

Johannes L van der Walt

## Theory for Explaining and Comparing the Dynamics of Education in Transitional Processes

### Abstract

Countries all over the world find themselves in the throes of revolution, change, transition or transformation. Because of the complexities of these momentous events, it is no simple matter to describe and evaluate them. This paper suggests that comparative educationists apply a combination of three theories as a lens through which such national transitions could be viewed: transitology, social action theory and critical theory. The strengths and weaknesses of each are discussed.

Keywords: national transformation, education system, method of analysis, transitology, social action theory, critical theory

### Problem statement

Virtually every country in the world has undergone some form of upheaval and change in the course of its history, some even more than once. These turbulent conditions go by a variety of names such as revolution, transformation, transition, change and as “transitional transformation” (Prica, 2007: 164). Such transformations can last up to five decades or more before “normality” seems to settle in again (Johannsen, 2000: 3; Cowes, 2002: 422). Since such upheavals affect large numbers of individuals and their relations, even entire communities, education in all its forms (informal, formal and non-formal), also politics, the economy, social structures and agriculture and so on, they are by their very nature complex phenomena and hence their dynamics very difficult to analyse, understand and compare.

Due to this complexity, education systems experts and comparative educationists have need of an “instrument” to help them analyse the historical events and the educational ramifications associated with social and political upheaval. Education always seems to form a thread woven into the fabric of transitional processes; its interwovenness with all the other dynamics of transition make them difficult to isolate for closer scrutiny. To complicate matters, as illustrated by the recent transition in South Africa from apartheid to full democracy, education as such might have been employed by the struggling forces as a strategic instrument to help bring about the desired political change (1976-1994) but then became itself affected by the transformation after it had taken place (1994-).

In addition to this methodological difficulty, there might be a tendency among educationists to approach the transition as if it were composed of a set of objective facts and figures just waiting to be analysed and described. Such an approach might, however, result in analyses, comparisons and discussions of the historical “facts” as if they were incontrovertible. Scholars working with a post-positivistic and post-foundationalist research framework will be aware of the shortcomings of this approach. They will be aware of the importance of preparing a pre-theoretical (philosophical) and theoretical substratum in which to root analyses, descriptions

and comparisons of education systems. Scholarship without due attention to the pre-theory (philosophy) and theory undergirding one's research efforts lacks depth and rigour.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a combination of theories that might assist education systems experts and comparative educationists to gain the required depth of insight and perspective when they describe, analyse, explain and compare the recent transformations in countries such as those in the Balkans, the Baltic and southern Africa.

### **Three aspects of transformation to be covered**

A search was made for theories that would cover three main aspects of the transformation in a particular country and education system.

The first aspect that has to be theoretically explained is the overall dynamics of a transformation, including its history and the political conditions that might have played a role. A theory has to be found that could provide researchers with a theoretical bird's eye view of the upheaval that occurred in a particular country during a particular phase in its history, and of education in that particular timeframe. The theory should be able to provide guidelines and pointers for researchers to make an in-depth study of events and particularly the various forces at play. The theory that presents itself for this purpose was transitology.

The second aspect that has to be theoretically analysed and explained is the roles or the actions of the various role-players, actors or agents in the particular sequence of events under scrutiny. Because transitology already pointed to the need of looking into the roles of actors in the transition, among others whether the researcher analyses events from an insider or an outsider view, a theory has to be found that could latch on to this perspective. Social action theory seems to fit this bill.

The third aspect that has to be theoretically covered is the need to be critical about the events and actions described and explained in terms of the first two theories. In line with a post-positivistic and a post-postfoundationalist orientation, scholarship cannot be confined to analysis, description and explanation. The researcher's value orientation compels him or her to evaluate, assess and criticise the results of the analyses and descriptions. Critical theory seems to fill this requirement.

### **The three theories in more detail**

#### *Perspectives flowing from the theory of transitology*

Transitology is the science of change. Its purpose is to analyse the complexities of transition (De Wet & Wolhuter, 2009: 361) or political and economic "shifts" (Prica, 2007: 163). It offers an approach and conceptual analysis that helps the comparative educationist to understand the processes of transition. The aim of transitology is to describe, understand and explain the transformation or transition of a system from one condition to another, for example from apartheid to post-apartheid in South Africa. Its purpose is to study and describe the turning points in history (Cowen, 2000: 339), the social turbulences and the dynamics of their development (Bray & Borevskaya, 2001: 346). According to Cowen (2002: 413), it is most interested in particular moments-in-time in a particular education system, in the in-depth analysis

of a particular event (Sweeting, 2007: 159-160). At the same time, it is also interested in the “wider meta-narratives”, the “grand transitions”, and as a result it tends to overlook or see as problematic the individual, personal stories of all those involved in these processes, although it is conceded that the latter might be a rich source of data (Hamilton, 2010: 38-39). Social action theory, as will be shown, can attend to this aspect of the transition in a more appropriate manner. In general, as Cowen (2000: 339) points out, transitions tend to be “complex mixtures” of political, ideological, economic and sociological factors playing an interwoven role.

The focus of transitology is to discover how and why regime change occurred, who the actors and the institutions involved were (Johannsen, 2000: 3). A careful study has to be made of the factors that enabled or facilitated the transition, including the distribution of power within the political system (Johannsen, 2000: 1-2). Questions such as the following have to be answered: when did the analysis take place (during or after the transition; how long after the transition)?; who did the analysis and who were the actors in the transition?; how did the researcher position him- or herself (insider, outsider, participant, observer, victim, perpetrator of change)?; for whom was the change intended, what were all the contingent and contextual factors?; what were the educational ramifications of the change?; what interpretive matrix was used by the researcher?; when was the factual moment that it can be said that the old finally disappeared, and what was the analyst’s own “old” consciousness and immersion in the “old” (Prica, 2007: 175-177)?

Transitology cannot explain all transformation processes adequately due to the complexities of their respective specifications. Transitions may also not be seen as rationalistic, deterministic and teleological processes that inexorably run towards particular end results. They are complex processes involving a multiplicity of factors that influence the outcome (Otakpor, 1985: 146; Sqapi, 2014: 220, 226; Hamilton, 2010: 39). In view of this, transitology should be seen as a theoretical framework that attempts to describe and analyse social change, longitudinally and historically, within a large area with cultural linkages (Hamilton, 2010: 41).

According to Cowen (2000: 338), education is given a major symbolic and deconstructionist role in the social processes of transition, i.e. the process of leaving a particular past behind and redefining a new future. The study of the historical turning points illustrates the influence of political, economic, and other powers upon education (Cowen, 2000: 339). Cowen (2002: 423) correctly argues that education tends in these processes to be redefined to play a decisive role in the establishment of this new future, as was done in South Africa when the anti-apartheid forces used a form of “people’s education” to pave the way for the new post-apartheid future. The case of post-apartheid South Africa also illustrates the problems associated with the question how much of the previous education system has to be destroyed, changed or adapted in order to transform education to be in line with the new political dispensation (Cowen, 2000: 339).

A transitional approach to (educational) reform can furthermore not be “the narration of transitional processes *ex nihilo*”, implying that “history is only now beginning and that prior to (a particular date) the area was without form and void”, as an “epiphany (sudden revelation) or emergence (out of nothing)”. There is no cutting-off point where the “old” just disappears and the “new” appears. Generally speaking, however, it can be said that transitions represent an ideological break with

a previous system, and they can either be sudden and spectacular or smooth, gradual and unspectacular (Prica, 2007: 174, 163, 164).

An important aspect of transitology is whether the scholar analyses and describes the transition from an outsider (etic, deductive, top-down) or an insider (emic, inductive, bottom-up) perspective. Insiders theoretically possess an in-depth dimension, a “secret” cultural code which may transform a negative social experience into acceptable, normalised levels of local knowledge. They have the advantage of “cultural intimacy”. According to Prica (2007: 165), the insider might be a more “natural” and more authorised representative of the particular cultural experience. On the other hand, the insider might be guilty of presenting optimistic and positive domestic insights. To avoid this, the insider researcher should follow the regime of rigorous research and has to understand that culture is an area in which s/he is both witness and actor. The insider perspective might also be more appropriate for research areas that have not yet been heavily theorised.

Some practitioners of transitology go beyond the original intentions of this approach in that they see it as a normative paradigm that can offer guidelines for transition (Sqapi, 2014: 217). This view is not supported in this paper; transitology is not assumed to be prescriptive about transitional processes (Sqapi, 2014: 218-219; 226). An assessment of the roles of actors and institutions (Przeworski, 1988: 64) is reserved for the third phase of the discussion, namely the critical phase, to be discussed below.

### *Perspectives flowing from social action theory*

Social action theory focuses on the roles of the actors involved in the transformation. It is interested in the interaction among agents and their mutual orientation, and / or the action of groups (Audi, 2005: 853). An important term, therefore, in social action theory is symbolic interactionism, an idea belonging to a kind of interpretive sociology which is interested in not only a subjective sense of social phenomena but also in their causal explanations (Mucha, 2003: 2). Educationists should nevertheless resist the temptation to impose *their* meanings upon the observed facts; only the agents involved could enunciate them (Otakpor, 1985: 140).

Social action, according to Max Weber, is the behaviour of an individual, either historically observable or theoretically possible or likely, in relationship to the actual or anticipated behaviour of other actors. Each social action takes account of that of others and is oriented to them (Hamilton, 2010: 42-43). An action of a human individual is of a social character regardless of whether or not it takes into account the behaviour of another individual or a group of individuals. Both individuals and groups can be the subject (agent, actor) of social action. Institutions such as education systems consist of individuals carrying out social actions designed to achieve the goals of the institution (Trueman, 2015: npn). Action, according to Max Weber, always centres on meaning; action is directed by meaning. Affective or emotional action stems from individuals’ emotional state at the time; traditional action is based on established custom, based on built-in habits, and rational action involves a clear understanding of a goal (Trueman, 2015: npn; Emirbayer, 2005: 186-190).

Social action theory attempts to tread carefully between the determinism of positivism, structuralism and systems theory, and total indeterminism in the form of voluntarism, idealism and other forms of subjectivism (Otakpor, 1985: 146;

Trueman, 2015: npn). In its attempt to follow this narrow route, it makes use of two forms of understanding of social action: observational understanding and explanatory understanding. The researcher tries to understand the meaning of an act in terms of the motives that have given rise to it. To achieve this kind of understanding one must put oneself in the shoes of the person whose behaviour you are explaining, and try to understand their motives (Trueman, 2015: npn).

The researcher has to gain an interpretive grasp of an action in its context. The context of an action might be historical (i.e. the actual intended meaning of the action), a sociological mass phenomenon, or that of a scientifically formulated pure type or ideal type (Mucha, 2003: 3).

Some actions are social in the sense that they can only be done in groups (Hamilton, 2010: 42-43). Social group action is a synthesis of individual actions which tie together two elements of culture: ideological values and social values. To manage their relationships, social actors must understand others' actions and intentions. This is attained, according to Hamilton (2010: 42-43), through the evolved cognitive ability to generate long connected skeins of actions and reactions and to comprehend the complexity through narrative thought.

In monological action, the agent's fulfilling of his or her purposes depends only on the contingent facts of the world; however, social action is also contingent on how other agents react to what the agent does and how that agent reacts to other agents, and so on (Audi, 2005: 853). Social action can take many shapes: co-operation, obstruction, conflict, hostility, unilateral, asymmetrical, and aimed at a mutual orientation or with widely different aims, of different duration (Mucha, 2003: 4-6). The difference in values of the various actors is most obvious when it appears in conflict (Mucha, 2003: 13-20).

As in the case of transitology, social action theory operates with the notion of an "insider" and an "outsider" view. Social relations can be either open or closed to outsiders (Mucha, 2003: 7).

### *Perspectives flowing from critical theory*

Science / research is never completely value-free and objective. Every description, explanation, interpretation and comparison in terms of either of the previous two theories will therefore inadvertently reflect the value system of the researcher. Whereas the first two theories focused on *describing* the dynamics and the actions of the various role players, critical theory is also practical, self-reflexive and above all *normative*. The critical assessment done in terms of critical theory is based on the empirical evidence provided by the first two theories as well as on the best available social theories (Honderich, 2005: 311-312). Critical theory traces the origins of the social processes (transformation) described in terms of the previous two theories, particularly their ideological assumptions and interests (Honderich, 2005: 312). Application of critical theory provides the researcher with understanding of the agents who wished to improve their social conditions through transformation of the status quo, how they wished to emancipate themselves and remove the limits to their freedom and to eradicate them and their society from the causes of human suffering. Critical theory is self-reflexive in that it accounts for its own conditions of possibility and for its possible transformative effects (Audi, 2005: 195).

## Concluding remark

Application of a combination of the three theories discussed in this paper can lend theoretical depth and rigour to descriptions of political and educational transformations that would otherwise have been rather theoretically shallow.

## References

- Audi, R. (2005): *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Bray, M. & Borevskaya, N. (2001): Financing education in transitional societies: Lessons from Russia and China. *Comparative Education*, 37, 345-365.
- Cowen, R. (2000): Comparing futures or comparing pasts. *Comparative Education*, 36, 333-342.
- Cowen, R. (2002): Moments of time: A comparative note. *History of Education*, 31, 413-424.
- De Wet, C. & Wolhuter, C. C. (2009): A transitological study of some South African educational issues. *South African Journal of Education*, 29, 359-376.
- Emirbayer, M. (2005): Beyond Weberian Action Theory. In: Camic, C., Gorski, P. S. & Trubek, B. M. (Eds.) *Max Weber's Economy and Society* (pp. 185-199). Stanford: University Press.
- Hamilton, G. E. (2010): Rediscovering our shared qualities in ever-changing situations. *Durham Anthropology Journal*, 17(1), 35-64.
- Honderich, T. (2005): *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford: University Press.
- Johannsen, L. (2000): Democratization and Development: Modernization and Political Institutions. Presentation at the ECPR Joint Session of Workshops. Copenhagen, 14-19 April.
- Mucha, J. (2003): The concept of "social relations" in classic interpretive sociology: Weber and Znaniecki. Research Networks no. 21. Paper presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> ESA Conference, Murcia.
- Otakpor, N. (1985): The social action frame of reference: An historical map and analysis. *Philosophia*, 36(2), 135-150.
- Prica, I. (2007): In search of post-socialist subject. *Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research*, 44(1), 163-186.
- Przeworski, A. (1988): Democracy as a contingent outcome of conflict. In: Elster, J. & Slagstad, R. (Eds.) *Constitutionalism and Democracy* (pp. 59-80). Cambridge: University Press.
- Sqapi, G. (2014): Transitional paradigm as an explanation for the democratization process. CBU International Conference on Innovation, Technology Transfer and Education. Feb. 3-5. Prague. Accessible at: [www.cbuni.cz,ojs.journals.cz](http://www.cbuni.cz,ojs.journals.cz).
- Sweeting, A. (2007): Comparing times. In: Bray, M., Adamson, B. & Mason, M. (Eds.) *Comparative Education Research: Approaches and Methods*. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong.
- Trueman, C. N. (2015): *Social Action Theory*. The History Learning Site. Accessed at: [www.historylearningsite.co.uk/sociology/theories-in-sociology/social-action-theory/](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/sociology/theories-in-sociology/social-action-theory/) (Accessed 8 July 2015).