The need for a shift in the South African educational research epistemological landscape

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Abstract

Up to now the traditional approach to knowledge production through research in education in South Africa has been driven by a ‘You’ perspective. The ‘You’ perspective implies the observation by a person of the reaction of other people, phenomena or contexts to some kind of manipulation. This results in describing practice and formulating theory. Reflection on own practice and ways of changing own practice to enhance teaching and learning was explored, but seldom if ever, followed up with reflective research.

This article aims to illustrate the relevance of an ‘I’ perspective in educational research in the South African situation. In order to achieve this, the presenter will put current South African educational research practice and the knowledge needed in teaching practice into context. The presenter will further argue for and substantiate the shift from a ‘You’ perspective to an ‘I’ perspective in the research approach to teaching and learning and therefore teaching practice.

INTRODUCTION

Working with lecturers, teachers and initial teacher training students made me aware of the need for knowledge about own practice and a research approach methodology that will enhance the production of knowledge about own teaching and learning practice.

South Africa is currently experiencing major changes in its general, further and higher education. General and further education are in a process of implementing new curricula. Higher education is in a merger process coupled with a new funding formula linked to mainly research outputs with little emphasis on teaching outputs. A possible approach for those lecturers with a main interest in teaching would be to action research own practice. In the teacher-training context this has an impact on the preparation of teachers to research own practice in order to improve own practice. This need also became evident during an in service training course of a group of further education college lecturers.

Studying some of the theories of new knowledge production like Mode 1 and Mode 2 (Gibbons et al. 1994) and Triple Helix (Etzkowitz and Leydendorff 1997) and weighing up different research methodologies or approaches, highlighted the
relativity of the role which perspective plays in knowledge generation. It became clear that the perspective you work from in an attempt to determine how to solve the problem you are facing will determine what new knowledge will be created and whether the new knowledge will actually assist in solving the problem.

The aim of this article is to initiate discourse in educational own practice and illustrate the relevance of an ‘I’-perspective in educational research in the South African situation. In order to achieve this, I will put the current South African educational research practice and the knowledge needed in educational practice into context. I will further argue for and substantiate the shift from a ‘You’-perspective to an ‘I’-perspective in the research approach to teaching and learning and therefore teaching practice.

CURRENT SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH PRACTICE

The main issue here is: How do general, further and higher education teachers currently develop knowledge about own practice and as a result thereof what new knowledge would be useful?

Kraak (2000, 12–15) describes the shift from a closed to an open Higher Education and Training (HET) system. As key features he indicated a move from discipline-based with a maintenance of canonical traditions of being science critical and the view that knowledge is important for its own sake and not because of its instrumental value, to programme-based with a responsiveness to society and economy with a plural, heterogeneous view of knowledge. The knowledge structure of the closed system is formal, academic and discipline-based. In contrast the open system encourages hybrid formations, which are mixes between academic and professional or tacit knowledge. This is a move from Mode 1 disciplinary knowledge to Mode 2 problem-solving knowledge production.

Educational research is basically still linked to Mode 1 knowledge generated by systematic study and organized by general principles, that which has been obtained in a systematic and controlled way. Mode 1 knowledge is and will stay important as it forms the foundation for Mode 2 knowledge, as Mode 2 supplements Mode 1 in a pattern of co-evolution between the two according to Gibbons, et al, (1994, 17).

As indicated by the themes and titles listed on the NEXUS database system under the broad discipline code 020 for Education only 8 research studies between 1992 and 2005 were conducted relating to own practice from an ‘I’-perspective. The rest were conducted from a ‘You’-perspective. Similarly the number of articles published in two well-known journals of higher education apparently gave preference to articles written on research done from a ‘You’-perspective.

Samuel (2002, 255) argues that there is a need to reconceptualise teacher education research and suggests that teacher educators should look more closely at teachers’ understanding of their own work. This is also true of looking at own practice by teacher educators and teachers.
In their discussion, Parker and Deacon (2005) divided research done on teacher education into five groups, namely: discipline-specific teacher education, inclusivity and diversity, management and design of programmes, recognition of prior learning, service learning and internships, and teachers’ roles and identities. Of the nineteen research papers referred to, only two were vaguely related to own practice. Blignaut (2002) investigated which cognitive, affective and psychomotor aspects should be considered when a training format is designed for pre-service teachers. Vithal (2002) explored how critical thinking may be linked to critical citizenship in a school mathematics classroom.

**KNOWLEDGE NEEDED IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE**

Judging from the above, true to the research tradition, knowledge generated about education in South Africa mainly deals with disciplinary knowledge obtained from studying subjects or phenomena as an observer from the outside and under controlled circumstances.

When I talk about education I immediately connect it to learning. Learning presupposes knowledge and knowledge generation that happens in an educational context influenced by variables. The educational context primarily is made up of the provision of and the facilitation for learning opportunities of some kind. This context constructs a triad of own practice components, namely teacher, learner and educational context manager. This brings into play the influence of different variables, like professionalism, morals, ethics, standards of judgement, management practice, social context, culture, background of teachers, learners and parents, and many more. Taking South African general, further and higher education into consideration the knowledge and therefore the research needed boils down to knowledge about own practice and how the related variables influence own practice.

Brodie, Lelliot and Davis (2002) put forward the following question for research in their article: ‘How do we scaffold and mediate learner’s ideas?’

According to Parker and Deacon (2005) and practicing teachers, student teachers and lecturers I consulted, the following questions can lead to knowledge needed about own practice:

How do/can I

- address the need for indigenous development via my own practice?
- redefine the role, as well as the structures, of national universities through my own practice?
- handle multiculturalism in my classroom?
- deal with second and third language speakers of the language of learning in my classroom to improve their learning?
- handle misbehaviour in my classroom?
- help learners to learn?
The knowledge needs to inform change in educational practice that is linked to own practice.

The question arises: How to contribute to new knowledge? McNiff and Whitehead (2005 Chapter 7, 4) suggest the following:

- consider what inspires your life.
- consider whether you are living in a way that is consistent with your values.
- show how you address this issue, again offering descriptions of what you are doing and explanations for why you are doing it.
- write a report of what you have done and give it to someone to read.

The question that needs to be answered next is how can I research own practice and validate the knowledge generated from the research? The following section of the article will endeavour to answer this question.

Knowledge can be produced via researching own practice from an ‘I’-perspective.

THE ‘YOU’ AND ‘I’ PERSPECTIVES

Gibbons et al. (1994) very eloquently distinguish between Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production.

Mode 1 produces disciplinary knowledge, which is the scientific form of knowledge production. This knowledge is developed in a disciplinary, primarily cognitive context, which is controlled by strong cognitive and social norms and processes that must be followed in the production, legitimation and diffusion of knowledge of this kind (Gibbons 2000, 35).

The above mode of knowledge production is the mode most frequently and traditionally followed in education research projects. This mode is also related to what McNiff (2005) refers to as a ‘You’-perspective. This means that the researcher or the research team is an observer or observers recording observations of a person or persons or a phenomenon within a specific context from a personal perspective, background, culture, ethics and standards of judgement position. The criteria for knowledge legitimacy are the traditional scientific criteria. This is what McNiff and Whitehead (2005 Chapter 1, 2) refer to as a spectator approach and what Mason (2002, 85) called ‘extraspective’ observation.

Extraspective observation is observing from the outside, thus emphasising subject-object distinctiveness. Traditional research methodologies are based on extra-spection studying what students, teachers and other practitioners do, both inside and outside of institutions by observing, probing, analysing, making distinctions and explaining and theorising (Mason 2002, 86).

In contrast to Mode 1, Mode 2 produces transdisciplinary knowledge, which is created in transdisciplinary, social and economic contexts and organised around a particular application. Utility is thus central to production. This knowledge is produced through continuous negotiation within a heterogeneous constituency.

R. E. Gerber
The need for a shift in the South African educational research . . .

derived from a continuous succession of transient and emergent problem solving contexts and situations. Comparing Mode 1 and Mode 2, Mode 2 is more socially accountable and reflexive (Gibbons 2000, 35).

Muller (2002, 57) points out that Mode 2 knowledge production is characterised by a form of social organisation which differs from traditional, pure or applied research. This implies that the problem arises in a context of application and as problem-solving research it is transdisciplinary, trans-institutional and financed by more than one source. This leads to a more collaborative research structure than the traditional research team. Quality of research is increasingly being assessed against hybrid, contextually relevant criteria. Furthermore, evaluation becomes an issue for traditional researchers and thus a new field of research and application. This also impacts on national research systems, knowledge clients and donor agencies (Muller 2002, 58).

Heath (2001) argues that Mode 2 knowledge is underpinned by the postmodern epistemological approach and a distinct epistemology derived from philosophical pragmatism, which states that truth is determined by consensus amongst informed practitioners and is linked to a communicative basis for knowledge.


Intraspective observation is that in which an inner witness observes the self caught up in the action, yielding inner objectivity experienced subjectively. According to Mason (2002, 85) this is different from introspection in which one person thinks back retrospectively over his/her own experience and speculates as to what he/she might or must have been doing and thinking. Gardner (1985 Chapter 5) found it to be an unreliable source of psychological data.

In recent times this perspective has been closely linked to Action Research and more specifically Collaborative Action Research and vide Mason (2002, 85) ‘interspective’ observation.

In the ‘I’-perspective the focus is on the I and not the you. This directs the research towards what is related to the I. The I is seen as part of the situation investigated. This participative approach places individual researchers at the centre of their own enquiries. The boundaries begin to dissolve, as researchers come to see themselves as sharing meanings, that is, developing a common understanding about what they are doing and why. Therefore researching own practice is inevitable (McNiff and Whitehead 2005 Chapter 1, 3). Own practice can be linked to personal, social, spiritual and professional practice or any relevant context. The you however plays an important role in the collection of data as evidence of knowledge about the I. As the focus is on the I a number of issues regarding the research arises.

The first issue is about the influence of the I’s cosmology and ontology on the outcome of the research. Can knowledge generated from a personal cosmology and ontology be legitimised? Within the Mode 2 perspective legitimacy will be judged
by an epistemology as well as standards of judgement and criteria for validation determined through consensus. McNiff (2005), in stating her theoretical frameworks refers to Merleau-Ponty’s (1945) concept of the ‘lived body’ as the embodied context for the generation of knowledge. Johnson (2004, 3) indicates that the role of the researcher as subjective becomes more important through the interpretation process. The practical and the ethical through reflection becomes the epistemological.

McNiff and Whitehead (2005 Chapter 3, 8) state that you aim to show how you hold yourself accountable for what you do. The implication is that you cannot accept responsibility for what others do and think, but you must accept full responsibility for what you do and think. Another implication is that you always need to recognise that you may be mistaken. The most stringent safeguard against the hubris of believing that one is right beyond a reasonable doubt, is to take into account the opinions of all whose lives are involved. In your case, this refers to your research participants (McNiff and Whitehead 2005 Chapter 3, 8).

The ‘I’-perspective and collaborative approach to educational research can deliver ‘knowledge as a base for action and as a platform for further enquiries’ (Brulin 2001, 441). Mason (2002, 85) refers to the collaborative approach as ‘interspective’ observation.

Interspective observation is that in which people share observations as witness to each other, yielding objectivity from negotiated subjective observation. This means to look between as in two observers sharing what they see. This describes interactions between colleagues who go beyond extra-spection and begin to form a shared, or taken as shared, world of experience (Mason 2002, 86).

This interspective observation becomes a medium to validate evidence through a mutually agreed set of criteria and standards of judgement to legitimize the knowledge created.

The importance of Mode 1 knowledge production and the research related to it is thus not questioned and deemed of minor interest in a quest for a shift from a dominant ‘You’-perspective research approach to a more ‘I’-perspective research approach. The next section of the article will endeavour to motivate the need for this shift.

**MOTIVATION FOR THE NEED FOR A PERSPECTIVE SHIFT IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**

The following is presented as motivation for the need to shift from a ‘You’-perspective to an ‘I’-perspective in educational research.

There appears to be growing consent that the way forward for academia is to change the forms of knowledge creation rather than find appropriate theoretical frameworks according to Toulman and Gustavsen (1996).

As indicated previously the current South African educational research perspective is mainly geared towards Mode 1 knowledge production due to the
traditional view on research and the structuring of universities and universities of technology (previously Technikons). Research funding and subsidies supported this perspective. The new general, further and higher education landscape with revised curricula, changed grouping and institutional structuring necessitates a need to investigate own practices. This relates to Mode 2 knowledge production identified by Gibbons, et al. (1994), which is characterised by a form of social organisation. By approaching research of own practice from an ‘I’-perspective all practitioners can be involved in research. This can increase research outputs in educational research dramatically. The benefit for higher education will be more research funding apart from knowledge creation and for general and further education, improved educational practices. This would however mean that everybody involved will have to be trained in research skills if training did not take place somewhere before. The outset of this could mean an increase in the quality of research outputs.

Subotsky (2000, 73) points out that according to Gibbons (1998, 40) ‘the spread of Mode 2 trans-disciplinarily into the curriculum requires a shift from discipline-based to problem-based learning’. This is also related to what Muller (2000, 59) refers to as an increasing stress on ‘transferable skills’ and ‘generic competences’. Subotsky (2000, 87) further argues that on the basis of clearer theoretical insights generalised from practice, different interventions can be initiated. He stresses the close relationship between theory generated in the context of application oriented to practice-based problem-solving and practice. For education this implies an understanding of how my current practice works and what needs to change in my current practice. Thus a need for a shift to an I research perspective.

Ensor (2000, 162) notes a discrepancy between the descriptions of intention and what actually happens in the classroom of Mathematics student teachers’ first year of teaching. She suggests that the reason for this lies in the disjuncture between teacher education and classroom teaching with student teachers being unable to put into practice the knowledge they acquire in training. The appropriate way to address this would be research from an ‘I’-perspective to address own practice problems.

There is a need for contribution to new theory. McNiff and Whitehead (2005 Chapter 7, 1) points out that most literatures on professional education tell you how to be good at your job but nowhere, however, is the point made that teachers should actually begin to investigate how they can acquire the power to make decisions about the nature and purpose of their own profession, and how this can contribute to wider debates about the nature and direction of the society we wish to live in. Practitioners are seen as worthy practitioners who can talk about practice, but not as highly competent theorists who can talk about the need to explain practice and specify what practice is for and whose interests it should serve.
Practitioners are systematically persuaded to believe that they are not capable of thinking for themselves or contributing to theory (McNiff and Whitehead 2005 Chapter 7, 2).

What do South African educators and educationists need most? In line with the view of the current South African educational research practice and the knowledge needs, the answer seems to be knowledge about own practice and ways to improve own practice, which actually are the same which McNiff and Whitehead (2005 Chapter 1, 12) provided as reasons for doing Action Research, namely

- to improve own understanding;
- to develop own learning;
- to influence others’ learning.

In a research project that links up with the above argument Auger and Wideman (2000) found in a study on the benefits of engaging in action research in the B.Ed. year that action research provided a powerful means for improving professional practice by enhancing participants’ sense of autonomy. They also experienced a dual role which emerged as participants became both active listeners and critical friends. They found that as active listeners, they provided support by helping participants clarify their understandings in the early stages of their investigations. As critical friends, they challenged participants to examine their findings on a deeper level. It was noted in the final word by Auger and Wideman (2000) that the teacher student researchers questioned the worth of their research because they did not see themselves as academics and a lot of time was spent reassuring participants that their ideas were valid and relevant on a personal level and could be of tremendous value to others in the profession.

In the conclusion of their article Auger and Wideman (2000) stated that their study supports literature by Sutton (1995, 1997) that demonstrates how actively investigating one’s own practice results in real changes in the classroom.

This shift to an alternative research perspective will also be in line with what McNiff and Whitehead (2005 Chapter 7, 10) describes as the characteristics of the new scholarship:

The new scholarship refers to newer holistic forms of enquiry, where a practitioner investigates their own work in order to generate theory from within the practice. Practice itself becomes the context for research, and contains its own theory. Knowledge is developed through the exercise of creative imagination and critical engagement. In professional learning contexts the assumption is that theory is always in process, and can contribute to new thinking about new forms of practice.

The previous motivations offered, substantiates the need for an additional educational research perspective or focus.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion it is not at all difficult to agree with Auger and Wideman (2000) that ‘(a)ction research points in the direction of a Copernican revolution in professional development and school improvement by placing teacher learning, rather than teacher training, in a prominent position in the teacher-education sky’. In addition I would like to add educational research of own practice related to higher education. This does not necessarily have to only include teaching practice but can go as wide as professional, social and epistemological practices.

REFERENCES


