*Johannes L van der Walt*

*Prof JL van der Walt, Faculty of Education, North-West University, Potchefstroom 2531, South Africa; email: hannesv290@gmail.com*

*Charl C Wolhuter*

*Prof CC Wolhuter, Faculty of Education, North-West University, Potchefstroom 2531, South Africa*

# An examination of the potential of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) for explaining transitions in national education systems

The political upheavals in Eastern Europe and in Southern Africa in the period 1985 to 1995 have had serious implications for education and education systems in the countries involved. Education system experts have in the past used various theoretical tools to examine and explain the complex transformations that took place. Transitiology, social action theory and critical theory are some of these tools. An examination of these theoretical tools shows that they do not quite succeed in embracing and explaining all the factors at play in the transformations under investigation. This article proposes cultural-historical activity theory as a more suitable alternative, and illustrates this thesis with reference to the South African transition (1990 onwards).

**Keywords**: education, education systems theory, national transitions, cultural-historical activity theory, transitiology, social action theory, critical theory, South Africa

## 1. Introduction

After the fall of Communism in the East Bloc in 1989, and after the demise of Apartheid in 1994 in South Africa, the countries involved underwent a period of intense socio-political transformation or, as Prica (2007: 164) wrote, a period of "transitional transformation". These transformations affected the institutional and social fabric of the countries in question (Johannsen 2000: 3; Cowen 2002: 422). This article focuses on how best to understand and explain the dynamics of transition and change in such communities, with particular reference to the effect of the transitions on their education systems. This point will be illustrated with reference to the transition that South Africa has undergone since 1994.

## 2. Problem Statement

Analysis of the changes and transitions, some of a revolutionary nature, that occurred in the above-mentioned countries and in their education systems from around 1989 reveals that a multitude of factors played themselves out in intricate patterns and configurations. A description of what transpired in these systems can be done at various levels. The most basic level is that of mere description of what happened in a country and its education system in a given period of time. This entails the application of historiographical methods and techniques to which we need not attend here. At a more complicated level the researcher accounts for the events on a more theoretical level by relating them to the socio-political circumstances prevailing at the time, in an attempt to contextualise the events under scrutiny. An even more complicated level is that of explaining at a theoretical level what occurred in the expectation that this might lead to a holistic picture of the dynamics of change and transition. This is done to overcome the problem of having a mosaic of theories, models, sets of principles and explanations that, combined, compose the knowledge about education system transitions and changes, as Merriam (2001: 3) remarked in another context.

   The purpose of this article is to discuss a few theories that might contribute to our understanding of changes and transitions in education systems taking place around the globe, even as we write. An answer is provided to the question whether the cultural historical activity theory (the CHAT) shows any potential to serve as a suitable over-arching theory for explaining the dynamics at play in periods of change and transition in countries and in their education systems.

## 3. Research orientation

We follow an interpretivist-constructivist approach in our exploration of the potential of the CHAT to serve as an explanatory tool of change and transition in

countries and in their education systems. Our point of departure is that there is a real world "out there" (countries, education systems, transitions, changes) that we are able to experience. Meaning, however, does not exist in reality independent from us as observers; we have to either discover it or create it for ourselves. There are many ways to observe, structure what we have observed and construct meaning from our observations and experiences (Duffy and Jonassen 1992: 3). The construction of theory depends on how the information provided by our senses and experience is interpreted (Merriam 2009: 8-9; Cohen, Mannion and Morrison 2011: 17-18). An interpretivist-constructivist-interpretivist approach is useful in that it aims at understanding the complexity of the problem under investigation (Schwandt 1994: 118).

## 4. Three theories considered as explanatory tools

More or less any social theory (e.g. dynamic / systems theory; social interactionism; habitus theory [Bourdieu]; social capital theory; Ubuntu; socio-cultural theory; structural functionalism [Parsons], and flow theory [Czikzentmihalyi]) will have something to say about transitions in education systems. Theories will have varying amounts to say about such transitions and will not necessarily all explain such transitions in the same depth. However, our investigations have led us to conclude that three theories in particular make the most plausible initial candidates for this purpose. 'Transitiology' makes a good choice because it wears on its face the claim that it studies transitions. 'Social action theory' and 'critical theory', although they do not have the same potential at face value, have been found to perform relatively good auxiliary functions to 'transitiology' in that the former allows one to examine the actions of the various role-players in a transition, and the latter is an instrument for evaluating the different transitional elements on the basis of a chosen value system. The discussion below of social action theory and of critical theory therefore briefly focuses on explaining what these theories are and then goes on to explain what each theory does or does not have to contribute to our understanding of transitions. We argue that while these three theories are able to explain what occurs during transitions and changes in countries and in their education systems they lack, even in combination, the potential to serve as an overarching theory for explaining the transitions in question. Put differently, our investigations have led us to conclude that while all social theories might have something to say about transitions, the cultural-historical activity theory can serve as overarching theory for explaining the dynamics of socio-political transitions, as will be explained below.

## 4.1 Transitiology as a possible explanatory tool regarding change in education systems

Transitiology is the science of change. Its purpose is to analyse the complexities of transition or political and economic "shifts" (Prica 2007: 163). It can, therefore, be used for explaining what occurred in South Africa between 1976 (the Soweto uprisings) to 1994, when the first inclusive democratic elections took place.

According to Sqapi (2014: 217), transitiology became "mostly oriented toward the goal or desire to see democracy prevail in those countries that had just emerged from authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, as well as challenging previous prevailing theories of democratisation." In view of this shift, transitiology was practised as a guide for new places to democratise. The aim of practising this discipline was "that by applying a universalistic set of assumptions, concepts and hypotheses, it could explain and hopefully help guide the way from an autocratic to a democratic regime". This approach and the frame or conceptual analysis that it offers to understand the processes of transition (e.g. from authoritarianism to democracy) went beyond the original intentions of transitiology in that it became a normative paradigm "claiming the validity and applicability of its assumptions in terrains with unfavourable conditions or contexts that were never originally imagined" (Sqapi 2014: 217). Applied to the situation in South Africa, this secondary approach would imply that transitiology be used as a normative paradigm for change in that it could be said that the change to a fully inclusive democracy was good and desirable. Such an approach, however, would go beyond the initial descriptive aims of the theory.

Transitiology is however also understood by many theorists as a science aimed at describing, understanding and explaining the transformation or transition of a national or political system from one state to another, e.g. from authoritarianism to democracy or from Apartheid to post-apartheid democracy (Sqapi 2014: 218-219; 226). Transitiology can therefore be used to describe, for example, the negotiations that took place between the incumbent Apartheid Government of the pre-1994 period in South Africa and the revolutionary movements such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the United Democratic Movement (UDM) (Thomson 2014: 141-264). These negotiations led to the end of Apartheid and to a fully inclusive democracy after the national elections held on 27 April 1994 (Thomson 2014: 263-264).

Transitiology furthermore can be seen as the study of turning points in history (Cowen 2000: 339), of the social turbulences that comparative educationists have to be aware of in their studies of education systems (Bray and Borevskaya 2001: 346). Practitioners who use transitiology are more interested in understanding a moment-in-time in a particular system (Cowen 2002: 413)

rather than for instance comparing education across cultures, nations, regions and academic disciplines (Alexander 2001: 507). It offers comparative educationists the opportunity to analyse a particular event in depth (Sweeting 2007: 159-160). The history of the South African transition offers transitiologists several such historical turning points to examine: the reasons for the Sharpeville massacre (1960), the reasons for the Soweto uprisings in 1976, the death of several right-wing Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) members in Bophuthatswana (1994), the frequent delays and crises during the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA)(1991-1993), to mention only a few (Meredith 2005: 122; 420-423; 438).

Some scholars approach transitiology as a specialised study of the movement from state socialism to Western liberal capitalist democracy, which attests to a rather limited view of its task and scope. It is probably better to say that it focuses on "wider metanarratives," on the "grand transitions," and tends to ignore or see as problematic the individual, personal stories (Hamilton 2010: 38-39). We therefore concur with Hamilton that we also have to examine Social Action Theory to get a grasp of such individual and personal stories (see below).

According to Cowen (2000: 338), education is given a major symbolic and deconstructionist role in the social processes of transition. The study of historical turning points illustrates the influence of political, economic and other powers upon education (Cowen 2000: 339). Cowen (2002: 423) furthermore pointed out that education tends to be redefined in order to play a decisive role in the establishment of the "new" future. Education also tends to be used purposefully and aggressively to direct and build the "new" future. This point can also be illustrated with reference to the South African transition. While Apartheid-style education proceeded relatively smoothly in the historically white schools (although many of them were semi-privatised in the form of "Model C" schools in anticipation of the transformation that was on the horizon), historically black schooling was often disrupted by violence and was deeply affected by efforts to introduce a form of "people's education" which was intended to sensitise the pupils to their disadvantaged situation in the Apartheid dispensation (Booyse 2011: 248-262). Unfortunately, the disruptive effect of these efforts to destabilise education and schooling during the transitional period of 1976 to 1994 can still be felt today, more than two decades after the advent of fully inclusive democracy (Du Preez 2013). Schooling in South Africa is even today characterised by ill-discipline among learners and by less than optimal academic achievement (Smit and Rossouw 2014: 63—88).

Those involved in the transformation processes in a country always find themselves confronted with the question how much of the existing education system has to be destroyed, changed or adapted in order to transform education

to be in line with the new political ideology (Cowen 2000: 339). This can be illustrated with the South African experience. The movement or campaign referred to as "people's education" was used in the period 1976 to 1993 as an instrument to create awareness among young black South Africans of the injustices of the Apartheid system. When the official education system eventually collapsed in 1994, the system in South Africa was radically transformed in order to erase all traces of the hated Apartheid education system, and for example introduced Curriculum 2005, an outcomes-based curriculum (DBE 2009; 11). The new government gradually developed the insight that the outcomes-based approach did not work as effectively as had been hoped, and it began dismantling this curriculum. The resultant Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements, introduced in 2012, could therefore be said to be a return to the content and teaching goal based approach of the pre-1994 period.

A transitiological approach to transformation cannot be "the narration of transitional processes ex nihilo," implying the "big-bang emplotment" that "history is only now beginning and that prior to [a particular date] the area was without form and void," as an "epiphany [sudden revelation] or emergence [out of nothing]". There is no cutting-off point where the "old" just disappears (Prica 2007: 174). Cowen (2000: 339) pointed out that transitions tend to be "pleasantly complex mixtures" of political, ideological, economic and sociological factors playing a role. This point is illustrated by the transition in South Africa: the effects of the transition of 1994 can today still be felt in the country's social arrangements, its politics and also its education (Johnson 2015).

The focus of transitiology, according to Johannsen (2000: 3), is how regime change occurs / occurred, who the actors and institutions are / were in the transition (i.e. the level of explanation), and to what extent democracy was the upshot of the transformation process. An assessment of the roles of institutions is important in transitiology (Przeworski 1988: 64); the association between institutions (such as the education system) and the emerging democracy should be qualified by the way in which the institution (the education system) offers / offered solutions to the problem. In South Africa, the regime change entailed a replacement of the Apartheid government system with a more inclusive democracy. The main actors in this process were the governing National Party and its opposition in the form of the African National Congress, assisted by several civil movements and forces such as the United Democratic Front, the international lobby, business leaders, progressive academics and media, and representatives of the cultural world. The transition resulted in the promulgation of a constitution based on Western liberal democratic principles and values. This offered a political framework for the creation of a full democratic dispensation, including in education. This led to a total overhaul of the education system.

The overhaul entailed attention to two aspects. Firstly, the system had to be restructured to be aligned with the new socio-political dispensation (including desegregation, democratisation, decentralisation, more learner-based teaching methods, equalisation of opportunity, decolonisation, recognition of diversity, movement away from authoritarian control and Eurocentric curricula). Secondly, the education system had to be recast to also serve as an instrument of change towards the creation of a new society (characterised among others by social justice, respect for human rights, non-sexism, a non-racial equal society, equality of opportunity and respect for democratic values).

Transitions of this nature can be sudden and spectacular, or smooth and unspectacular (Prica 2007: 1674). This issue has to be approached firstly through a study of the factors that enable(d) the transition, and secondly from the perspective of the distribution of power within the political system (Johannsen 2000: 1-2). In the case of South Africa, the transition was not sudden or spectacular; it was gradual and relatively smooth. By the late 1980s, the Apartheid government came to the realisation that its situation was untenable (due to international pressure and to political pressure from the majority of its populace) and hence decided to enter into the negotiations with formerly banned parties and movements, and which led to the democratic elections of 1994 (Thomson 2014: 221-252).

It is also important to note, as Prica (2007: 164) has emphasised, that one has to indicate whether one looks at the transition in a country, a system or in education from an insider or an outsider perspective. This article was written from an insider perspective; the authors are South Africans who have experienced all the changes mentioned. It is furthermore important to note, as Sqapi (2014: 220) has, that transitiology cannot explain all transformation processes adequately. In some cases, she avers, its teleology is so aimed at the telos of the end process (democracy, for example) that it loses sight of the complexity of specifications of the process along the way. The result of this is that the transformation is described in terms of rationalistic and deterministic stages along the way and that the specific contexts of the particular country are overlooked (Otakpor 1985: 146). This point can also be illustrated with reference to the South African transition to democracy. Examination of what occurred between 1976 and 1994 (and later) reveals that the transition was complex in that it involved many ethnic groups, several languages, an incumbent government and several revolutionary parties within South Africa as well as beyond its borders, the ideal to arrive at a democratic dispensation guided by rule of law, the threat of an economy which was on the point of collapse, and many more (Thomson 2014: 241-257).

In view of these arguments, transitiology should be seen as a theoretical or analytical framework which can describe and analyse social change, longitudinally and historically, within a large area with cultural linkages (Hamilton 2010: 41).

## 4.2 Perspectives regarding change flowing from social action theory

Whereas transitiology focuses on the macro-processes involved in transitions, social action theory concentrates attention on the roles and actions of the actors involved in a particular transformation or transition from one state to another. Social action theory is interested in the interaction among agents and their (mutual) orientation, and / or the action of groups (Audi 2005: 853). In South Africa, social action theory is particularly interested in the roles played by respectively Apartheid President F W de Klerk, the leader of the then governing National Party, who decided around 1990 that Apartheid was untenable and that the government had to enter into negotiations with the out of parliament opposition, and also the role of Nelson Mandela, the leader of that opposition. Social action theory is interested in the fact that the former had all the power and instruments of government and state at his disposal but chose not to use them to force Mandela's hand, whereas the latter had no such power or resources at his disposal but enjoyed the support of by far the majority of the populace, which provided him with immense negotiating power.

An important term in social action theory is (symbolic) interactionism. This idea belongs to a kind of interpretive sociology which is interested not only in social phenomena but also in their causal explanations (Mucha 2003: 2), in this case, the rationale behind the actions of respectively De Klerk and Mandela. Action is a behaviour to which the actor attaches a subjective meaning, and it is social insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course. Social action can be oriented to the past or expected future of one's behaviour (Max Weber, as summarised by Mucha 2003: 3).

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 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). 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 also can be of different duration (Mucha 2003: 4-6). Examination of the conditions prevailing in South Africa in the transitional period between 1989 and 1994 prove the validity of these perspectives flowing

from social action theory. De Klerk and Mandela both felt themselves constrained by prevailing conditions, particularly by their evident desire to ensure a peaceful transition to full democracy (Thomson 2014: 246 252).

Conflict and hostility are also relationships. Conflict is seen as action against the will of another 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 to a (new) order. Associative relationships only consist in compromises between rival interests where only a part of the conflict has been eliminated (Mucha 2003: 6-7). The transition in South Africa also illustrates this point. Giliomee and Mbenga (2007: 403) devote a section of their book to "a blazing row" in 1991 between De Klerk and Mandela about the status of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC.

Social action theory attempts to tread carefully 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, as was the case in South Africa. Sociological analysis is indeed possible only because people tend to act in similar ways when confronted by the same type of social situation. It is a fallacy for social scientists (including 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 the situation with those of others, and with the general constraints of geography, of scarcity, and so on (Otakpor 1985: 146). Examination of the South African transition underscores this point. All the explanations and discussions pertaining to the transition, also in the educational realm, remain tentative in that they are based on the historian's interpretations of historical "facts". This will always remain a historiographical conundrum; no historian will ever be able to conclusively determine what exactly inspired role-players such as De Klerk, Mandela and others to act and behave as they did during the transitional processes. The same applies to the changes and the transformations that were brought about in the South African education system since 1994.

Social action theory makes use of two forms of understanding of social action: observational understanding and explanatory understanding (and in this, it agrees with the task of transitiology). 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).

## 4.3 Perspectives regarding change flowing from critical theory

Audi (2005: 195) defines critical theory as any social theory that is at the same time explanatory, normative, practical and self-reflexive. When they make claims to be scientific, such approaches attempt to give rigorous explanations of the causes of oppression, such as ideological beliefs or economic dependence. These explanations must in turn be verified by empirical evidence and employ the best available social and economic theories. Every one-sided theory must also be subjected to criticism, for example a theory that claims that the problems that we have to deal with in society are primarily and wholly ascribable to social and economic forces (Honderich 2005: 311-312). Since theory and its concepts are products of social processes, critical theory must trace their origins, and not merely accept, describe or explain them, and thereby appear to endorse them. According to Habermas, one of the exponents of this approach, theories depend on ideological assumptions and interests, and these have to be tested and evaluated. In view of this, critical theorists argue that science and scholarship cannot be value-free and hence cannot avoid value judgments about the people and institutions they study, including education systems and the transitions they undergo (Honderich 2005: 312).

Such approaches are normative and critical since they imply negative evaluations of current social practices. The explanations are also practical in that they provide a self-understanding for agents who may want to improve the social conditions that the theory negatively evaluates. Such change generally aims at "emancipation," and theoretical insight empowers agents to remove limits to human freedom and the causes of human suffering (Audi 2005: 195).

Cursorily applied to the transition in / of South Africa, a critical evaluation would show that the new democracy has not met with pre-1994 expectations. The situation is currently characterised by weak government, corruption and a failure to deliver the required services at national, provincial and local level. The government is repeatedly being taken to the Constitutional Court for neglecting or infringing upon the fundamental rights of citizens, and more often than not loses its case (see Carstens 2016: 3). Among the rights most infringed upon is the right to freedom of speech and opinion. The economy has also deteriorated to a level

that is currently just one notch above "junk status," according to international standards, meaning that investment in South Africa is regarded as risky (Mutize and Gossel 2017). Deterioration is also noticeable in the fact that whereas South Africa's economy used to be the most vibrant and strongest in Africa before 1994, it is now regarded as the third strongest on the continent (after those of Nigeria and Egypt). Life on the ground is often characterised by uprisings due to the non-delivery of basic services. Health and educational services are inadequate, and unemployment is rife (around 40%). On a positive note, however, it can be said that more South Africans than ever before have permanent homes and access to pure running water, toilets and electricity (Johnson 2015).

## 5. Critical appraisal of the above discussed theories in view of what is expected of them as explanatory tools regarding change

Transitiology holds potential as a tool to describe and explain the dynamics involved in change and transition, for instance, in the education systems of particular countries that experienced momentous political change, particularly since it concentrates on the turning points in history and on the wider picture. Of importance is also the place that it sees for education in transitional processes, either as facilitating the process or as being affected by a transition. It also recognises the differences between outsider and insider views in the descriptions of transitional processes, and is able to indicate whether a transition was gradual or abrupt.

A few points of criticism could be raised against transitiology, the most important of which is that there seems as yet to be no clarity whether it should be a normative, prescriptive and teleological theory, or whether it should be applied for descriptive purposes only. Its practitioners also do not seem to be unanimous about whether the roles of actors and agents have to be included in descriptions, and about what exactly should be included or omitted in descriptions. Generally speaking, however, the comparative education and education system studies would have been poorer if they did not have this tool at their disposal.

Social action theory seems to complement transitiology in many ways, particularly in that it focuses on the contributions of the agents or role players in transitional processes. It could, however, overlap with transitiology in cases where the latter also attends to agentive roles. Like transitiology, it is also susceptible to determinism and to the dangers of being prescriptive about the roles played by the various agents. It is a powerful tool, however, when combined with transitiology in that it attends to the "small" narratives of role players whereas transitiology attends to the "grand" picture.

Much the same applies for critical theory. When combined with transitiology and with social action theory, it could show where certain processes have become derailed. There are always issues of social justice, human suffering, inequality, and unfair treatment involved in transitions. Whereas some theories pretend to be neutral, objective and value-free and hence only aimed at description and analysis, the value-laden character of critical theory makes it an important tool in the hands of the student of political and social transition.

It can be concluded that none of these three theories, on their own, is able to provide the researcher with a holistic picture of a socio-political transformation in a country or of its education system. A combination of them works more efficiently towards this end, but nevertheless leaves the researcher with the dilemma of having to apply a combination of three tools of widely different background, with widely different philosophical (meta-theoretical) and theoretical underpinnings. Our investigations enabled us to identify the cultural historical activity theory (the CHAT) as a theory that provides the researcher with a holistic picture of a transformation as well as with mini-pictures in terms of the roles that the various agents or role players in transitional processes play. It also provides the researcher with a tool for critically assessing the effects of the dynamics at play in a transition.

## 6. The cultural-historical activity theory (the CHAT)

There are various accounts of the historical background of the CHAT. According to some authors, it originated in the activity theory of Vygotsky and evolved through a number of generations (Asghar 2013: 19-22); others aver that it was developed by Leonti'ev and Engeström from the basic thoughts of Vygotsky (Stetsenko and Arievitch 2004: 476; Yamagata-Lynch 2010: 13 25-26; Postholm 2015: 43). Interestingly, CHAT can also be seen as a variant of general action or activity theory derived from Parsons's work. CHAT can be regarded as a theory that ties together the contributions of sociologists such as Parsons and of Vygotsky et al. and also as an advance on social action theory in that it focuses mostly on how the nature of actions or activities is constituted socially, culturally, historically and educationally. It has been proved to be effective for analysing change as social, cultural and historical processes (Engeström 1999). CHAT can for instance be used as a framework for designing and redesigning work (Engeström 2000: 960-974).

For purposes of this article, we agree with Wilson, Cole, Nixon, Nocon, Gordon, Jackson, Garia and Minami (2013: 1) who regard "the differing formulations [of the CHAT] as expressions of a single family of theoretical commitments". Our examination of the CHAT has convinced us that Yamagata-Lynch (2010: 24) is correct in concluding that the CHAT could serve as a framework to help identify

the boundaries of complex systems such as the socio-political and educational transformation in a particular country and of its education system.

In terms of the CHAT, all human activities and actions, including transformations in countries and in their education systems, as described above, could be seen as activity systems. "Activity" can be defined as a socially constructed and culturally mediated event, procedure or human action (Lampert-Shepel 2008: 214). In the case of South Africa since 1994, we can discern two coterminous activity systems, namely "living in South Africa" and "transforming the education system".

The elements of an activity system, in this case, the two activities mentioned above after the transition of 1994 in South Africa, make up several triadic relations. This can be graphically demonstrated as follows:
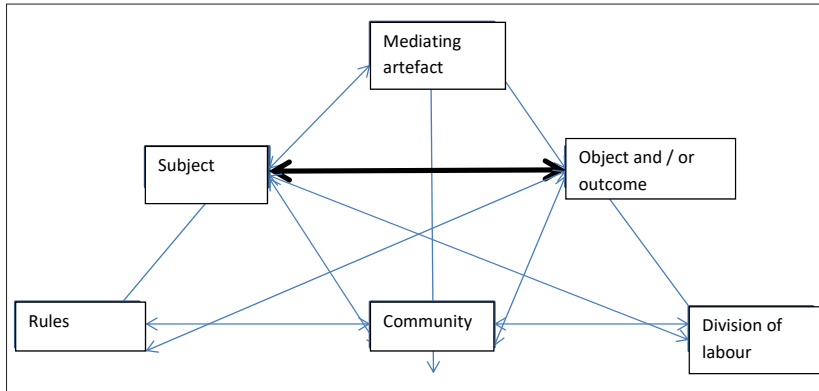


Figure 1: Elements of an activity system (Engeström 1987: 213; Postholm 2015: 45; also see Yamagata-Lynch 2010: 22-23).

Regarding the element "subject" in the diagram, human subjectivity stems from and exists within activity processes, in an activity system such as those mentioned above. A subject's (an individual or a group's) activity system is enabled and constrained by unique contextual conditions facing the individual or the group (indicated by the arrows), such as their historical epoch and environment, on the one hand, and by individual forces and facts (for instance, birth, sex, temperament), on the other. In claiming this, the CHAT chimes with both transitiology and social action theory. Applied to the South African political, social, cultural and educational transformation, the various role-players such as F W de Klerk, Nelson Mandela and their supporters could be seen as subjects. In this particular case, they all wished for a peaceful transition from Apartheid to fully inclusive democracy (Davenport 1991: 437-445), although they did not

necessarily share the same object (aim, goal) for either the future political or the educational dispensation.

Activity processes (i.e. actions, deeds, activities), forming the principal foundation of human life, according to Stetsenko and Arievitch (2004: 485-486), ultimately drive the epigenesis of human subjectivity, including the self and the mind, in unique constellations for each individual human being and group (cf. Engeström 2001/2002: 133-156). Each subject (individual, person, group) is profoundly socio-cultural and historical, somehow situated and embedded in a sociocultural world because he or she is formed from within, out of, and driven by the logic of evolving activity that connects individuals in the world, to other people and to themselves. In stating this, the CHAT dovetails with transitiology and social action theory. This can be illustrated with reference to the situation in which FW de Klerk and the governing National Party found themselves. The socio-political and economic situation in which the country found itself in the period between 1976 and 1991 (which could arguably be seen as part of the mediating artefacts, according to the CHAT) proved to the government to be unsustainable in the long run (Thomson 2014: 221-240). The government consequently succumbed to the pressures and entered into negotiations with its long-standing political opponents (Thomson 2014: 241-260).

The self of the subject is a force that plays an active role in all the processes of the activity system (actions, deeds, activities). Although the subject is itself the result of external social and cultural forces, it is also an active agent that contributes to life in his or her own way. A subject /an individual is what the person makes of himself or herself by actively appropriating culture in the form of making it part of his or her human functioning and instrument for future activities and actions (Stetsenko and Arievitch 2004: 489). This point can also be illustrated with reference to FW de Klerk. After announcing the unbanning of all the "terrorist groups" in 1991, he justified his actions by saying that it was morally wrong for South Africa to persist with Apartheid. Among others, his Christian value system inspired him to take this step (De Klerk 1991: 183-185).The concept of "mediated action," "cultural mediation" or "mediating artefact" that is a central point in the CHAT advances the idea that the individual's mental activity such as De Klerk's moral self is founded and integrated in a mutually social, cultural, educational and historical context. Cultural artefacts such as language and signs function as intermediary aids, which the acting subject (individual, person) chooses to use when trying to attain the goals for his or her actions (Postholm 2015: 45). "Mediated activity" means understanding and documenting the toolkit of mediational means of reflection. The term "mediated action" is synonymous with "agent-acting-with-mediational-means" (Lampert-Shepel 2008: 214-215). Two instances of mediated action functioned in the South African transition:

the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) and the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (Thomson 2014: 252-254; 274-278). The former led to the demise of Apartheid and the rise of a new democracy in South Africa, and the latter then facilitated and promoted peace and reconciliation among parties and individuals who had been fierce opponents before the transition.

Actions exist in relation to the context that is visualised by the triangles at the bottom of the activity system as depicted in Figure 1. This context, which comprises the factors "rules", "community" and "division of labour," lays the premises and also possible restrictions for the subject's goal-directed actions (Postholm 2015: 45). Concerning "rules", for instance, it is possible to distinguish between formal rules (laws, and norms) and informal rules, for instance those applied by individuals and organisations who have taken to the streets in reaction to the current government's failure to provide sufficient job opportunities or those that protest about violence against women and children. There are also differences in the ways that people think and talk about race (cf. the remarks made by property agent Penny Sparrow and radio personality Thumi Morake).

Through the subject's participation in the activities of the community, the individual begins to understand the rules of acceptable behaviour within the community, and how the various tasks have to be performed in that particular community as the individual in question understands the concept "community". As Stetsenko and Arievitch (2004: 479) concluded, the individual understands himself or herself as rooted in clearly defined patterns of social practice. Social rules govern the interactions among the members of a community; division of labour organises the division of tasks among the members of the community (Asghar 2013: 21). Rules include the norms and conventions that direct the actions in the activity system. The implication of this is clear in the context of transformations: each agent and the groups they belong to have some understanding of their roles in society, the rules that they are subject to in their community, and of the division of labour in the community, in other words what is expected of a person with respect to contributing to the transformation. This CHAT perspective can be illustrated with reference to the transition that South Africa underwent in the period 1989 to 1994. Whereas all South Africans were expected to live and play by the rules of an Apartheid Constitution prior to 1994, these rules were changed fundamentally in 1994 when a provisional democratic Constitution was adopted, and when a Constitution was finally promulgated by the new government in 1996. Since 1996, South Africa is a democracy that functions in accordance with the rule of law. Chapter 2 of this Constitution entrenches the fundamental rights of every South African. Put in CHAT terms, the new Constitution embodies the new rules according to which the South African community conducts itself and according to

which it divides the different tasks to make the country a liveable space (Thomson 2014: 252-258; 269; South African Institute of Race Relations 1997: 517-524).

The factor "community" refers to all people who share the same goals. The "community" element in the diagram suggests that the subject (individual or group) is shaped by social factors such as interactive experiences with significant others and group membership along with the roles and positions each occupies in society. Individual and social dimensions evolve together in the social development of the individual; there is continuity and reciprocity between individuals and society (their particular community, for example). The individual develops in a process of on-going social transactions and dynamic processes. He or she develops a relational character through participation in the community, despite the shifting and moving patterns of participation (Stetsenko and Arievitch 2004:478-479). In the CHAT, the individual is not reified as fixed, predetermined and independent of social processes during its upbringing. In view of the above outline, the term "South African community" as used in the previous paragraphs refers to a more complex phenomenon than meets the eye. Each individual (subject) living as a subject in the activity system described as "living in South Africa" experiences this community idiosyncratically. According to Yamagatha-Lynch (2010: 23), the community is the social group with which the subject identifies while participating in the activity. Human activity can trigger tensions caused by systematic contradictions within the community. These tensions arise when the conditions of an activity put a subject in contradictory situations that can preclude achieving the object or the nature of the subject's participation in the activity while trying to achieve the object. All South Africans as subjects in this activity system, for instance, do not necessarily share the same object (goal or aim) for the country or the same notion of the mediating artefacts for meeting the goals that they envisage.

As indicated, the South African socio-political transformation has brought about other changes in how the term "community" is understood. Previously, under Apartheid, the white minority dominated politically and this created deep divides between racial groups. In principle, the new dispensation has brought about a new, single South African community, the constituent members of which do not in CHAT terms, as explained above, necessarily share the same object. Some political leaders, including the former South African President, occasionally plays the "race card" to gain political advantage over their opposition (see Thomson 2014: 293, 311). Such actions lead to new divisions in the community and thwart efforts to create a sense of being a South African, irrespective of race, background, colour, gender or sexual preference (see Johnson 2015: 242-243).

Division of labour means that the work or the goal-directed or the object-directed action is divided between, and conducted by, people belonging to the community, each as he or she believes to be required. The concept "division of labour" makes it possible to distinguish between collective activity and individual action, in this case, with respect to the transformation that has been brought about. When people divide work among themselves, their own portion does not satisfy their needs. Rather, their needs are satisfied by the portion of the product of the aggregate activity they gain in their social relations during the working process. The activity system as a unit of analysis makes the system view and subject's view complementary factors. The different factors in the activity system are in mutual relation to one another and are continuously changing because of human actions and interplay (Postholm 2015: 45-46). These insights are particularly salient when attempting to understand the dynamics of transformation.

It is clear from the above that it is difficult to overestimate the role of the socio-cultural setting and participation in various discourse communities in the development of the multiple meanings held by the subject. Different meanings emerge in different socio-cultural settings (Lampert-Shepel 2008: 213). Part of the socio-cultural setting is the culture in which the activity takes place. Culture embodies the social languages, speech, metaphors, charts and schemas accepted by (for instance) a particular religion or culture (Lampert-Shepel 2008: 214). The activity is also socially organised, and forms a natural setting for the actions of the subject, in a real-life context (Lampert-Shepel 2008: 216).

The CHAT also offers a useful framework for understanding the tensions that not only exist within an activity system such as a process to bring about change, but also those existing among widely different activity systems, whether a system is an organisation (such as a government, a state, a group of influential people, a group of dissidents clamouring for reform and transformation) or an individual agent. Knowing the source of the tension is important as this might influence change and development. Put differently, the CHAT could help to surface systemic tensions and so go further than the superficial adaptations that people sometimes make to be able to continue with their lives amidst the tensions (Asghar 2013: 21-22). Tension and contradiction within and between the elements and factors in an activity system and between activity systems as such can be seen as the foundation for further development and change. Development and change are thus accentuated by continuous transitions and transformations with and between factors in the activity system and between activity systems (Postholm 2015: 46). Also in this regard, the CHAT could contribute much the same insights into transition and transformation of education systems as social action theory.

It is furthermore clear from Figure 1 that an activity system is a unified system constitutive of human social life, interpenetrating and influencing all parts of it and never becoming detached or independent of other parts of the system. It is an integrated and interrelated system. As Stetsenko and Arievitch (2004: 490) concluded: human subjectivity (in the form of individuals or groups), social relations and material practice all have the same ontological grounding. The development of an activity system is not just a matter of simple change, organic growth or maturation, a collection of quantitative changes. Its evolvement is a complex process of qualitative changes and reorganisation. The development of subjectivity, of the human mind, is also not just a biological process but rather a complex socio-cultural process (Veresov 2010: 84).

It is clear that the CHAT has much to say about large scale transformations in education systems, such as has occurred in South Africa. Due to space constraints only cursory remarks will now be made about how CHAT can be used to explain the dynamics of change in education systems as a result of political transformations.

According to the CHAT, the transformation of the South African education system can be seen as an activity constituted by the various elements as portrayed in Figure 1 above. In this particular case, the subject of the transformation activity is the government as the ostensible embodiment of the will of the South African nation (elected on the basis of democratic processes). Other subjects (stakeholders) with an interest in the transformation of the education system, although already represented in and by government, are organised business, religious groupings, academic and cultural leaders, parents, the teaching core and the learners. Although, theoretically speaking, all these subjects have the same object in mind (a better performing, high quality system of lifelong learning and education, consonant with the ideals incorporated in the Constitution, education that provides equal future opportunities for all), they differ in practice about how to achieve these aims. The achievement of this object is impeded by the fact that the different subjects have different mediating artefacts (funds, physical infrastructure, resources, quality of teaching staff) at their disposal. This has led, since 1994, to the de facto rise of a two-tier education system, consisting of a group of highly successful affluent schools, and a large group of schools performing below expectations. This problem is exacerbated by the diversity in the population of South Africa (cf. Engeström 1999: 36). Each constituent part of the South African community has a different view of "community" and what the goals of education, the object, should be in order to benefit their respective societies. The population consists of a large variety of possible communities, including races, cultures, religions, socio-economic status, spatial spread, languages, age and gender, sexual orientation and ability status. Each group has its own views about how the education system should evolve and what it should achieve, and of the

rules to be in place to ensure the development of such a system. This variety also results in a plethora of rules and views about labour division regarding how these aims should be achieved. This explains, for instance, the phenomenal growth in private / independent education and also the rise of campaigns such as "fees must fall" with respect to higher education.

## 7. Conclusion

The CHAT embodies a conceptual and theoretical tool for the more holistic and deep analysis and understanding of activity systems and for exploring the ramifications, complexities and tensions of such systems and between them (Wilson et al. 2013). In a sense, it contributes much the same insights as transitiology. It furthermore highlights the roles of the various agents or actors in a situation, in much the same way as social action theory. It helps the different actors understand their own roles (subject positions) more consciously (Asghar 2013: 19), and in this it also ties in with social action theory as well as with critical theory.

Lastly, there is the danger of reductionism in the CHAT in that concentration on an examination of the activity system as the unit of analysis might lead the researcher to overlook many other salient aspects of the transition. Only a detailed practical application of the CHAT on an actual transitional process such as that in South Africa, the Balkan or the Baltic will reveal whether this danger is real.

## Bibliography

Alexander R J (2001) Border crossings: Towards a comparative pedagogy. *Comparative Education* 37(4): 507-523. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050060120091292

Asghar M (2013) Explorative formative assessment using cultural historical activity theory. *Turkish Online Journal of Quantitative Inquiry* 4(2): 18-32.

Audi R (2005) *The Cambridge dictionary of philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Booyse J J (2011) Education provisioning during the period of National Party rule. In: Booyse J J, Le Roux C S, Seroto J and Wolhuter C C (eds) *A history of schooling in South Africa*. Pretoria: J L van Schaik.

Bray M and Borevskaya N (2001) Financing education in transitional societies: Lessons from Russia and China. *Comparative Education* 37: 345-365. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050060120067820

Carstens S (2016) Saak oor skoolgeloof kos al R1.5 miljoen. Beeld 3 January 2016: 3.

Cohen L, Manion L and Morrison K (2011) *Research methods in education*. London/New York: Routledge.

Cowen R (2000) Comparing futures or comparing pasts. *Comparative Education* 36:333-342. https://doi.org/10.1080/713656619

Cowen R (2002) Moments of time: A comparative note. *History of Education* 31:413-424. https://doi.org/10.1080/00467600210153609

Davenport T R H (1991) *South Africa: A modern history*. (Fourth edition). London: Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-21422-8

De Klerk W (1991) *F W de Klerk: The man and his time*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.

Department of Basic Education (2009) Report of the task team for the review of the implementation of the national curriculum statement. Pretoria. DBE.

Duffy T M and Jonassen D H (1992) Constructivism: New implications for instructional technology. In: Duffy T M and Jonassen D H (eds) *Constructivism and the technology of instruction. A conversation.* Hove and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers.

Du Preez M (2013) *A Rumour of spring: South Africa after 20 years of democracy*. Randburg: Penguin.

Engeström Y (1987) *Learning by expanding: An activity / theoretical approach to developmental research*. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit.

Engeström Y (1999) Activity theory and transformation. In: Engeström Y, Miettinen R and Punamäki R L (eds) *Perspectives on Activity Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812774.003

Engeström Y (2000) Activity theory as a framework for analysing and redesigning work. *Ergonomics* 43(7): 960-974. https://doi.org/10.1080/001401300409143

Engeström Y (2001-2002) Expansive learning at work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education and Work* 14(1): 133-156. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080020028747

Giliomee H and Mbenga B (2007) *New history of South Africa*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

Hamilton G E (2010) Rediscovering our shared qualities in ever-changing situations. *Durham Anthropology Journal* 17(1):35-64.

Honderich T (2005) *The Oxford companion to philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johannsen L (2000) Democratization and development: Modernization and political institutions. Presentation at the ECPR Joint Session of Workshops. Copenhagen. 14-19 April 2000.

Johnson R W (2015) *How long will South Africa survive: The looming crisis*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.

Lampert-Shepel E (2008) Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and case study design: A cross-cultural study of teachers' reflective practice. *International Journal of Research and Application* 20(2): 211-227.

Meredith M (2005) *The State of Africa: A history of fifty years of independence.* Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.

Merriam S B (2009) *Qualitative research.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam S B (2001) Andragogy and self-directed learning: Pillars of adult learning theory. *New Directions of Adult and Continuing Education* 89: 3-14. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.3

Mucha J (2003) The concept of "social relations" in classic interpretive sociology: Weber and Znaniecki. Paper presented at the 6th European Sociological Association Conference, Murcia. 23-26 September 2003.

Mutize M and Gossel S (2017) Why SA's at risk of 'junk status' in 2017. <https://www.moneyweb.co.za/news/economy/why-sa's-at-risk-of-junk-status-in-2017>

Otakpor N (1985) The social action frame of reference: An historical map and analysis. *Philosophica* 36(2): 135-150.

Postholm M B (2015) Methodologies in cultural-historical activity theory: The example of school-based development. *Educational Research* 57(1): 43-58. January. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2014.983723

Prica I (2007) In search of post-socialist subject. *Narodna Umjetnost-SCIC. (Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research)* 44(1): 163-186.

Przeworski A (1988) Democracy as a contingent outcome of conflict. In: Elster J and Slagstadt R (eds) *Constitutionalism and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173629.003

Schwandt T (1994) Constructivist approaches to human inquiry. In: Denzin N K and Lincoln Y S (eds) *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and Issues. Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks Ca.: SAGE.

Smit M H and Rossouw J P (2014) Student discipline from authoritarian apartheid to constitutionalism: South Africa as a society in transition. In: Russo C J, Oosthuizen I J and Wolhuter C C (eds) *International Perspectives on Student Behavior: What we can learn*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.

South African Institute of Race Relations (1997) *South African Survey: 1997-1998*. Houghton: South African Institute of Race Relations.

Sqapi G (2014) Transitional paradigm as an explanation for the democratization processes. CBU International Conference on Innovation, Technology Transfer and Education. Prague, Czech Republic, 3-5 February 2014. <www.cbuni.cz,ojs.journals.cz>

Stetsenko A and Arievitch I M (2004) The self in cultural-historical Activity theory. *Theory and Psychology* 14(4): 475-503. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354304044921

Sweeting A (2007) Comparing times. In: Bray M, Adamson B and Mason M (eds.) 2007. *Comparative education research. Approaches and methods*. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6189-9_6

Thomson L (2014) *A history of South Africa: From the earliest known inhabitants to the present*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.

Trueman C N (2015) Social action theory. The history learning site. <www.historylearningsite.co.uk/sociology/theories-i-sociology/social-action-theory/>

Veresov N (2010) Introducing cultural historical theory: Main concepts and principles of genetic research methodology. *Kulvturno-Istoriceskaia Psigologia* 4(8):83-90.

Wilson D D, Cole M, Nixon A S, Nocon H, Gordon V, Jackson T, Garia O L and Minami Y (2013)

Qualitative research: Cultural-historical activity theory. In: McGaw B, Peterson P and Baker E (eds) *International Encyclopedia of Education.* 3rd Edition. New York: Elsevier.

Yamagata-Lynch L (2010) *Activity systems snalysis methods: Understanding complex Learning Environments.* Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-6321-5