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# Three current developments in teaching-learning and knowledge creation and the implications thereof for education: A reformational perspective

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## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to survey the following three contemporary developments in the conceptualisation of teaching-learning and of knowledge creation and to spell out the implications thereof for education: the rise of constructivist learning theories, inter-culturalism and the reality of multiple ways of thinking. Social action theory is applied in an effort to get a more over-arching understanding of these developments that have already been affecting education worldwide. The last part of the article is devoted to a transcendental critique of these developments in an effort to arrive at an appropriate reformational-educational response to them.*

## Opsomming

*Die doel van hierdie artikel is om 'n oorsig te bied van die volgende drie hedendaagse ontwikkelinge in die konseptualisering van onderrig-leer en van kennisskepping, en om die implikasies daarvan vir die onderwys uit te spel: die opkoms van konstruktivistiese leerteorieë, inter-kulturalisme en die werklikheid dat mense op verskillende maniere dink. Die sosiale aksieteorie word aangewend om 'n meer oorkoepelende greep te verkry op hierdie ontwikkelinge wat alreeds heelwat invloed op onderwys oor die hele wêreld begin uitoefen het. Die laaste deel van die artikel word afgestaan aan transendentale kritiek op hierdie ontwikkelinge in 'n poging om 'n gepaste reformatories-opvoedkundige respons daarop te formuleer.*

## Keywords:

**education; teaching and learning; constructivism; multicultural education; teaching and learning styles; Social action theory**

## Slutelwoorde:

**opvoeding; onderwys; onderrig en leer; konstruktivisme; multikulturele onderwys; onderrig- en leerstyle; sosiale aksieteorie**

## 1. Introduction

Teaching, learning and the creation of new knowledge (the last reaching its zenith in the research function of higher education) can be regarded as key aspects of education. Three interrelated mega-changes are currently taking place in the world with respect to each of these key areas, namely the rise of constructivist learning theories, of inter-culturalism and the reality of multiple ways of thinking.

According to Kretchmar (2015: no page number)<sup>1</sup> constructivism in recent years has become one of the most often cited theories of learning in the educational literature, and its popularity has achieved such heights that it has been referred to by various scholars as fashionable, faddish, and even by some, as a religion. The concept of learning styles that embraces the notion

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1 Henceforth: npn

of multiple ways of thinking and hence also related to constructivist thinking, is an umbrella term that represents a belief among educators that students differ widely in their ways of learning, demonstrating preferences in the way they process classroom experiences, and that pedagogical practices should be designed with an awareness of differences among students in how they learn. The term first surfaced widely in educational literature during the 1960s when it was strongly linked to a widespread interest in experiential learning. While that link is still prevalent in the literature and classroom practices of the twenty-first century, learning styles have recently assumed new importance since schools are increasingly dealing with reconciling differences in how students learn with the intellectual rigours and emotional pressures of repeated, high-stakes, standardised student testing (Weinstein, 2015: npn). The issue of differences has in recent times become more complex due to the realities of multiculturalism and cultural diversity. Whereas “multicultural” is a descriptive term referring to the presence of many cultures in a multi-ethnic and multiracial society, “multiculturalism” seems to have become a prescriptive concept that entails attitudes, value judgments, public policies, and controversies with regard to the diverse cultures present, especially as to how such cultures are to be identified and represented. Multiculturalism at the school level is often seen to be instrumental in the successful education of an increasingly diverse student population in terms of their scholastic proficiencies, civic aptitudes, and comprehensive preparation for the global economy of the twenty-first century (Chow, 2015: *passim*).

## 2. Problem statement

As will be explained in the discussion below, all three of these developments have clear life-conceptual implications for education (both in the form of parental and/or legal care-giver influence on children and in the form of teacher influence on learners in schools). Despite the fact that education, particularly the teaching-learning variety thereof that occurs in public or state schools, is seen as a secular enterprise (i.e. without any life-conceptual, religious or spiritual entanglements) in the current world, it is a widely accepted view in reformational pedagogical circles that education can never be life-conceptually neutral (Olthuis, 2012:1/7). By implication, the same applies for the three current developments mentioned above; each of them has life-conceptual roots and hence a life-conceptual impact on education. Based on this assumption, we analysed the three developments for the purpose of finding an answer to the following question: Given the fact that

we wish for reformational education to remain relevant (i.e. up to date) and valuable (i.e. have practical application value in the modern world) what could reformational educationists learn (i.e. take cognisance of) and absorb (i.e. make part of their personal pedagogical equipment) from these three current trends in the world and how could they respond to the challenges issuing from these trends?

### 3. Research method

It is widely accepted in Christian scholarly circles that scholarly work occurs on at least four different levels (Strauss, 2009:66). The first is the level of abstraction, analysis and description of a situation such as a current world development or trend.<sup>2</sup> The challenge at this level is to portray the development as faithfully and convincingly as possible. The purpose of scholarly work at this level is to penetrate to the essence of a development so that its potential life-conceptual impact on education can be gauged as accurately as possible. Scholarly work at the second level is to attempt to explain the dynamics of the trends under discussion in terms of an overarching theory that would assist the educationist in attaining a satisfactory grasp on the dynamics at play in the various current developments. Social action theory was chosen for this purpose because it not only provides a bigger picture of the developments but also allows the researcher to examine the actions of the various role-players in these trends. The challenge here was to find a suitable theory and to apply that theory as faithfully as possible to the issue under examination. The third level of scholarly work goes by the name of transcendental critique or criticism (Strauss, 2009:69): in this phase of scholarly work the researcher delves into the life-conceptual, religious and spiritual roots of the trends that were described, as well as of the explanatory theory, in this case Social action theory. The fourth and final level or phase of scholarly work, occasionally referred to as the transcendent phase (Strauss, 2009:22), is to offer a number of perspectives about the issue at hand from the reformational scholar's own understanding of a reformational life-view. The scholar avails him- or herself with Scriptural insights (while avoiding Biblicism and fundamentalism) to cast a new perspective on the issues under examination, in other words the three trends and the explanatory theory.

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2 For the sake of variation, the term "development" in this context will be occasionally exchanged for "trend" and – in the context of social action theory – with "event", "series of events", "action" or "behaviour".

The remainder of this article embodies this procedure. The next section contains a brief analysis and description of the three current trends that modern educators and educationists should be conversant with. The section thereafter contains an outline of the Social action theory as overarching explanatory tool or perspectival lens. The article concludes with an assessment of the underlying (transcendental) principles of the trends and of the theory, and with a brief presentation of perspectives from a reformational pedagogical standpoint.

#### **4. The rise of ‘new’ learning theories: constructivist and self-directed learning**

One of the early learning theories, namely that of John Locke (1632-1704), was based on the premise that a child is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which the educator could inscribe what he or she wished. J.F. Herbart (1776-1841) formulated a somewhat more refined theory, centring on the notion of an apperception mass (formed of perceptions) in the mind. In the early twentieth century, the behaviouristic view of learning became the common way of understanding the learning process. According to Behaviourism, learning results from a stimulus from outside of the learner. Learning was seen as the collection of information previously unknown to the learner (Puolimatka, 2002).<sup>3</sup>

Later in the twentieth century, cognitive learning theories made their appearance. Jean Piaget (1893-1980), for instance, distinguished between several phases in the development of a child/person: as the person’s cognitive faculties mature in the process of biological growth, he or she becomes ready for a sequence of levels of mental operations. Two key concepts in Piaget’s learning theory are assimilation and accommodation: the integration of new sensory impressions into an existing mental schema, and the creation of a new schema when new impressions are found to be discordant with an existing schema. Piaget’s theory attached equal weight to stimuli from the outside (in this respect, his theory is consonant with those of Locke, Herbart and the behaviourists) and to the learner’s physiological apparatus and activities. He therefore seems to occupy a middle position between the older learning theories and the more modern constructivist theories which shift the emphasis more to the learner and his/her activities.

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3 The absence of page numbers in references indicates that the entire work is relevant to the subject under discussion.

According to the constructivist approach, the learner is seen as active in the learning process, and no longer a passive recipient of what is learned. The learner is not filled with information from the outside but is seen as an active searcher for and builder of meaning. The learner is regarded as an active constructor of information and knowledge, and learning as the process of changing the learner's knowledge structures. The teacher's role is to support the student's attempts to construct meaning and models of understanding (Puolimatka, 2002).

Cognitive constructivism, a variant of constructivism, incorporates Piaget's thinking in that it views learning as based on the learner's existing mental constructions; the learner's inner regulations are central to this process. These new learner-centred theories, apart from being based on the premises of constructive learning theory, also embrace theories about motivation, multiple intelligences and learning styles, teaching and learning in the affective domain, creativity and adult learning (*cf.* Jaschik, 2010; Moloji, Dzvimbo, Potgieter, Wolhuter & Van der Walt, 2010; Mompoti & Redoli, 2010). Teaching-learning scholars also take into account how these learner-centred theories could inform practical inquiry strategies such as constructionism, learning by design, project-based learning, problem-based instruction, i-search, case-based learning and, according to Orey (2008), also how learning might effect changes in students' minds, such as that which occurs in transformative learning.

A relatively recent development in the area of learning theory is that of self-directed learning. Self-directedness in learning has been one of the fastest-growing and most-researched areas of education for the past 40 years. The realisation is spreading that self-directed learning is an essential skill for the 21st century (Guglielmino, 2013). Knowles (1975), in the most-cited definition of the process of self-directed learning (Guglielmino, 2013), indicates that it occurs when the learner takes the responsibility for identifying his or her learning needs, developing learning goals, preparing a learning plan, locating learning resources and implementing the plan, and evaluating the results and the process – essentially, directing his or her own life and learning.

## 5. The rise of multicultural education

Until relatively recently, it was assumed that the purpose of schools was to socialise children into the culture of the ruling class. Cohen's (1970) theory on the creation of school systems posits that schools had been erected in the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Athens and Ancient China

with the purpose of gang-pressing a culturally diverse population into loyalty to a dominant, i.e. ruler class, and their state. This was done by suppressing the local cultures and enforcing loyalty to the central state, its rulers and their culture. Cohen (1970:55-147) is convinced that this was also the case in the nineteenth century when national systems of primary education were created in the nation states of Western Europe and North-America. This situation seems to have prevailed right down to the mid-twentieth century; schools had the effect of socialising learners into the dominant culture, i.e. into accepting the language, religion, view of history and the culture of the ruling or dominant class in society.

After the Second World War, especially from the 1960s, there was an about-turn on national education policies regarding the management of cultural diversity. Governments in Western Europe and Northern America instituted a new approach known as Multicultural Education. This policy change resulted from the confluence of a number of factors such as the increasingly multicultural make-up of the populations of Western Europe countries, the atrocities associated with racism during the two World Wars, the proclamation of the Creed of Human Rights (one of the Rights being the right to practise and promote one's own culture, see for example sections 22 and 27 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2016), the demise of the power of the nation state due to globalisation, democratisation and the empowerment of the individual, and the rise of the power of minority interests, including those of minority cultural groups, brought about by the information and communications technology revolution (*cf.* Wolhuter, 2014:104).

It is difficult to encapsulate the term "multiculturalism" in a brief formulation which will be universally accepted, but Magsino's (1995:256) outline of the use of the term in Canadian political and social discourse can be used as a working circumscription. According to him, multiculturalism refers to:

- official policy encouraging all cultural groups which give structure and vitality to society to retain and develop their cultures;
- respect for and the sharing of a common cultural heritage in order to promote a richer life and national unity for all;
- the full participation of all cultural groups and their members in society, and
- individual freedom and choice with respect to cultural identity and participation in cultural activities.

Multicultural Education itself has undergone several changes since its inception. During the first phase, other cultures and cultural perspectives

were merely added as extras to Western perspectives and practices. In a next phase, Multicultural Education took on the form of Anti-Racist Education (cf. Leicester. 1992). Then, when Multicultural Education began accommodating theories of unequal power relations it became intertwined with Anti-Oppressive Education (cf. Kumashori & Ngo, 2007). The events of 9/11 then led to Multicultural Education evolving into Intercultural Education, i.e. an approach that entails knowing of and empathically understanding other cultures, the employment of intercultural dialogue, all of which are based on the premise that all cultures contain the possibility of development and that the co-existence of different cultures requires a commonly shared social capital and shared values base (cf. Coulby, 2007).

Religion (an aspect of culture) suffered a particular fate in the history of multicultural education. Mono-religious approaches, i.e. where a particular religion is taught for the purpose of inculcating a set of unique beliefs in young children, was banned from public or state schools. Such inculcation is deemed to be the responsibility of the parents, the family and organised religious groupings (cf. Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2005). Where religion is still being taught in schools, the learners are introduced to the spectrum of religions in their society with the objective of promoting inter-religious tolerance among the learners and in society (cf. Wolhuter, 2012).

## **6. Recognition of the fact that learners tend to think in unique ways due to the cultural conditions in which they find themselves**

The past fifteen years saw the appearance of a number of publications explicating thinking and philosophical systems that deviate from Western thinking patterns and education. Reagan's *Non-Western Traditions: Alternative approaches to educational practice* (2000) discusses traditional-African, meso-American, traditional North American Amerindian, Confucian-Indian, Hindu-Buddhist, Roma in Europe and Islamic philosophical systems. Merriam and others' book entitled *Non-Western Perspectives on Learning and Knowing* (2007) covers the Islamic, Amerindian, Hindu, Maori, Buddhist, Traditional African, Latin American Liberation Theology and Confucian Eastern philosophical systems. Nisbett's book *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently and why* (2003) contrasts Westerners' (particularly Americans') ways of thinking with those of Easterners (especially Chinese), in particular their views of reality, the place of the self (the human being) in reality, causal attribution, the organisation of



knowledge, the employment of knowledge, and the use of logic and dialectic. The differences between these two groups can be traced back to the heritage of the Greeks in the case of the West and Confucian philosophy in the case of the Chinese.

The following examples illustrate some of the differences between the two ways of thinking. As far as their views of reality (cosmology) are concerned, Westerners tend to view the world as consisting of objects, while Easterners tend to see reality as consisting of substances. Westerners furthermore tend to see reality as consisting of distinguishable objects whereas Easterners tend to have a holistic image of continuous, undifferentiated substances of continual matter (Nisbett, 2003:47-77). In Westerners' view of reality and of the world the self is more prominent than in the case of Easterners (Nisbett, 2003: 89-90). As far as causal attribution is concerned, Westerners place more emphasis on personal characteristics and the free choice of individuals than Easterners who attach more value to circumstantial evidence (Nisbett, 2003:111-112). In contrast to the Western view of the world as a place of objects and people, and of people in control of their own behaviour pursuing their own personal goals, Easterners place greater emphasis on interpersonal relations and relations between objects (Nisbett, 2003:52-53).

As far as the organisation of knowledge is concerned, Westerners have a predilection for classification, for the use of categories and for the organisation of objects and for the inductive use of categories, whereas Easterners show an aversity to taxonomies; when they do classify, they do so on strength of relations rather than on the ground of properties (Nisbett, 2003:140-141). This preference explains why Eastern children learn verbs faster than Western children and why Western children learn nouns faster. Verbs are also more prominent in the Oriental languages (Nisbett, 2003:149-152; 156-157). In Western languages it is easy to form abstractions, e.g. in English by adding the affix “-ness” as in “loveliness”. It is not possible to form such constructions in Oriental languages (Nisbett, 2003:156-157). East Asian languages are highly contextualised; words or phonemes have multiple meanings, and can only be understood in the context in which they are used (Nisbett, 2003:157).

The Western historical legacy and the Aristotelian logic result in Western learners tending to use the principles of logic, more so than do Oriental students who tend to attach more value on the context, experience and credibility of things. Western students wage “either-or” arguments with their equipment of the identity, contradiction and excluded third principles of logic. Oriental students, on the other hand, tend to wage “both and” arguments, and strive

towards Confucian harmony and dialectic (Nisbett, 2003:173-174; 186-187). Nisbett's observations have been confirmed by the Comparative Education Research Center of the University of Hong Kong's publications entitled *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (Watkins & Biggs, 1996), republished in 2010 under the title *Revisiting the Chinese Learner: Changing contexts, changing education* (Chan & Rao, 2010). Its publication *Teaching the Chinese Learner* (Watkins & Biggs, 2001) also deals with the unique characteristics of Chinese learners, thereby suggesting that Oriental learners should be taught in ways amenable to their way of thinking (Nisbett, 2003:210-217).

Having now briefly described three of the most momentous interrelated developments in the world during the last few decades, namely the rise of learner-centred learning theories, the rise of multiculturalism and interculturalism and the rise in acknowledgement and appreciation of multiple, culturally-shaped ways of thinking, there is a need for an overarching theory that might explain how these developments chime with one another in some respects, and also how they impact on education. Our choice fell on Social action theory because this theory places emphasis on the agentive roles played by the various role-players in executing their actions, and is also sufficiently broad in scope to envelop all three of the developments, thereby offering an understanding of the combined impact of the three developments on education. The following section contains an outline of Social action theory which is then applied to the three developments alluded to above.

## 7. Social action theory

Social action theory focuses on the roles and actions of the actors involved in a particular event, series of events or development, as described above. It is interested in the interaction among agents and their (mutual) orientation, and/or the action of groups. Per definition, for an action to be 'social', it has to be directed towards other people (Audi, 2005:853). This notion hails from a kind of interpretive Sociology that is interested not only in social phenomena as such, but also in their causal explanations (Mucha, 2003:2). Action is a behaviour to which the actor attaches a subjective meaning, and is social in so far as its subjective meaning takes account of the behaviour of others and is oriented in its course by the actions of others. Social action can be oriented to the past or expected future (Mucha, 2003:3).

Max Weber, one of the founding fathers of this theory, does not oppose the 'social' character of human action to its potential 'individual' character. Weber

is interested first and foremost in the social character of individual action. An action of a human individual is of a social character regardless of whether or not it takes into account the actions of individuals. Groups of individuals can also be the subject (agent) of social action. To understand an action, we have to gain an interpretive grasp of such an action in its context. Its context may be historical (the actual intended meaning of the action), a sociological mass phenomenon (the average of or an approximation to the actual intended meaning of the action), the context of a scientifically formulated pure type (the ideal type) of a common phenomenon (the meaning appropriate to such a pure or ideal type) (Mucha, 2003:3).

Social action theorists such as Weber and Meads have developed the concept of “double contingency”. Whereas in mono-logical action the agents’ fulfilling their purposes depend only on contingent facts of the world, the success of social action is also contingent on how other agents react to what the agent does and on the behaviour of another individual or of an aggregate of individuals (Mucha, 2003:3).

Some actions are social in the sense that they can only be carried out in groups. Individualists such as Weber believe that such actions can only be seen and analysed as the sum of the actions of each individual involved. Social action, according to 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 individuals. Only individuals can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action (Mucha, 2003:30). This is not to deny that collectives exist, but the term “collective entities” has a meaning only in the minds of individual persons. Each social action takes account of that of others and is oriented towards them. Actions can be cooperative or obstructive (Hamilton, 2010:42-43).

The subjective meaning of the situation or context needs not be the same for all the parties in a given relationship; a relationship can also be unilateral or asymmetrical – in the form of a mutual orientation. Relationships can also be of different duration (Mucha, 2003:4-6).

Conflict and hostility are also relationships, according to Weber, not a breaking down of relationships. Conflict is seen as action against the will of the other party (peaceful conflict is conflict without violence). Competition is defined as an attempt to take control over opportunities and advantages also desired by others, the ends and means oriented towards a (new) order. Associative relationships only consist in compromises between rival interests where only a part of the conflict has been eliminated. Outside the area of compromise, the conflict remains unchanged, with its attendant competition

for supremacy (Mucha, 2003:6-7). The difference in values is most obvious when it appears in conflict. Hostility between individuals or groups can take four forms: avoidance, aversion or elimination of the attitudes of the social object; frustration and deliberate destruction of the social object's values because of what the latter has done to the agent in the past (Mucha, 2003:13-20).

Social group action is a synthesis of individual actions which tie together two elements of culture: ideological values and social values. People form complex relationships. To manage these relationships, they must understand, as social actors, each other's actions and intentions. The inter-subjectivity required to engage within the intricate web of interactions that they face is attained through the evolved cognitive ability to generate connected bundles of actions and reactions and to comprehend the complexity through narrative thought (Hamilton, 2010:42-43). According to Weber, institutions consist of individuals carrying out rational social actions designed to achieve the goals of the institution. Weber views the whole development of modern societies in terms of a move toward rational social action. In his mind, modern societies are consequently undergoing a process of rationalisation (Trueman, 2015: npn).

Social action theory attempts to tread the line between the determinism of (for instance) positivism, structuralism and systems theory, and total indeterminism in the form of (for instance) exaggerated voluntarism, idealism and other forms of subjectivism (Otakpor, 1985:146; Trueman, 2015: npn). It sees human action as not merely random or idiosyncratic, but as related to the pressures inherent in the situations in which people find themselves. Sociological analysis is possible only because people tend to act in similar ways when confronted by the same type of social situation. It is furthermore incorrect for social scientists (such as educationists) to impose their meanings upon the observed facts; only the agents could enunciate them, for "if [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Otakpor, 1985:140).

According to Trueman (2015: npn), social action theory is "generally subjective"; it is not as "solid" as a structuralist or a positivist approach where research is supposedly based on "facts". Social action theory in these terms provides an inadequate basis for explaining action, that is, the behaviour of actors forced to reconcile their interpretations of a situation with those of others, and with the general constraints of geography, of scarcity, and so on (Otakpor, 1985:146).

Actions furthermore have a mental character and bring real consequences. Every action of an agent can be the object of another agent's action and vice versa. Groups can also act as 'an' agent; they can act and experience a collective way, being a "collective will", a social agent, a cultural force which focuses individual actions into one common action, the purpose of which is social. In the process, the group undergoes transformation in terms of purpose/intent, (inter-)relational content, as well as composition and form. The transformation will then present itself in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, durability and productivity or in the opposite/privation thereof (Mucha, 2003:8-13).

Social action theory operates with the notion of an 'outsider' or 'insider' view. Social relations can be open to outsiders or closed. An organisation, according to Weber, can be 'closed' and, as such, form the basis of collective action (Mucha, 2003:7).

Holists such as Marx and Durkheim reject the idea that social action can only be interpreted in terms of individual action (as claimed by Weber). They argue that in social actions, agents must see themselves as members of a collective agent. Holists generally establish the plausibility of their view by referring to larger contexts and sequences of action, such as shared symbol systems or social institutions. Explanations of social actions do therefore not only refer to the mutual expectations of agents, but also to these larger causal contexts, shared meanings, and mechanisms of coordination. Theories of social action must then explain the emergence of social order, and proposals range from coercive authority (according to Hobbes) to value consensus about shared goals among the members of groups (according to Parsons)(Audi, 2005:853).

Action, according to 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) summarises Weber's view of actions and their meanings as follows: An action is instrumentally rational when it is determined by expectations as to the behaviour of objects in the environment and other human beings; these expectations are used as 'conditions' or 'means' for the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends. An action is value-rational when it is determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other forms of behaviour, independently of its prospects of success. An action is affectual (emotional) when it is determined

by the actor's specific affects and feeling states. An action is traditional if it is determined by ingrained habituation.

Social action theory makes use of two forms of understanding of social action: observational understanding and explanatory understanding. The scholar must try 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).

## **8. Using Social action theory as a lens through which to examine the three current worldwide trends**

It is clear from the above outline of Social action theory that it provides the educationist with a theoretical lens through which the three developments discussed above can be examined. An analysis of Social action theory shows that it pivots on the following precepts, which together form a lens for looking at the trends described above.

Social action theory emphasises the roles and actions of actors in executing their agentive functions in society, yet is intent on walking the thin line between determinism and indeterminism. It focuses particularly on the interaction between the various role-players in a particular situation or action. The actors attach their own meaning to the contexts in which they act and to their actions as such. Agentive actions can be goal-, emotion- or habit-driven. Social actions are often instituted to achieve the goals of societal institutions. The theory is most interested in causal explanations for actions and behaviour, and in the subjective meaning that actors attach to their context and their own actions. Actors or role-players can be either individuals or groups, or both, and their actions can be cooperative or obstructive. Even hostility and conflict as actions are relationships. Ideological values and social values are often tied together in actions. Actions are often related to pressures within the social system or between social systems. Actions can be described from within (the insider view) or from the outside (the outsider view). Actions can lastly be understood on the basis of observation or on the basis of explanation.

This last tenet of Social action theory enables the educationist not only to observe the following with regards to the three current trends, but also to attempt to explain what has been observed. As far as the rise of new learning theories is concerned, it can be observed that learners are now

being entrusted with agentive roles in their own learning; they are now seen, according to constructivist learning, as active agents searching for, and attaching meaning to the knowledge that they are attempting to master. Learners learn in accordance with their own inner regulations, discover meaning and apply them accordingly to practical situations and contexts. The agentive role of teachers has changed to learning instigator/initiator and learning support. Self-directed learning, in particular, places a heavy emphasis on the “self” of the learner as active agent in the learning process.

As far as the rise of the different forms of multicultural education is concerned, learners and teachers are seen as active agents searching for meaning in a myriad of cultural factors and circumstances, among others the reality of diversity of all kinds (gender, culture, language, age, race, religion). As agents, they are expected to show respect for diversity and the uniqueness of others in a multicultural environment. They are expected as agents to develop empathetic understanding of others and their differences, and have to work towards a state of peaceful coexistence with others who are different from them in many ways, for instance as far as material culture, language and religion are concerned. At the same time, they are entitled to individual and group freedom as agents in a multicultural social setup. They have to exercise this freedom in the context of constantly varying power relations, and in the process avoid hostility and conflict. As agents, they are also free to respect, exercise and celebrate their own cultural and religious uniqueness.

Concerning the acknowledgement of the fact that people think in different ways depending on their location in the world and in society, it has been widely accepted that all people are equal agents and that no single way of thinking can be regarded as normative. All people, whether individually or in groups, think, speak, argue and act in unique ways, in many respects determined by their personal, group and historical backgrounds. Each person or group is also entitled to his/her/its own logic. The agentive role of the teacher is to locate the learner in the latter’s unique situation and support him or her from there.

## **9. A reformational perspective**

The three current developments in the world of teaching and learning, as well as Social action theory are in themselves products of a secular culture, in other words, they seem not to have been inspired in any particularistic religious or ideological way, and neither have they been developed by any organised religious group (Mohler, 2008:29-30). This does not, however,

make them less useful in a reformational pedagogical context. According to 2 Corinthians 10:5, Christian educationists are called to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (New International Version).<sup>4</sup> Klapwijk (1989:48) outlined this process as follows in philosophical terms:

The Christian worldview itself has such transformative power. It is challenged by pseudo-religious ideologies, the public ideas and scientific theories of modern life. It is called to take a critical stance regarding the cultural goods and societal achievements of our time. Within the all-encompassing framework of a secular worldview, these achievements are often objectionable, or at least ambiguous. In spite of these difficulties, however, the “praxis” of the modern secular world still lends itself to re-evaluation and reintegration within the Christian “vision for life”. That is what I call “religious transformation”.

The question now becomes: how do we bring the ideas embodied in the three developments discussed above and in Social action theory into captivity, make them obedient to Christ? We offer a two-fold answer to this question: first, we search for what could be useful in and compatible with a reformational life-view, and second, we attempt to show in which respects the three developments and the Social action theoretical lens that we have been using have been found inadequate according to that life-view.

Regarding the first aim, it can be stated that Social action theory gives due recognition to the individual as a subject that is free to take his/her own decisions, which ties in with a reformational view of the human being. This theory helps us understand that the three developments under discussion can only be comprehended when individuals and groups are indeed seen as agents of change and that their agentive function to change rests on the premise of their freedom to choose. According to the reformational worldview, individuals’ agentive function to change and to be free operators can only be understood in the context of service of God and fellow human beings, a thought which is in line with the Creation or Cultural Mandate (Gen 1:26-28; 2:15; cf. Van Brummelen, 1994:26 et seq. for a detailed discussion of this Mandate).

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4 According to Kistemaker (2004:336-7), the apostle Paul avails himself of warfare language in saying that thoughts have to be taken captive and made serviceable to the Kingdom of Christ. The verb *to lead captive in* the present tense indicates that the act of taking prisoners is in progress, the battle is won, and victory is inclusive (indicated by the inclusion of *every* in “every thought”). The apostle continues with this imagery, for the conquest is to subdue not people but thoughts: all theories are captured and brought into obedience to Christ. The culture that is conquered for Christ remains intact, but its components are transformed to serve him. These are the captive thought patterns that are brought into conformity with the teachings of the Lord.



A second perspective that flows from the study reported in this article is that education, including reformational education, can no longer be of the “banking type”, where teachers are expected to dispense knowledge for learners to master. All three of the new developments as well as the Social action theory place emphasis on the agentive and constructive function of the learner (De Muijnck & Van der Walt, 2006:17). The learner is expected to search for meaning and to discover meaning in the learning material, and the teacher’s agentive function or action is to accompany and guide the learner in this search. Learning and the outcomes of learning are now much more strongly determined by the learner and by the social structures in which they find themselves. The new approach acknowledges the role or input of the learner and of their social structures in the process of learning and the outcomes of education.

As far as multicultural education is concerned, this study seems to indicate that the designed learning content will not automatically and all by itself result in the establishment of cross-cultural respect or tolerance. Learners and the social structures in which they find themselves will co-determine the outcome of education. These structures (including the religious group to which a learner belongs) should also bring across the message of cross-cultural respect. In addition, as the third development discussed above has underscored, it has become important to establish a method of teaching that is consonant with and accommodates the learning styles that are typical of different cultural traditions (Planel, 2008).

The value of the Social action theory is that it highlights the importance of social and agentive factors, in the case of the three developments under discussion, of cultural and cultural-historical factors, in the ordering and creation of knowledge. It has a major shortcoming, however, when viewed from a reformational perspective, in that it views all human activity and agentive functions, in fact the entirety of reality, through the rather restrictive and hence reductionist lens of social action. It reduces life in general and the activities of human beings to social actions. Reality displays several more structural aspects than just the individuality (of human beings) (Strauss, 2009:136 et seq.), and it also functions in many more modal aspects than just the social aspect of reality and of the human being (Strauss, 2009:82 et seq.). It is reductionist also in another respect, namely in that its focus is mainly anthropological, i.e. on the human being and his or her actions and behaviour. It filters every aspect of life through this rather restrictive lens. In doing so, it does not do justice to other foundational aspects that well developed theories possess, namely the ability to expound concerted views of reality (ontology and cosmology), knowledge (epistemology),

society (societal relationship theory), relationships between human beings (ethics), to mention a few of the foundational aspects that seem to have been somewhat neglected by Social action theory (Van der Walt & Potgieter, 2012: 20-232).

In addition to these two shortcomings, social action theory does not sufficiently embody the notion that the actions of human beings, also in terms of the three new developments that have been discussed in this article, according to the reformational view, should be serviceable to the God of the Scriptures, executed in His honour and to the glory of His name. This perspective is understandably neglected in secular circles but should not be overlooked in a reformational context. According to 1 Corinthians 10:31, 2 Corinthians 5:15, 1 Colossians 1:10 and 1 Thessalonians 2:12, all of our deeds, by implication also when inspired and contextualized by the three developments discussed in this article, should be centred on God, His glory and His service.

## 10. Conclusion

The three contemporary developments in the conceptualisation of teaching-learning and of knowledge creation have, despite their secular origins, important implications for education, also in reformational circles, and it is therefore important to take note of them. The Social action theory, used as a theoretical lens in this study, is of equal importance despite its reductionist tendencies. The constraints of a single journal article did not allow full justice to be done to the three contemporary developments in the field of teaching and learning and to the Social action theory lens which was used to gain an overarching grasp of the three developments. Educators and educationists working from a reformational perspective are therefore urged to inform themselves in greater detail about these developments. Deeper and critical knowledge of these developments can prevent them from falling prey to the philosophical views lurking behind these theories and approaches.

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