposes and curricula of these institutions, even the methods, and also the school attending population (which social strata did attend these institutions) as a “perspective from above” were portrayed. Some of these publications still contain a substantial amount of idea history too, for example Duggan (1916) and Boyd & King (1975).

In the 1960s a new paradigm appeared, namely the social paradigm, as the focus shifted from ideas and Acts shaping education to actual education practice (Depaepe, 2002: 2–3). Education policies and changes were viewed in their broad social and political contexts (Wolhuter & Karras, 2016). In the course of time and in line with developments in the discipline of history and the social sciences, new topics gained prominence, for example, the history of the role of women in education, the role of the family, the role of minorities, and the role of excluded or marginalised individuals and groups (*Ibid.*).

### **Cultural History of Education**

In the stock-taking and setting of the compass for the twenty-first century, that took place within the field of History of Education around the dawn of the new millennium (*cf.* Depaepe, 2002), much hype was generated around the publication of Popkewitz *et al.*, eds

(2001) as heralding a new era of History of Education, where the paradigm of cultural history would be the flagship. However, despite a follow-up publication by Popkewitz, ed., (2013), and despite there being a strong case for the development of cultural history of education, both as a paradigm worthy of furthering the objectives of History of Education, and as a means to gain a better understanding of the cultural formation of society (*cf.* Falcon, 2006), cultural history has never come to occupy the centre stage in History of Education (*cf.* Freeman and Kirke, 2017; Swartz and Kallaway, 2018).

## **South African context**

### ***Geography***

South Africa is located at the southern tip of the African continent, far removed, peripheral to the international nerve centre of the academic world in North America and Western Europe. Even in this age of the instant electronic communication, this is placing the scholarly community in South Africa at a disadvantage, as can be seen in i.a. registration of South African scholars in the international pool of peer-reviewed journals (*cf.* Wolhuter, 2018) although, admittedly, peripheral geographical location is but one factor explaining this low profile.

### ***Demography***

The population of the country totals 57.73 million (mid-2018 estimate) (StasSA, 2018). The South African population consists of Blacks (people from African descent), Whites (people from European descent), Indians (people from Indian descent), and “Coloureds” (people from mixed racial descent). Statistics South Africa (2014), the official demographic agency of the South African government, gives the current population composition of South Africa, as follows: Blacks: 80.2 per cent; “Coloureds”: 8.8 per cent; Indians: 2.5 per cent; and Whites: 8.4 per cent.

To complicate matters, Whites (who despite making up a mere 8.4 percent of the population, are because of their economic position and high levels of education and skills, a factor in strength totally out of proportion to their numbers) are divided into two main groups: Afrikaners (descending mainly from Dutch ancestry, the Netherlands East Indian Company started a colony in South Africa in 1652; the Afrikaners speak as their first language Afrikaans, a derivative language from Dutch) and English-speaking White South Africans (immigrants from Britain began to enter South Africa after Britain took over the colony from the Netherlands in 1806).

### ***Social system***

Two salient features of the social system of South Africa, each of which poses very compelling challenges to education, are diversity and the extant lack of social capital. To illustrate the diversity, the population make-up above could be cited, also the fact that the country has eleven official languages, the largest, isi-Zulu is the first language of but 22 percent of the population.

The term “social capital “ as used in this chapter is not the meaning attached to the concept by Pierre Bourdieu; but refers to a common set of values and agreements and interpersonal relationships enabling individuals in society to trust each other and to cooperate (Fukuyama, 1999). The lack of social capital is evident in high levels of crime, endemic corruption, a culture of entitlement and moral breakdown in both government and business sectors. Indicative of the lack of social capital is the concern-raising high incidence of crime. For example, 52.1 murders are committed every day in South Africa; the country has a murder incidence of 34.1 per 100 000 people per year (Africa Check, 2018).

### ***Economy***

While being an upper-middle income country (in terms of the classification of the World Bank), the problems besetting the South African economy are serious. These include gross inequalities (aggravated by the fact that the lines of inequality run coterminous with that of the racial divide in the population), low productivity levels, and very low growth rates (which could be traced back to a number of other factors, such as an unfavourable macro-economic policy, policy uncertainty and an overregulation).

### ***Politics***

While the country has had since 1994 a Constitution buttressed by a Bill of Human Rights widely lauded as one of the most progressive in the world, on the other hand the country is plagued by an ineffectual civil service, and an incapacity to ensure rule of law, service delivery and guaranteeing Constitutionally entrenched human rights.

### ***Religion and World- and Life Philosophy***

According to the best of recent data available (for two decades national census surveys in South Africa no longer ask respondents about their religious beliefs), 79.8 percent of South Africans regard themselves as Christians, 1.5 percent are adherents of the Islam religion, 1.2 percent are Hindus and 17.5 percent do not subscribe to any religion (Gaum, 2018). Here too the social divide is visible. Afrikaans-speaking Whites belong mainly to the Calvinist-Protestant churches which can trace their descent to the Calvinist church in the Netherlands. The biggest denomination of these is the Dutch Reformed Church. English speaking Whites belong to churches such as the Anglican Church, the Roman Catholic Church and the Methodist Church. While all these churches also have Black members, Blacks are concentrated in the Africanist churches, such as the Zion Church of Christ. Many Blacks of all denominations practice a kind of syncretic religion, combining Christianity with



elements of Traditional African religion, such as the worship of ancestors. Eighty percent of South Africans of Indian descents are Hindus, and 8% are Muslim.

On a secular plane the modern Western liberal, individualistic and materialistic philosophy, with its attendant value system has taken root in the country among all population groups, existing side by side with traditional cultures and their philosophical systems, with religious groupings with their philosophical systems, and with political groupings, with their philosophical overtones (Wolhuter, 2015).

### **History of South African education**

Formal education in South Africa commenced with the establishment of a refreshment station at the Cape by the Dutch East Indian Company in 1652. A typical colonial set-up, education (as society as a whole) was segregated along racial lines. Starkly unequal education systems for the different population groups developed. Schools for White South Africans compared (in terms of for example physical facilities and teacher education) with the best in the world; on the other hand, schools for Black South Africans, while better than the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, lagged grossly behind that of White South Africans (*cf.* Wolhuter, 1998). In the socio-political turmoil in the years before 1994, the call for equal and integrated education was one of the rallying points. After the political change in 1994, the new government formulated a new education policy based on the following principles; most of which presented the diametrical opposite of the pre-1994 education system: equalisation, democratisation, desegregation, decentralisation, desegregation, and multicultural education (*cf.* Wolhuter, 1999). Not only has government hitherto dismally failed to deliver on these promises (*cf.* Wolhuter, 2014), but the education system is beset by a host of other problems.

At least five, interrelated problems are visible in the South African education system. Firstly, the South African education has been,

since 1994, the subject of an incessant avalanche of changes, which appear to be never-ending and which cannot get to stability. Education Acts and policies are constantly re-drafted, revised and rewritten (Nkambule & Amsterdam). New provincial education ministries have been created and new management and new administrative styles were introduced (Mathebule, 2013). Not only are schools and education ministries often at loggerheads, but Education Acts and the interpretation thereof by schools are continually the subject of litigation and court proceedings and appeal cases, all of which work against stability (Beckmann and Prinsloo, 2015). Secondly, schools, school principals and teachers are, contrary to what was proclaimed as one of the foundation stones of new education dispensation, subjected to an accumulating set of very narrow prescriptions, which often draw a line through any sign of professional autonomy (De Clerq, 2013). Thirdly, political leaders to whom education is entrusted, as political leaders in general, often descend into populism, and populist statements, for the sake of their own survival (Du Preez, 2018). Fourthly, the interminable and unconsidered, irresponsible outbursts of populism create policy uncertainty (Odendaal, 2017). Fifthly, schools are the suffering party of cumbersome, dispiriting and paralysing bureaucracy, administrative incompetence, and dysfunctionality from the side of national and provincial education ministries, which characterise large parts of the civil service and administration (*cf.* Wolhuter and Van der Walt, 2018).

The outcomes of this education system are shocking as is evident in the results of international test series. In the 2016 PIRLS (Program in International Reading Literacy Study) South African students came last under the 51 participating countries, with 320 marks, compared to Russia and Singapore which came first and second with respectively 581 and 576 marks (Mullis *et al.*, 2017).

### **Historiography of South African education**

The historiography of South African reflects the context (demographic and otherwise) of the country. The writing up of the

history of South African education took off in all seriousness early in the second half of the twentieth century. Three paradigms became salient. The first was the Christian-National paradigm. This paradigm was propounded by Afrikaans-speaking White scholars, attached to the Afrikaans universities. A very conservative school of thought and writing, this paradigm favoured the policies of education (and other) segregation of the government of the day. An example of a publication from this school of thought was that of J. Chris Coetzee (1963). The second school paradigm was the liberal paradigm. The scholars from this paradigm were mainly English speaking White South Africans, based at the English medium White universities. They wrote the history of South African education from the liberal value system as normative framework. An example is the two volume history of South African education written by E.G. Marherbe (1925, 1975).

A third paradigm is a neo-Marxist conflict paradigm. This is a radical paradigm, which arose within the context of the aftermath of the 1976-Soweto riots in South Africa and the ensuing low-key civil war, which culminated in the new political dispensation of 1994. It was certainly also informed by the rise of similar paradigms internationally (Foucault, Bourdieu, Bowles & Gintis, Franz Fanon, Ali Mazrui, post-colonialism, Pan-Africanism). This paradigm portrayed the history of education as the outcome of power relations and power struggles and resultant oppression in South African society. Proponents differed as to how they laid emphasis on economic forces (class struggles) or racial conflict, or racial conflict placed within a colonial-decolonial paradigm. The propounders of this paradigm include not only the rising generation of Black scholars who began to come of age at the time (e.g. Nkomo, 1990), but also the new (post-1976) generation of White scholars attached to the liberal English medium historically White universities, such as Kallaway (1984), or Christie (1985).

These three paradigms re-set their compasses with the lodestar of the 1994 political dispensation (Constitution and Bill of Rights, and values informing these) and certainly moved closer to each other,

though they are still visible (*cf.* Wolhuter, 1999). It should be noted, however that after 1994 the field of History of Education suffered a severe blow in terms of infrastructure (Departments of History of Education and Faculty exclusively tasked with teaching and doing research in History of Education) and the place of History of Education in teacher education programmes (where it used to be very strong, one of the basic blocks of teacher education programmes, it disappeared after 1994; *cf.* Wolhuter, 1996, 2006; 2010). This too impacted on the research activity in the field, which lost momentum after 1994, and all but came to a standstill (*cf.* Wolhuter, 2011). Furthermore, whatever research activity takes place in History in Education, is surely also affected by a general malady in post-1994 scholarship in South Africa, particularly in the social sciences, where, due to i.a. a number of factors in the political environment, the critical voices (very vociferous in the pre-1994 era) fell silent (*cf.* Gumede and Dikeni, eds, 2009; Johnson, 2004: 217-218; 2009: 315, 316).

On the other hand, the most recent policy directives from the Ministry of Higher Education once again shows appreciation for the Foundation of Education disciplines (of which History of Education is one), and reserve substantial space for these disciplines in teacher education programmes, after an absence of two decades (*cf.* Republic of South Africa, 2015). This development bodes well for the resuscitation of research activities regarding the reconstruction of the education history of South Africa too. The same applies to the intention of the Ministry of Basic Education to re-introduce (a revised) History as a compulsory subject in South African schools (*cf.* RSA, 2018) which is indicative of an intentional to cultivate a historical consciousness.

### **The need for a cultural history of education in South Africa, and its problematic parameters**

It is one the two observations in the last paragraphy that this section will commence and connect too. The cultivation of a historical consciousness is certainly to be welcomed, as is the strengthening

of the place of History of Education in teacher education programmes. Ditto for the stimuli and opportunity these will offer for scholarly activity regarding the reconstruction of the education history of South Africa. But whatever is currently present in the historiography of South African education, is fossilised into three paradigms, and renewal, or then an expansion and addition is sorely needed. The conservative Christian-national paradigm is arguable the one who has adapted the most of the three to the new socio-political context, with propounders no longer unabashedly advocating rigid segregation, but rather (in line with — at least how they read — the Constitution and Bill of Human Rights) emphasises maximum space for cultural self-determination and for example school autonomy; can certainly be granted a place. However neither in terms of the set of values they focus on, nor in terms of the small section of the population they represent, can this paradigm be recognised as the be all and end all of the historiography of South African education. The liberal paradigm represents a loft set of values, however the often levelled accusation found in the scholarly and public socio-political discourse that this paradigm serves only the interests of the elite, the White section of the population, and the former colonial masters, leads to the conclusion that this paradigm cannot address the concerns, or all the concerns of a large section of the population. At an international level, Harari (2018: 110-126) has argued recently convincingly that, in a world with diverse societies, the liberal manifesto *per se* will not do and is in need of serious fine tuning.

Turning to the conflict paradigm, not only is this paradigm, in view of increasingly diverse societies (for example, consider the rise of the middle class, totally invisible in the conflict model of society with its dichotomy of privileged-oppressed), but in History of Education's sibling field, Comparative Education, the conflict theories of reproduction has come attracted strong flak for its fixation of structural forces of society (totally losing focus of what is actually happening every day in schools and classrooms) (*cf.* Wolhuter, 2007) and have lead to a new paradigm of ethnomethodology (*cf.* Heyman, 1979). The conflict paradigms

also appear to be cultivating a defeatist attitude of helplessness and despondence, rather than harnessing the unifying, healing and progressive potential of history and of education.

For these reasons the author wish to call for a cultural history of education paradigm to be developed to complement the existing three major paradigms of education historiography in South Africa. The argument for such a call will depart from the creed of Intercultural Education, which has arisen internationally as appropriate and promising for the twenty-first century, particularly in diverse (and historically divided) societies such as South Africa. Many different definitions and interpretations have been attached to the term Intercultural Education, however, in this chapter, it is used with the meaning attached to it by Markou (1997). Markou (1997) explains the four principles of intercultural education as follows:

- Education with empathy, which means showing deep understanding for others, and trying to understand their position;
- Education with solidarity, which means that an appeal is directed to the cultivation of a collective conscience, and to the promotion of social justice;
- Education with intercultural respect; and
- Education with ethicist thinking, which assumes the presence of dialogue.

In South Africa the past has been experienced and interpreted differently, and in order to ensure peaceful co-existence and future some intercultural dialogue is essential. This is also so with respect to the history of education in South Africa in particular. While South Africans right across the political spectrum regards education as pivotal for the future of the country and nation, their experience and interpretation of the education past differ sharply, and, mindful of the maxim that is the past that informs people's future ideal and plans, this is something that will render the re-construction of South African education and society difficult. For example, the system of Bantu education (as the pre-1994 education system for Black South Africans was known), is widely regarded by Black South Africans

as a system designed to keep Black people in a state of eternal subjection (e.g. *cf.* Tabata, 1960), even progressive White South Africans of today, such as Giliomee (2009) sees the system as a squandered opportunity for Black South Africans to advance themselves.

But to bridge these differences, the first task will be to fully explicate the variety of different experiences and interpretations. Then to engage in an intercultural discourse. For this a cultural history, or actually cultural histories of South Africa's education history need to be written. Such a project should steer clear from both the charybdis of admitting everything, and the scylla of allowing only one accepted narrative. While space should be open for a diversity of voices, these should be subjected to intercultural discourse and criticism. On the other hand, having a hegemony of just one accepted narrative will defeat the object of having a diversity of voices and proceed from there, by means of intercultural discourse, to an inspired, shared vision of the future. In order to stay clear of these two threats, the following beacons for this project could be suggested:

1. The principles of Interculturalism, as outlined above
2. The four Global Commons of Torres: Carlos Torres (2015) tabled the "three global commons", yearnings shared by all people on earth, regardless of culture, religion or socio-economic status:
  - We all have only one planet;
  - We all desire peace;
  - We all have a right to pursue life, prosperity and happiness.
3. The principles contained in the South African Constitution and Bill of Human Rights, such as valuing diversity, democracy, and freedom of speech.

## **Conclusion**

Experiences of education run strong in the memory of South Africans, and while much value is attached to education, experiences and interpretations of experiences are diverse. For two decades History of Education as a field of scholarship has been severely marginalised, and has become almost extinct. A new dispensation regarding teacher education programmes bodes well for the resuscitation of the field. The ruins of a field of once fairly active scholarship, consist of three paradigms which, while each has merits, are inadequate for what is seriously needed at this point in time.

At the turn of the new millennium, leading scholars in the field of History of Education took stock of the field and reflected around the question as to what kind of History of Education is needed for the twenty-first century ( *cf.* Wolhuter, 2011). In what is closely related to a role in teacher training, historians of education saw a role for the discipline in informed public debate on education and educational reform (McCulloch 2000; Robinson 2000). Here too what is pleaded for is a new kind of involvement. McCulloch (2000) distinguishes between an official, a private and a public History of Education. History of Education went through a phase that might be considered an official history of education – a state/government version of the past, used to justify education reforms. This was followed by a private history of education – an ‘ivory tower’ reconstruction of the past. Many writers argue that what is needed now is for history of education research to inform and to become involved with the public education debate.

In South African society, in the scholarly discourse as well as the public discourse at large, a much wider, urgent and noble cause for History of Education in public discourse is evident; where memories and interpretations of educational histories and experiences serve to fuel centrifugal forces having the potential to rip asunder and to destroy society and education. A Cultural History (actually Cultural Histories of Education) is called for, to be added



to the architecture of educational historiography. While the first assignment is such cultural historians of education is the explication of the different conceptualisations of the educational past of the country, cultural historians of education cannot be stenographers only. The explicated histories should be taken further as the raw material for an intercultural dialogue and ;while steering away from the two caveats of allowing uncritically anything to go and foisting down one hegemonic version of history; these histories should be utilised to build a humane society and education system, worthy to take note of by the international community.

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