Initiating Debate

Education and education research: Moribund Fields or dynamic interacting systems?

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Abstract
The complex field of education is often depicted as a static field governed by technocratic approaches to activities that characterise the field. Education change is equally viewed in such limited and positivistic ways and linear means-end processes (Hoban 2002). In such orientations to the field, educational research therefore, is about finding rule approaches and law like processes to enable change processes and renewal of the field.
I argue that education, when viewed as a dynamic and complex system allows for change within boundaries and space that leads to meaningful and dynamic interactions between complex phenomena leading to open ended interactions and change possibilities that makes for a dynamic, selfrenewing, rather than episodic bureaucratic change process. This in my view enables education activities to make meaningful professional and socio-economic contributions often attributed as key functions of the field of education.

INTRODUCTION
The field of education is not an isolated theoretical and practical endeavour but one which is intimately linked to social processes. Change in broader society is closely linked to education and change in education in particular. Morrow (2001, 2) illustrates this link in highlighting the case of South Africa during the major political transition in the early nineties as indicated below:

Although the social and political world never remains stable for very long there are key symbolic moments of change, and 1994 provided such a euphoric moment in our shared experience. However social transformation itself is not a single dramatic event, it takes decades (sometimes centuries) to unfold and requires the combined efforts of many people .... Social transformation always raises fundamental questions about education, schooling and teaching. Embedded convictions that carried our thinking and practices fairly comfortably in the past are challenged by the new situation, and issues we once thought settled press forward for articulation and reconsideration.
Lee (2010) in citing Bauman (2009) highlights the importance of reviewing and being vigilant about taken-for-granted assumptions about education:

The history of education has been full of critical periods in which it became evident that tested and seemingly reliable premises and strategies were losing their grip on reality and called for revision and reform. The present day challenges deliver heavy blows to the very essence of the idea of education as it was formed at the threshold of the long history of civilization: they put in question the invariants of the idea the constituent features of education that have thus far withstood all the past challenges and emerged unscathed from the past crises – the assumptions never before questioned let alone suspected of running their course and being in need of replacement (Bauman 2003, 19).

The afore-mentioned illustrates the multi-faceted nature of education as well as its links to various fields of endeavour. Bauman also points out how education as an enterprise and its attendant processes are questioned as part of the change processes. The field of education is linked to other academic disciplines and much of the knowledge base is linked to that of other disciplines. How the field is constituted and functions is therefore linked to disciplines and social processes as illustrated by Morrow (2001) above.

Christie (2008, 5) indicates that education is often viewed at different scales or levels each having its own associated discourses, debates and logics. She lists these as global, national, state policy and institutional / school reform. Lee (2010, 68) expands on the sectoring idea and indicates that sectoral boundaries are part of the 20th century response to ‘massification’ of education. This she indicates was largely developed according to policy imperatives including categories of education services: primary, secondary and tertiary education. Other categories can be defined beyond these and include vocational colleges, adult education colleges as well as pre-primary, early childhood and further education. Lee (2010, 68) views this as a disciplinary grid associated with the management of populations, social stratification, citizenship and nation building agendas and ultimately with the consolidation of a field of education and education research.

Debates have always raged about education in broader public circles as well as in the academe. These debates continue to be at the forefront of academic discussions. Much of the debates are focused on what constitutes the field of education and how education professionals develop and contribute to the knowledge base of the field.

Scholarship in education would then be assumed to be research related and shared amongst professionals. On the one hand, how the field is constituted and maintained and what serves as major contributory factors in the field is always a contested terrain and hotly debated. Education research on the other hand is often presented as the processes by which the field is reconstituted, regenerated and invigorated. I touch on this as part of the argument what education and education research are and that
they will be more useful if viewed and practiced as complex processes in a dynamic system.

DEFINING AND DELINEATING THE FIELD OF EDUCATION

The idea of education can be described in many ways and depiction of the parts, function, ends, and meanings of education will vary depending on the scope of the elucidation. I want to introduce a large, expansive view of education that emerged in the 20th century out of the disciplines of philosophy, social psychology, sociology, and ecology. These academic fields helped shift social scientific understanding away from a narrow, positivistic, reductionist, product-oriented individual behaviour toward a broader environmental, historical, social, and process-oriented view of human beings. In order to understand and evaluate the means and ends of education we must understand the physical, historical, and social process of which any educational endeavour is naturally a part. This broader conception of education can help people better understand the process of education, how it should be practiced, and how educational practices should be studied and evaluated.

Burton and Bartlett (2006, 383) define education studies as a programme of study that examines education systems and processes from a range of ideological, social, psychological and historical perspectives. Education courses are provided by diversity of service providers but largely by universities and education faculties in particular. It is mainly associated with initial teacher education but has developed into a field in its own right distinct from teacher training (Burton and Bartlett 2006). Initially education studies drew heavily on the ‘parent’ disciplines and were heavily influenced by the academic traditions of universities. These courses according to Burton and Bartlett (2006) came under heavy criticism and pushed for a different view and the development of a more distinct field of education.

A study by Davis and Hogarth (in Burton and Bartlett 2006) is unable to identify a clear consensus about the nature of education studies. Broad parameters suggested include ‘fundamental grappling with contested concepts, exploration of a range of perspectives, providing multiple rather than singular explanations of phenomena’, (Burton and Bartlett 2006, 390). Education studies according to Burton and Bartlett (2006, 391) ‘provides a set of analytical discourses that generate insights into educational phenomena as bodies of knowledge and societal conditions shift, develop and wane’. They further contend that education courses could be seen as the provision of courses that sustain and promote critical awareness and continual debate of educational issues within significant sectors of society and state and that this is vital for the protection of long-held freedoms and democracy.

The subject and field of education can be configured in a number of ways. Tubbs and Grimes (2001) suggest that education studies needs to be conceptualised as a field of study and not an academic discipline in its own right. They further contend that in the long run it should be seen as a way of thinking which can inform courses which have the term educational in the titles. On the one hand, education according to
them needs to exist as a form of social, political, cultural and historical critique. They argue further for education as a subject which is independent of disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, politics, psychology and that discipline which does not rely on these for its own coherence and relevance. Tubbs and Grimes (2001) further indicate that in this way we can develop an understanding of education as social and political experience, critique and development, ensuring a programme not just about education but that it is educational in itself.

McWilliam and Lee (2006, 43 and 47) on the other hand suggest that viewing education as an isolated field is a part of a disciplinary fantasy of education that it can deliver transformative learning outcomes of itself (original italics). They indicate further that this thrust for self identity is linked to the project of disciplinarisation of education within universities. Liston, Whitcomb and Borko (2009) argue that (teacher) education courses should embrace the liberal arts and humanities and that teacher education students would benefit from being liberally educated. This they feel provides a broader base for education students, one that takes cognizance of and matches the realities of societies and its impacts on education institutions such as public schooling. The alternatives dominating today they mention has almost become an orthodoxy linked to constructivist learning and student focused pedagogies. This they feel provides a singular, narrow framework which offers candidates in education courses a limited lens through which to understand learning, schooling and the larger social and political contexts of education.

According to Liston, Whitcomb and Borko (2009), the social foundations and intellectual disciplines associated with it (history, philosophy, sociology and anthropology), have played important roles in educating professionals in the field of education. These philosophical and social foundations have enabled distinct and varied understandings and this has enabled choices from a plurality of options that are worthy of pursuing as curricular approaches and instructional practices. Broader exposure as discussed thus would enable education professionals to settle on various combinations of the goals of education to suit their practices and pursuits in the field.

The foregoing alludes to a form of problem about definition and standing in education. McWilliam and Lee (2006, 47), state that this is partly related to the historical tensions between the ‘pure and applied’ dimensions of the field. McWilliam and Lee (2006) argue for the ‘blurring of old boundaries’ in keeping with global, political and social changes linked to economic reform and the restructuring of work. The discourses of the knowledge economy and progressive education need to be viewed with caution and even suspicion as we rethink education processes and practices. Broader ideas related to social foundations can enable such critique and engender choices that can allow for varied views of the extent to which education can achieve social and socio-economic goals often stated as aims for education globally.
EDUCATION RESEARCH: PROCESS OF RENEWAL OR REPRODUCTION

Saltmarch, Sumison and McMaugh (2008, 75) state that one of the defining features of any profession is the distinct body of knowledge that is developed and which it has responsibility for, and this is no different for (teacher) education. Rigorous and deliberate theorising and reconceptualising of this knowledge base is essential for any field to remain vibrant and relevant and education is no exception. Research provides the space and ‘tools’ to engage in this enquiry and needs to form a part of the processes of education.

Research is often seen as the way in which to regenerate and invigorate a field of study. This holds true for education which has seen many paradigm shifts and changes in emphases in the research processes in the field. While education research does contribute to the robust debates and knowledge production, education research has often not had an influence on policy makers and key moments in educational change. Lee (2010) cites Carr (2007) to explain problems related to educational research and how / why it has not served the field of education well. Carr in asking the question, what is educational research suggests that,

Educational research now embraces so many traditions, paradigms theoretical perspectives, methodological frameworks and academic disciplines that it cannot claim to meet even the most minimal criteria of homogeneity that any notion of a research community presupposes and requires. It is thus unsurprising that any identity educational research may have stems more from its institutional embodiment in conferences, research journal and learned societies than from any internal intellectual coherence (Carr 2007, 3).

Carr further suggests that there is incompatibility between what research is and what education is and ascribes educational research’s lack of influence to this incompatibility. He adds that if there are no criteria for educational research what then is the difference between educational research and that which is not? But education is complex and context related. Thus education research needs to be diverse and context related without losing rigour and systematic approaches.

McWilliam and Lee (2006) discuss educational research in Australia but this seems true for many other contexts including South Africa. An important point they emphasize is the fact that education research is often seen as irrelevant to policy makers and education authorities. This they indicate is as a result of the qualitative dominance that has taken root in education research over a period of time. The studies produced focus on small scale case studies and contextualised work often done at advanced levels such as doctoral studies. This knowledge production has become the preserve of education academics and largely has represented the research contribution of education academics. They indicate further that this kind of research has been labelled as ‘for the interest of those pushing on their projects and the handful of people who might benefit from it’ (McWilliam and Lee 2006, 56).
McWilliam and Lee (2006, 52) indicate that quantitative work has been marginalised and leading to what some consider as a de-sciencing of educational research. This they indicate has been a useful move for education faculties. They indicate however that this is particularly negative to policy makers who consider good research as that which can provide a solid evidence base for future social investment. McWilliam and Lee (2006, 54) indicate that this kind of work needs to be both

... big in scale and applied in character utilising cross sector, interdisciplinary collaborations that can address multi-faceted community problems on the ground rather than building domain knowledge for its own sake.

According to McWilliam and Lee (2006, 54) essentially governments want research that tells them how and where to invest resources that will best assist with implementation of policy to mitigate social and economic ills. They feel that it is here where education faculties have failed to make a contribution to the broader field of education through research. While many education academics have made important contributions to the knowledge base of the field, McWilliam and Lee (2006, 55) indicate that faculties of education (in Australia) have failed to offer collective, definitive directions to governments by way of systemic data that could guide policy development and resource provision to improve matters at all levels of education processes.

It is however difficult to provide a unified view of educational research and one size fits all approaches to scholarship. Contexts vary widely and faculties of education tend to respond to local contexts and needs. Retreating into a disciplinary haven within faculty and field boundaries does not provide space for broader growth and development. McWilliam and Lee (2006) indicate that while education faculties are seen to be actively seeking collaborative partnerships the institutions are careful not to threaten the separate identity of educational research and faculties within which these processes occur. They suggest that education academics need to do more and risk more and seek new productive coalitions to advance education as a knowledge domain.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The above accounts of education and educational research indicate varying views and functions of these processes. Lee (2009), Grimes and Tubbs (2001) mention that education can be viewed as a singular discipline while other such as Liston et al. (2009) suggest that education should remain open to interdisciplinary and collaborative efforts to take the field further in its functioning processes.

Education research is similarly viewed from different perspectives. The general view is that the field can be regenerated by research activities which include research publications, senior degree research as well as conference presentations and
gatherings which promote the activities of the field. The kind of research as pointed out by McWilliam and Lee (2006) can vary from small scale qualitative studies very popular over the last two decades and seemingly favoured by academics in the field or large scale studies which offer broader perspectives on the field and needs of the field, more popular with policy makers and education officials. What really matters in research is that knowledge production related to the field resulting from these processes needs to add to the knowledge base of the field and also to rejuvenate the field and improve education.

What is clear is that the field of education is complex and influenced by many different viewpoints / activities and also by other disciplines and their processes. Hoban (2006) suggests that education and change in education is a dynamic and complex system where varying aspects of the field impact on and are in turn impacted on by other aspects and activities in the field by way of complex interactions which are self limiting and yet open. It is my contention that education would best be viewed, treated and practiced in this manner.

Cvetek (2008) similarly suggests that the complex education activities can be grounded / theorised in terms of chaos theory which suggests that these activities are characterised by complexity, non-linearity and sensitivity to initial conditions. He suggests further and I concur, that if education professionals accepted complexity and unpredictability as part of education processes (education and research) education as a field might be more responsive to the real needs of the field and thus make more relevant contributions that would develop the field. In this way I contend the field of education will make meaningful contributions to professional education as well as the improvement of important social, economic conditions often seen as the core functions of the field.

REFERENCES