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## **Reflections on Educational Psychology in an Emerging Democracy**

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# Reflections on Educational Psychology in an Emerging Democracy

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## Abstract

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This paper reflects on the changes in Educational Psychology in South Africa in a ten year period (2005 – 2015) after the first democratic elections. It shows how Educational Psychology as a scientific discipline, and as a helping profession, has responded to the changing landscape and how the post-democracy years inspired a complete departure from previous practices. It also explores an expansion of its leitmotif from ‘helping’ to leading and facilitating processes of change and support. It shows how conceptual shifts from the individual level towards systemic interventions have impacted the nature of the support provided by educational psychologists and how the creation of virtuous cycles became central their work. The shifts from individual support to systemic support interventions have also contributed to blurring boundaries between professionals and stakeholders. The paper also argues that the strong experiential nature of studies in Educational Psychology has led to gaps in the empirical database in Educational Psychology – specifically in terms of the limited comparative studies that have been conducted. Such studies were mostly conducted within bounded systems. Furthermore, the paper argues that the role of educational psychologists has been marginalized in formal education support structures even as their role increased in importance in broader society.

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**Keywords:** Educational Psychology, educational psychologist, South Africa, emerging democracy, helping professions, support

# Reflexiones sobre Psicología de la Educación en una Democracia Emergente

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## Resumen

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En este artículo se reflexiona sobre los cambios en la Psicología de la Educación en Sudáfrica durante un periodo de diez años (2005-2015) posterior a las primeras elecciones democráticas. Muestra cómo la Psicología de la Educación, disciplina científica y profesión de ayuda, ha respondido al panorama cambiante y cómo los años de la post-democracia inspiraron un avance completo respecto de las prácticas anteriores. También explora una expansión de su leitmotiv: 'ayudar' a liderar y facilitar procesos de cambio y apoyo. Muestra cómo los cambios conceptuales desde el nivel individual a intervenciones sistémicas han afectado la naturaleza del apoyo prestado por los psicólogos de la educación y cómo la creación de círculos virtuosos fue el centro de su trabajo. Estos cambios han contribuido también a desdibujar los límites entre profesionales y agentes interesados. El artículo también señala que la fuerte naturaleza experiencial de los estudios en Psicología de la Educación ha conllevado un vacío en cuanto a datos empíricos - específicamente en términos de los limitados estudios comparativos que se han realizado. Además, el artículo sostiene que el papel de los psicólogos de la educación ha sido marginado en las estructuras formales de apoyo a la educación, aunque la importancia de su papel aumentó en la sociedad.

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**Palabras clave:** Psicología de la Educación, psicólogos de la educación, Sudáfrica, democracia emergente, profesiones de ayuda, apoyo.

One of the most anticipated and celebrated democracies in modern times has finally come of age in 2015. Twenty-one years have passed since democracy was established by means of a universal non-racial franchise in 1994. For all its challenges and growing pains, this period has seen the establishment of an era in which the freedoms which were fought for by so many in the preceding years could be enjoyed by all.

South Africa is often described as the ‘rainbow nation’ – a term that was coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu when he referred to post-apartheid South Africa. It has also been called “the country of Madiba” – Nelson Mandela, its founding father. It is a country with a Bill of Rights and a Constitution that is regarded as one of the most progressive and transformative in the world (De Vos, 2002):

It is a transformative document that does not merely delineate the scope and contents of rights in a negative way, but also spells out a vision of what kind of society [ it ... ] aims to help bring into being’ (De Vos, 2002: 243).

The South African Constitution protects the rights of all its citizens and it provides a solid foundation upon which a new country, relatively free from the restrictions of the past, can be built. But in spite of the freedoms and privileges that this new libertarian zeitgeist confers on all its citizens, South Africa nevertheless remains a challenging country for all its inhabitants. Very few South Africans had any experience of living in a democracy prior to 1994. Since most of were born in this country, South African citizens acquired the psychological remnants of people who have lived under a regime that blatantly favoured one sector of the population at the expense of others. This ideological selectivity has burdened both those who were its victims as well as those who were its ostensible beneficiaries.

With the advent of true democracy and racial justice in 1994, educational psychologists were obliged to create new methods and pathways – new modes of practice, theoretical development, empirical research and approaches to engaging the world. In many ways, the freedom engendered by the new forms of this unique and emerging democracy, was favourable to the enterprise described in the previous sentence. Although freedom allowed practitioners to make decisive progress in some spheres, it also created

fissures in theoretical development and empirical research that are still in urgent need of attention today. The current socio-political landscape has forced practitioners to reflect deeply on existing practices and to contemplate the multiple opportunities that may materialize in the future.

Although this paper describes and examines some trends in Educational Psychology during the last two decades, its purpose is not to present an exhaustive list of such trends. It does however extend post-colonial discourses to show how one discipline within Psychology has embraced new identities, has adapted to the ever-increasing demands on its professional practice, and has carved new pathways for theoretical development. These descriptions are based on an analysis of various publications in Educational Psychology from South Africa during the period between 2005 and 2015.

The paper subscribes to the notion of Hume (1951) which maintains that perceptions which enter the human mind correlate and cohere with one another with the result that they constitute a distinct existence in and of themselves. Each group of perceptions is *sui generis*, that is to say, it is distinguishable and different from other groups of related perceptions, whether they exist contemporarily or successively. The reflections in this paper are presented in terms of this notion. In practice this means that the author lays no claim to objectivity, but rather presents subjective descriptions and reflections that are unique and personalized, and yet shifting in emphasis and point of view. The author's point of view and perceptions were shaped by, among many other factors, schooling in a pre-democratic period, access to university education during a period of political transition in the country, postgraduate studies within a democracy, and professional opportunities as a registered educational psychologist and researcher at a large tertiary institution in South Africa. Simultaneously, the author presents her perceptions from a 'disadvantaged' point of view because they are singular in their experiential trajectory. The viewpoints thus presented are those of a single individual, and they are subject to what Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) characterize as 'the ambiguous, unstable and context-dependant character of language, the dependence of both observations and data on interpretation and theory, [ ... ] and the political-ideological character of the social sciences' (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000: 1). While it is therefore reflective in its approach, this paper only presents a

limited description of the complexities of educational and psychological realities in South Africa.

### **Background**

Although this paper in general takes cognizance of 21 years of democracy in South Africa, it specifically reflects on the role of Educational Psychology as a scientific discipline, and the changes within this discipline in the period between 2005 and 2015. The purpose of the study is to describe and reflect upon the changes and developments that have taken place in Educational Psychology during this ten year period. It locates the reflection within the context of an emerging democracy and it acknowledges the contributions of a post-colonial society that grapples continuously with questions of identity, power relations and belonging. The study makes the fundamental assumption that change rather than stagnation characterizes this period of development within Educational Psychology. The rationale for such an assumption is the view that scientific disciplines are impacted by broad societal changes and that change is therefore integral to scientific development.

### **Methodology**

The methodology adopted for this paper is to provide an in-depth literature review together with experiential, reflective notes on Educational Psychology in an emerging democracy. The paper draws on studies conducted in Educational Psychology (and related fields) within the second decade of democracy in South Africa, namely between 2005 and 2015.

### **Data Collection**

The literature search for this study was conducted by a qualified information specialist who has a Master's degree in Knowledge Management, an Honours degree in Industrial Psychology, and a bachelor's degree in Library and Information Sciences. She has accumulated thirteen years of full-time experience in conducting literature searches.

The first search was conducted on EBSCOhost. EBSCOhost was used because of its multiple data-bases. The EBSCOhost platform hosts a variety

of international databases which are specific to or related to Education and Psychology. In addition to the subject-specific databases such as *ERIC* and *PsycINFO*, it also hosts multidisciplinary databases such as *Academic Search Complete* and *MasterFile Premier*. This was included because it fits the multidisciplinary nature of educational psychology, the fields that it relates to, and the different contexts in which educational psychologists work. Educational psychologists by and large publish in a wide variety of disciplines.

In addition to the specific and multidisciplinary databases, EBSCOhost also includes *Africa Wide* information that harvests articles from a subset of databases with specific African and South African focus, such as the *Index to South African Periodicals* (ISAP). This was an evaluative measure for the results found in the ISAP and SAePublications (*Sabinet African Electronic Publications*) databases hosted on the Sabinet platform. Sabinet is a platform for content in South African libraries.

A comparison of the results found on the two platforms (Sabinet and EBSCOhost) was found to be methodologically challenging due to the fact that functionalities between the two platforms differ. Thus, for example, searching within the ten year time frame had to be done by hand because of restricted retrieval when using the date range functionality. Sabinet also does not have a limiting function for peer review articles (one that ensures that only academic journal articles will be retrieved). Sabinet permits the searching of separate databases while EBSCO's *Africa Wide* information does not.

On the Sabinet Reference platform, 1500 articles were retrieved using the Journals option and searching both SAePublications and ISAP. In the first batch of 500, 28 were published within the data range. In the second batch, there were 146 articles in the date range. The last batch of 500, the records were not accessible. This may have been due to duplications or a system setting that limited the number of records that could be viewed.

The reasons for the inclusion of the EBSCOhost data bases in the first advanced search are as follows: i) It made the *academic search complete* since it is a multi-disciplinary full-text database. ii) It ensured *Africa-Wide Information* since it is produced in South Africa and provides extensive coverage of all facets of African Studies and Africa. iii) It made the *business*

*source complete* since it dates back to 1886 and provides a comprehensive scholarly database. iv) It includes *CINAHL* because of its focus on health professionals, educators and researchers. v) It includes *ERIC* because it contains more than 1.3 million records and lists journals from the *Current Index of Journals in Education and Resources in Education Index*. vi) It includes *Family & Society Studies Worldwide* because of the coverage of the literature pertaining to human development, social welfare, family science and human ecology. vii) It includes *MasterFILE Premier* because it is updated daily and provides full-text access to almost 1700 periodicals dating back to 1975. viii) It includes *PsycARTICLES* because it contains almost all journals published by the American Psychological Association (APA), almost all of which date back to the first issues. ix) It includes *PsycINFO* because of its comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in behavioural science and mental health (some of which date back to the 1600s).

The searches were conducted during August 2015. During the first search, the keywords ‘Educational Psychology’ and ‘South Africa’ were utilized. A total of 125 items were obtained from this search. The search results were analysed to screen for duplications, editorials and book reviews. After duplications had been removed from the item list, 97 items remained.

Items were included in the data base for analysis in terms of the following inclusion criteria: i) The item was a scientific, peer reviewed article. ii) The text of the article included the two keywords ‘Educational Psychology’ and ‘South Africa’. iii) The article focused on an aspect of Educational Psychology. The institutional affiliation of authors was not considered as an inclusion criteria because numerous non-South African researchers conduct studies within the South African context.

Items were excluded when, i) the item was a book review, ii) it focused on a field other than Educational Psychology, iii) the item did not include the two keywords ‘Educational Psychology’ and ‘South Africa’, iv) it was a duplicate of another item.

Results from the first search are presented in Table 1. Results are tabled in terms of search terms used and the search options utilised. Search options delimited the searches to the period between 2005 and 2015 period, as well as to peer-reviewed journal articles. Table 1 also includes the data-bases



within EBSCOhost that were searched and the results obtained. The term SU means that key terms were searched within the subject and the term AB means that key terms were searched in the abstract.

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Table 1:

*Results from the first advanced search on 'Educational Psychology' and 'South Africa' during the period 2005 – 2015*

Search ID#	Search Terms	Search Options	Last Run Via	Results
S4	AB EDUCATIONAL psychology AND South Africa	Limiters – Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals; Published Date: 2005/01/01 – 2015/12/31 Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases <u>Database:</u> Academic Search Complete; Africa-Wide Information; Business Source Complete; CINAHL; ERIC; Family & Society Studies Worldwide; MasterFILE Premier; PsycARTICLES; PsycINFO	38
S3	SU EDUCATIONAL psychology AND South Africa	Limiters – Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals; Published Date: 2005/01/01 – 2015/12/31 Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases <u>Database:</u> Academic Search Complete; Africa-Wide Information; Business Source Complete; CINAHL; ERIC; Family & Society Studies Worldwide; MasterFILE Premier; PsycARTICLES; PsycINFO	114
S2	SU educational psychol* AND South Africa	Limiters – Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals; Published Date: 2005/01/01 – 2015/12/31 Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases <u>Database:</u> Academic Search Complete; Africa-Wide Information; Business Source Complete; CINAHL; ERIC; Family & Society Studies Worldwide; MasterFILE Premier; PsycARTICLES; PsycINFO	125
S1	educational psychol* AND South Africa	Limiters – Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals; Published Date: 2005/01/01 – 2015/12/31 Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	Interface - EBSCOhost Research Databases <u>Database:</u> Academic Search Complete; Africa-Wide Information; Business Source Complete; CINAHL; ERIC; Family & Society Studies Worldwide; MasterFILE Premier; PsycARTICLES; PsycINFO	559

A *second search* was conducted in order to cast a wider conceptual net. The terms ‘Family and Society Studies’ were now included. The difference in the result in the search was three articles. The delimiter term, ‘South Africa’, remained.

A *third search* was conducted from ProQuest on the ERIC data base in order to compare the search results from the previous searches. The same data-base is available on two different platforms and therefore served as a reliability check for the previous searches. The information specialist demonstrated that high correlation were obtained between the searches.

## **Data Analysis**

The data set from the three searches was analysed by a registered educational psychologist with 21 years’ experience of research in Educational Psychology. The data analyst also has accumulated more than ten years’ experience in leading a department of Educational Psychology and a Faculty of Education in South Africa during the period under study. Data analysis consisted of in-depth content analysis of titles and abstracts of all items that met the inclusion criteria.

In addition to the in-depth, advanced literature searches, a data set of reflective notes from the author spanning a period of 20 years (1995 – 2015) were analysed by means of content analysis. This data set consisted of a set of 12 notebooks in which the author made reflective notes on Educational Psychology during this period.

The findings from this study are presented in a reflective way. Key concepts are defined as a prelude to sharing broad reflections about Educational Psychology.

## **Definition of Key Concepts**

### **Educational Psychology**

For the purpose of this paper ‘Educational Psychology’ as a science is defined very broadly in terms of ‘the study of learning in a variety of educational contexts’. It includes the scientific study of all the psychological aspects of education and it utilises both educational and psychological

knowledge to understand and support the processes of teaching and learning. Emotional wellbeing and behavioural aspects of learning are also integral to the work of educational psychologists. Educational Psychology includes work over a lifespan with individuals, groups, schools, families, teachers, adults, children and a variety of professionals. In South Africa, Educational Psychology as a subject field includes clinical work with children and their families.

### **Educational Psychologists**

Since this paper reflects on Educational Psychology in South Africa during the most recent ten years of democracy (the period between 2005 and 2015), the definition of the term *educational psychologists* is situated within a country-specific conceptualization. It may however find resonance with educational psychologists working in similar contexts around the globe. Although educational psychologists are health professionals who work primarily in the education sector, the scope of practice of educational psychologists extends beyond schools and classrooms.

The Health Professions Act of 1974, as amended in 2011, defines the scope of practice of educational psychologists more broadly than it defines the scope of the psychology profession alone. It states that:

the following acts fall within the scope of practice of educational psychologists: (a) assessing, diagnosing, and intervening in order to optimise human functioning in the learning and development; assessing cognitive, personality, emotional, and neuropsychological functions of people in relation to the learning and development in which they have been trained; (b) identifying, and diagnosing psychopathology in relation to the learning and development; identifying and diagnosing barriers to learning and development; applying psychological interventions to enhance, promote and facilitate optimal learning and development; performing therapeutic interventions in relation to learning and development; referring clients to appropriate professionals for further assessment or intervention; (c) designing, managing, conducting, reporting on, and supervising psychological research, in the learning and development; conducting psychological practice, and research in

accordance with the Ethical Rules of Conduct for Practitioners registered under the Health Professions Act, 1974; adhering to the scope of practice of Educational psychologists; (d) advising on the development of policies, based on various aspects of psychological theory, and research; designing, managing, and evaluating educationally-based programmes; (e) training and supervising other registered psychological practitioners in educational psychology; and (f) providing expert evidence and / or opinions” (Health Professions Act, 1974, as amended in 2011).

## **Helping Professions**

The ‘helping professions’ in this paper include psychologists (of all categories), speech therapists, audiologists, occupational therapists, social workers, doctors, nurses, dieticians, counsellors, and pastoral workers. Helping professionals provide support services to individuals, families and communities, which may be preventative, remediating or curative in nature. Although the work of other health professionals such as dentists, surgeons, midwives and pharmacists is recognized and acknowledged, they are not directly included in the focus of this study. Allied health professionals, such as laboratory assistants or technicians, are excluded from this study.

## **Support**

‘Support’ in this paper refers to psychological and educational interventions that support children, teachers, parents, school principals, schools, and families. Such support ranges from individual support to broad systemic interventions. It may be single-discipline support, or multi-, trans- or interdisciplinary in nature. It includes both needs-based support and support that focuses on strength and capacities.

## **Emerging Democracy**

The ‘emerging democracy’ referred to in this paper is the democratic society that has existed in South Africa since the general election based on universal suffrage of 1994. South Africa became a true and universal democracy in

1994 when Nelson Mandela became the first democratically elected president. The period selected for discussion in this paper is between 2005 and 2015, which falls within the first 21 years of democracy in South Africa.

## **South Africa**

South Africa is the southern-most country on the continent of Africa. Politically, it became a democracy in 1994, after years of exclusionary ideological apartheid had dominated the country since 1948. It has a population of approximately 53 million people, nine provinces, and eleven official languages. It has three capital cities: Pretoria (executive capital), Bloemfontein (judicial capital) and Cape Town (legislative capital). It shares common borders with Namibia, Botswana, Mozambique, Swaziland and Zimbabwe, and is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean in the west, and the Indian Ocean in the east.

During the apartheid years, all aspects of socio-political life in South Africa were strictly racially segregated. In the education sector, education departments were segregated on the basis of race and skin colour, and there were vast discrepancies in the allocation of resources to ‘white’ departments and departments staffed by other racial groups. During the period after 1994, comprehensive strategies have been implemented to address the inequities of the past across all sectors of society, including education.

### **Educational Psychology in South Africa**

#### **‘Out with the Old, in with the New.’**

When a country experiences a profound and significant political transformation, the echoes of ‘change’ rhetoric reverberate into academia and permeate the scientific understanding of a variety of subject disciplines. Hope and optimism often influence the emergence of a new, democratic social order (Badat & Sayed, 2014). In the social sciences, and perhaps also in Psychology in general, these echoes were particularly influential during the development of democracy in South Africa. It was noticeable, for example, that Educational psychologists questioned almost everything that

had been done before, and that they were in consequence advocating new methods for the conduct of their practice. Many, for example, were actively involved in crafting new policies that supported novel ways of engaging the world in their professional practice. New text books in Educational Psychology appeared and new authors emerged in the broader field of Psychology (Duncan, Van Niekerk, Townsend, 2004). Extensive debates about the scope of practice of educational psychologists were the order of the day, and changes in leadership took place within formal societies as more inclusive spaces were actively sought by participants. It was within the ambience of these new inclusive, non-segregated spaces, that an atmosphere was created in which it became possible for new discourses to emerge.

In the South African Constitution, which was promulgated two years after the first democratic elections (Republic of South Africa, 1996), the way in which “helping” was conceptualized changed fundamentally from the way in which it been defined before. Since what had preceded the Constitution was no longer acceptable, what might an alternative be? An analysis of studies in Educational Psychology in the last decade identifies numerous studies that “explored and described” new interventions, new approaches, alternative methods of assessment, and theoretical frameworks that departed fundamentally from earlier theoretical directions (Human-Vogel, 2006; Moletsane & Eloff, 2006; Van der Westhuizen & Van der Merwe, 2010). All these efforts on the part of educational psychologists formed part of a collective and individual quest to find new ways of serving the needs of an emerging democratic society. But if educational psychologists could no longer practice in the old way, they needed to be able to identify new ways of conducting professional practice that could be supported by sound empirical evidence.

A strong sense of urgency and excitement permeated the projects and pursuit of new knowledge in this radically altered landscape. New research methodologies were embraced and new clinical methods were explored, assessed and described in detail (Bischof & Alexander, 2008; Ebersöhn, 2010; Fike, Knoetze, Shuttleworth-Edwards, Radloff, 2012; Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2011, Matsitsa, 2006; Oswald, 2014).

Before 1994, Educational Psychology in South Africa had, broadly speaking, three separate focuses. These were: i) emotional and behavioural

problems of children, ii) learning problems in children, and iii) career counselling. Now, in the new democratic society, ‘problems’ themselves were problematized with the result that the boundaries between ‘problems’ also became blurred.

The seminal work by Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2002) challenged South African educational psychologists to think beyond the needs and difficulties of individuals and to consider the systemic challenges that needed to be met if learning was to be successful. Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana re-conceptualised ‘problems’ as ‘barriers’ – thereby shifting discourses to focus on ways in which ‘barriers’ could be overcome, rather than what was needed to fix ‘problems’. These narratives also began to permeate policy documents (Department of Education, 1997) so that educational psychologists were encouraged to support children (‘learners’), teachers (‘educators’), and schools in ways that reflected the value of individual human rights and the dignity of human beings. These policies did not spell out actual details and directives, but rather foregrounded the seven fundamental values enshrined in the South African constitution, namely, democracy, equality, reconciliation, diversity, responsibility, respect and freedom. At the grassroots level this meant, for instance, that children with disabilities could be included in mainstream classrooms for the first time. Their effect was also to suggest radical changes in the ways in which educational psychologists could be effective in their practice.

The resultant increase on the systemic level of the scope of practice of educational psychologists has produced a number of subliminal effects. First, it has raised awareness of how broad societal dynamics exert an influence on theoretical developments within Educational Psychology. Thus, for example, experiences of discrimination, suppression and resistance have been and still are being foregrounded by researchers and commentators. Simultaneously, experiences of justice, capability, continuous success, and resilience have also become frequent in the field of Educational Psychology. Such experiences have not only been described from the perspectives of educational psychologists, but from many others in allied helping professions.



## **Leitmotif in Educational Psychology**

Since its earliest years, the ‘leitmotif’ in Educational Psychology in South Africa has been “helping” in all its varied manifestations (Van Niekerk, 1986). How do we help children in need? How do we support families who are in distress? How do we support schools in order to ensure effective learning? How do we support individuals over a lifetime?

Prior to 1994, the practice of educational psychologists was focused predominantly on helping the *individual*: the individual child that needed help, the family unit that needed ‘fixing’, and the teacher that needed to teach in a particular way. During the early 2000s some of the most influential and prestigious publications in this field corrected the imbalance inherent in the content of their articles and commentary by deliberately shifting the emphasis away from individuals so as to foreground the systemic nature of Educational Psychology (Davidoff & Lazarus, 2004; Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002).

Such shifts in the conceptualization of Educational Psychology increased the status of educational psychologists to such an extent that they often found themselves in positions of leadership in the struggle to implement the values of democracy and human dignity in the new South Africa. Educational psychologists repositioned themselves away from their earlier singular-focus practice and began to take charge of processes that would change the way in which educational psychological support, help or intervention would be conducted in the future. Such studies and initiatives adopted foci that ranged from resilience in township schools, to pre-school teacher beliefs about HIV and AIDS programmes, to non-invasive career counselling techniques, and many other challenges which were of importance in the new democracy (Mampane & Boucher, 2011; Ruto-Korir & Lubbe-De Beer, 2012; Wood & Webb, 2008; Maree, 2012). Whereas previous service delivery models depended for legitimacy on strong structures and internal referral systems, efficacy began to be assessed in terms of the collaborative nature of partnerships, the extent of consultation, and the buy-in of stakeholders. Educational psychologists were thus seen to be leading -- rather than passively receiving. As such, they were actively using their expertise in groups, learning, psychological functioning and

human behaviour to influence interdisciplinary processes that sought solutions to large-scale systemic challenges.

The challenges inherent in the processes and initiatives were often overwhelming. The majority of the South African population had not had access to education for the major part of their lives. The dire consequences of the huge discrepancies in resource allocation between the racially segregated education departments of the past were becoming more and more apparent as schools opened up to welcome a diversity of children. It was immediately evident that illiteracy was prevalent and that poverty was often racially bound. HIV and AIDS were changing the architecture of South African families. While children with disabilities had access to inclusive schools, effective support was often neglected or unavailable. The tragic effects of the previously entrenched culture of exclusion were more than ever visible in South African schools even as South Africans rejoiced in its new opportunities. But, as elsewhere in the world, education was regarded as a means to obtain prosperity and a better life for those who had been previously disadvantaged.

In the face of these seemingly overwhelming challenges, the “helping” role of educational psychologists changed. These changing roles coincided with several other converging trends at the time. Boundaries between different categories of psychologists thus became a contested field. Whereas statutory differences between the scope of practice of clinical, counselling, educational and industrial psychologists had previously been fairly clearly defined and delineated, such differences of scope now became a theme of intense debate and extended consultation processes. And even as the roles of various categories of psychologists became blurred, the professional boundaries between psychologists and *other* professions also became indistinct. Social workers, for example, began to do clinical work; speech therapists and audiologists became prominent role players in schools, and occupational therapists were increasingly involved in the creation of optimal learning environments. These were all positive developments, and some universities even developed interdisciplinary postgraduate qualifications in which health professionals from a variety of disciplines could work together to learn needed skills and competencies.

The response of educational psychologists to the challenges of South

Africa's emerging democracy, apart from increased interdisciplinary work, has been pro-active and developmental in nature. New, responsive and inclusive approaches to intervention were developed during this time, and the participation of identified stakeholders became integral to all planning processes. Although Educational psychologists were still 'helping', they were now doing so on a larger and more flexible scale than before. They were also increasingly seen to be operating in terms of systemic challenges that went beyond the individual helping relationship.

### **Lack of (and limited) Comparative Work**

However, while the developmental, pro-active, systemic work served the immediate needs of a changing service delivery model for educational psychologists, critical aspects of empirical work became neglected. Critical comparative studies were often ignored in favour of rich, descriptive studies that focused on bounded systems.

It seems from the analysis, that educational psychologists have largely shied away from comparisons in research and practice during the years of democracy. Even when comparisons *were* done, it was done in a descriptive way rather than an empirically-based, comparative way that would provide insight into practices that would work better or worse.

What educational psychologists have done adequately during this period of democracy is active social engagement, widening our theoretical perspectives and advocating for success stories. What educational psychologists have done *inadequately* is finding out what works better in comparison to what we are doing. The focus has been very reflective and in many instances educational psychologists have adopted cyclical, development processes in interventions. These studies certainly seem to have strengthened educational psychological practices, but it has not been benchmarked against alternatives. These alternatives may have been better than the interventions that has been studied, but in view of the limited comparative data, this cannot be assessed. Comparative studies allow the assessment of which helping modes/interventions/ programmes are better than others. The assumption is that studies by educational psychological researchers should not just tell us what is working. It should also tell us what

is working better than what we have.

### **Creating Virtuous Cycles**

Even though empirical research in Educational Psychology was limited in terms of comparisons during the period under discussion, the lack of comparative studies may inadvertently have contributed to a positive effect: the participation of educational psychologists in the creation of virtuous cycles. One of the key roles of educational psychologists within the emerging democracy in South Africa has been the creation of virtuous cycles. The notion of “facilitation” emerged very strongly within the broad helping professions in South Africa and it resonated well with the clinical practices of many educational psychologists.

Even as educational psychologists relinquished ‘power’ within helping relationships, they stepped into expanded roles as ‘facilitators’. The democratic ethos that was permeating social engagement on many levels, meant that equality was sought amongst all role players in support and helping processes (Daniels, 2006).

For educational psychologists it meant building collaborative partnerships with teachers, schools principals, parents, families, children, health professionals and civic organizations. The collaborative partnerships that emerged as a central construct in the research and practice of educational psychologists entailed a blurring of traditional boundaries and roles. In fact, one of the successes of Educational Psychology in a democratic South Africa has been the effective blurring of lines in the ‘us-them’ conceptual phenomenon. This may have been an inadvertent result of a society-in-transition in which the lines between formerly ‘apart’ (e.g. separate) groups were blurred. It may also have been the result of activism on the part of educational psychologists who wished to topple former power structures that depended on the continued existence of previously defined groups, e.g. us-and-them.

These former ‘us-them’ groupings constituted a variety of conceptual groupings – amongst others, the patient/client vs professionals group, the parents vs teachers group, the schools vs families group, the male vs female group, and also a set of (problematically defined, socially constructed) racial

groupings. The ‘early history of developmental psychology in South Africa reflects a struggle with the concepts of sameness and difference between races, and with shared behavioural determinants in contrast to group specificity formed by variations in experience’ (Richter & Dawes, 2008: 309).

The definition of these ‘us vs them’ groups in Psychology were highly problematic, *and* it was also subliminal in many ways. The country was moving away from socially-constructed groupings at a socio-political level, but it had to be overcome at the personal, individual level too. During this time educational psychologists were therefore actively questioning the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders within helping processes and seeking increased equity. However, the formal role of educational psychologists in education support structures were undergoing changes too.

### **Inside Out: Educational Psychology at The Margins of Formal Support Structures**

Educational psychologists played prominent roles in the psycho-social support structures in the education sector in the pre-democratic years in South Africa. Roles were formalised and job opportunities were numerous. Psychometric assessment was integral to the practice of educational psychologists. Assessments were individual, it was frequently conducted and there was a strong assumption that interventions could not proceed if it were not based on comprehensive assessment data. In a democratic South Africa, the use of psychometric assessment tools however, presented complex challenges. Previously, psychometric instruments were developed and standardised on a relatively small part of the population. It was also restrictive in terms of language of instruction. Many instruments were only available in some of the indigenous languages and many were not available in languages other than English.

Concurrent to the shifts in educational assessment, the education sector was also aligning with international trends on inclusive education. Within these discourses, full inclusion of children with disabilities was strongly advocated. Previously, psychometric assessments were utilized to support children with disabilities. However, it was also used for special school

placements and the determination of psychological support services. Previous assessment practices of educational psychologists with children with disabilities were therefore now questioned. Psychometric assessment was viewed by some as mechanisms for exclusion. There was also a perception that psychometric ‘tests and testing were not indigenous to Africa’ (Foxcroft & Davies, 2008: 161). Educational psychologists now needed to find legitimate ways of supporting children with special needs, while not being able to rely on traditional modes of assessment and support.

This period saw the development of a number of alternative assessment methods (Foxcroft & Davies, 2008; Moletsane & Eloff, 2006). It also saw the subsequent development of interventions that was less focused on individual children, and more focused on group intervention, classroom-based interventions and systemic interventions at the school level.

However, on a structural level, formal “positions” for educational psychologists in the formal education departments disappeared. The ethos at the time, was that educational psychologists should be spending their time and effort on preventative measures, that would lessen the need for ‘remediation’ later on. As a result, many educational psychologists found other roles. In general, the formal role of educational psychologists in the education departments diminished.

Today, educational psychologists tend to function at the margins of formal support structures in both of the education departments, e.g. the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training. Many are involved in project-based interventions with non-governmental organizations. In some instances, support services by educational psychologists are also integrated into research projects. However, the expertise of educational psychologists are not integrated into formal support structures in educational planning processes – even as *ad hoc* projects that relate to the roles and functions of educational psychologists are implemented.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The paper focused on Educational Psychology broadly during the period of emerging democracy with a specific focus on the 2005 – 2015 period. It did

not focus on specific challenges within the field such as poverty-related challenges, literacy levels in schools, teacher effectiveness, the use of technology or adequate resourcing of learning environments. Even though themes such as educational psychological assessment or HIV and AIDS may be referenced, it is not discussed in-depth. Some of the trends that are highlighted in the paper may also not necessarily be unique to the South African context. Trends such as the move towards broader systemic interventions and the equalization of power relationships are also to be noted in the global context.

The paper also has the limitation of restricted retrospective analysis. It focused on the period 2005 – 2015, yet the nature of the reflections necessitated some cursory references to the period prior to 1994, e.g. to the pre-democracy period. The author relied on some, but not all-inclusive data from this pre-democracy period. In addition, the advanced literature search delimited the 2015 period, but the paper was finalized before the end of this period. It may therefore be, that some articles will still be published in the three month period between the writing of the paper and the end of the year in question.

The claim that educational psychologists increased their leadership roles in support and interventions may also not be unique to the educational psychology profession – it may indeed be consistent with developments in other helping professions. However, the leadership role of educational psychologists has been under-reported in the educational landscape in South Africa and this paper purports to highlight this notion. In effect, the paper illustrates that educational psychologists are not only leading support and intervention processes, but they are leading *different ways* of helping individuals, groups and systems.

The concept of interdisciplinarity and the identity of educational psychologists within the multiplicity of roles is under explored in this paper. There is heightened paradigm awareness amongst educational psychologists, and roles have been expanded to the systemic level. The granular meaning of these shifts is, however, yet to be determined.

Alvesson and Sköldberg's assertion that 'even ideologically and politically aware researchers risk being steered by their own text production, where influences from prevailing, free-floating discourses can gain the upper

hand and play their own fragmented game with the intentionally referential, supposedly politically aware text' (2000: 9), seem to be particularly pertinent when a reflective text on Educational Psychology is written. They claim that 'any ambition to determine 'how things are' or 'how best to interpret a phenomenon' [...] may then be regarded as illusory' (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000: 9).

### Conclusion

It seems that every solution contains within it the start of the next challenge. As South African educational psychologists have sought to carve new pathways for their research and practice within South Africa's emerging democracy, new challenges have emerged. Old outdated practices have made way for new, broadened ways of thinking. 'Helping' as a concept has enlarged to include leading and facilitation. Virtuous cycles have been created and sustainability of interventions is emphasized. But educational psychologists' empirical research needs to be elevated beyond the descriptive level. In addition, blurred boundaries should not deter us from exploring comparative work in order to continue to strengthen our practice.

Badat and Sayed (2014) mention that twenty years into the South African democracy, we still have formally desegregated yet class-based educational institutions. We still witness continuing disparities and inequities and poor academic achievement for a majority of South African children. The work of educational psychologists, within this context, therefore remain critical.

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