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Enabling spaces in education research: an agenda for impactful, collective evidence to support all to be first among un-equals

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Single case studies are prolific in South African education research. I equate the abundance of case studies to the urgency for evidence to transform the highly unequal landscape of education opportunities. In contrast however, stand-alone case study evidence does not offer much impact in building an evidence-based body of knowledge for education interventions. I posit an alternative for education research in the absence of collective studies, and propose for education researchers to collaborate in order to be deliberate in building a collective body of knowledge on circumstances that enable positive education outcomes given a postcolonial context, such as South Africa. I use an egalitarian political philosophy position to posit the notion of schools as enabling spaces, so as to counter a dis-enabling disaster perspective and promote dialogue on evidence of that which supports positive learning and development, given high structural disparity. I show that, as with studies in which I participated, many studies exist locally to generate evidence on education responses given adversity. However, insights thus derived are fragmented, regional and mostly single case studies using multiple conceptualisations, measures and indicators. I argue that an intentional education research agenda to coordinate inquiries could inform design, conceptualisation, measurement, comparative value and data sharing. An enabling schools research agenda could intentionally guide inquiry into that which supports education, where chronic poverty renders society as characteristically less equal.

Keywords: barriers to education; buffers in education; egalitarian political philosophy; equality of opportunity; global South education; high risk schools; poverty and education; protective resources; resilience; risk factors

Introduction

Education knowledge is generated in South Africa on evidence-based responses given a high adversity context. Afterall, South Africa's undesirable status as most unequal society in the world (OXFAM, 2013; The World Bank, 2012) necessitates such studies, to address negative educational, health, social and economic outcomes that abound in more unequal societies (Bhana, Petersen, Baillie, Flisher & The MHAPP Research Programme Consortium, 2010). However, the existing insights are derived from fragmented, regional and mostly single case studies, using multiple conceptualisations, measures and indicators. Consequently the impact offered from such disconnected studies remains negligible. I propose for education researchers to collaborate in order to be deliberate in building a collective body of knowledge on circumstances that enable positive education outcomes, given a postcolonial context (e.g. South Africa).

To have a fair chance for many to be firsts amongst un-equals requires intervention. And the severity of inequality requires much more than piecemeal insight. To counter structural disparity, evidence needs to offer a more far-reaching impact. Consequently multiple, comparable studies are required on education interventions with high efficacy, fidelity and transferability. I use equality of opportunity (Page & Roemer, 2001; Roemer, 1998; Roemer, Aaberge, Colombino, Fritzell, Jenkins, Lefranc, Marx, Page, Pommer, Ruiz-Castillo, Jesus San Segundo, Tranaes, Trannoy, Wagner & Zubiri, 2003) as a lens to posit the notion of enabling spaces in education, and argue for an education research agenda that emphasises evidence on innovative adaptation (rather than a deficit focus on scarcity and education) in a transforming, postcolonial Global-South space.

Given the associated multiple and chronic disruptions faced in this emergent postcolonial democracy, it may be enticing to the individual and collective body of education researchers to opt to make challenges the focus of their deliberations. However, based on experience, in long-term, resilience school-based studies (Ebersöhn, 2014a, 2014b; Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2012), I make a case for turning the research light on those outlier incidences, where schools, teachers, students and school communities succeed against the odds. Moore's (2001) reference to 'positive deviance' informs my call for the intentional research pursuit of instances where individuals and communities in at-risk school settings exceed expectations by accessing limited (educational) opportunities, and then perform well.

An Unequal School-Ground: Enabling Equal Opportunities for Education

Many have shown that the context of inequality calls for very particular lenses to support positive outcomes (Hoadley & Galant, 2015; Sayed, Kanjee & Nkomo, 2013; Soudien, 2010). Elsewhere (Ebersöhn, 2014b), I argued for the way in which the particular global South space, place and temporality is significant when considering which evidence to generate in support of positive learning outcomes. In this article, in order to build a case for an education research agenda, I argue that a prerequisite is the acknowledgement that a challenging context with particular deficit requires deliberate investigation into, and championing of, evidence on

interventions that assist teaching, learning and development. I contend that a premise for an education research agenda – given inequality – would accordingly incorporate both positive- and negative contextual issues. Depending on the theoretical position of the education researcher, he or she would thus take note of risk factors and protective resources, barriers and buffers, or lack of resources and services, together with available resources and services. Consequently, to imagine a research agenda, I draw on frameworks valid in contexts where structural disparity persists. When structural disparity characterises a society, individuals and communities are marginalised. Like others (Branson & Zuze, 2012; Laryea-Adjei & Sadan, 2012; Palardy, 2013) I contend that a lens of inequality (Roemer, 1998), which acknowledges theorising on opportunity for equality, provides a balanced vantage point, when considering contexts characterised by poverty.

A Risk Lens in Education Research

Egalitarian political philosophers have been influenced by Roemer's (1998) and others' (Page & Roemer, 2001; Roemer et al., 2003) work on equality of opportunities. Analyses based on these frameworks seldom include data from emerging

economy countries (Moore, 2001), where chronic poverty renders societies as characteristically less equal – with slender chances of accelerated progress towards more equal distribution of services. Political philosophy debates often focus on deficit variables, primarily related to social origin, that lead to a continuum of more, or less opportunity, or more, or less equality. Figure 1 provides a synopsis of a primarily deficit lens to policy frameworks (Branson & Zuze, 2012; Laryea-Adjei & Sadan, 2012; Palardy, 2013).

From Figure 1 it is apparent that inadequate opportunities are associated with socially-generated risk factors (as is characteristic of structural disparities in South Africa). The portrait for equality of opportunities becomes especially grim if a home, school, neighbourhood or country is in remote spaces, or spaces with high exposure to conflict and instability. The risk of intergenerational poverty is high, as societal structures lead to parents probably accessing low-income generating jobs, due to a limited number of job opportunities and low education levels. In a less equal context, if you are born female, or differently-abled, or become orphaned, chances are high that you would be especially at risk to not enjoy equal opportunities to learn.

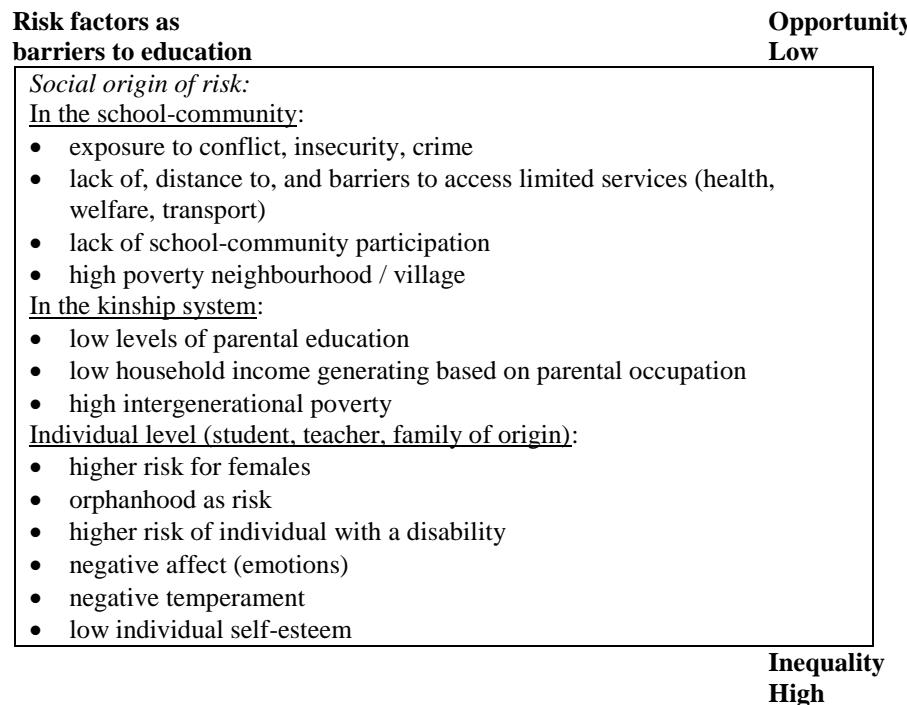


Figure 1 A deficit policy lens: rural education, opportunity and inequality (adapted from Ebersöhn, 2014d)

Characteristically an unequal ecology usually points to less opportunity due to resource constraints, with few services and goods available to advance the development of human capital. This lack of capital may be aggravated by features of an at-risk social context and social origins. In a

poverty context, vulnerability will be especially high, and education infrequently accessed by mainly girls, orphans and people with disabilities, those who live in emerging economies, rural villages or inner-city lodgings; who may regularly be exposed to crime, and conflict. On a psycho-

logical level, a negative temperament may be an additional hindrance to accessing education (Fredrickson, 2001). Significantly anti-social behaviour seem to be especially evident where societies are more unequal.

Following Roemer's (1998) equality theory, these circumstances of social context and origin are beyond individual control, and consequently require evidence to inform interventions in order to equalise the coverage, distribution and access to educational services (sparse as they may be in a poverty ecology).

A Continuum of Risk and Resources as Education Research Lens

An alternative image of enablement (Figure 2) is possible when assets and strengths are accounted for in education research. Socio-ecologically, it is known that risk factors (as is evidenced in Figure 1) occur together with available protective resources (Collins, Kinzing, Grimm, Fagan, Hope,

Wu & Borer, 2000; Liu, Dietz, Carpenter, Alberti, Folke, Moran, Pell, Deadman, Kratz, Lubchenco, Ostrom, Ouyang, Provencher, Redman, Schneider & Taylor, 2007). Equally, community development studies (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) show that, in development processes, asset-awareness precedes ability to traverse towards and access available resources. An enabling school (Figure 2) would be a place where the risk factor (Figure 1) is mediated by acknowledging, identifying and using available protective resources to make the adversity context conducive to education. The use of protective resources can buffer against the impact of disparity, and mediate learning and development. An enabling school therefore embodies a space where the co-existence of risk and resources in a rural context is acknowledged. High opportunity and low inequality is possible when protective efforts mobilise existing resources so that quality education is possible.

Opportunity High	protective resources buffering education	risk factors as barriers to education	Opportunity Low
<p><i>Social origin of protective resource:</i></p> <p><u>In the school community:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • safety structures (supervision, security, role-models) • structures to refer to and access limited and/or distant services • school-community participation in school activities • high levels of allocating and managing available resources for collective prosperity <p><u>In the kinship system:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • access to adults with varied levels of parental education • access to household income support and examples of varied adult occupation • higher possibility for intergenerational mobility <p><u>Individual level (student, teacher, family of origin):</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being male as protective • non-orphaned as protective • high physical health as protective • positive affect (emotions) • positive temperament • high individual self-esteem 	<p><i>Social origin of risk:</i></p> <p><u>In the school community:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exposure to conflict, insecurity, crime • lack of, distance to, and barriers to access limited services (health, welfare, transport) • lack of school-community participation • high poverty neighbourhood / village <p><u>In the kinship system:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • low levels of parental education • low household income generating based on parental occupation • high intergenerational poverty <p><u>Individual level (student, teacher, family of origin):</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • higher risk for females • orphanhood as risk • higher risk of individual with a disability • negative affect (emotions) • negative temperament • low individual self-esteem 		

Inequality
Low

Inequality
High

Figure 2 Enabling schools include resources and risks (adapted from Ebersöhn, 2014d)

In a less equal society, more resources are available to some than to others, and therefore resources and risks will differ in degree and scale: those with fewer resources experience more risk. In addition, the degree of resource constraints is

higher and scarcity exists on the scale of individual, family, community, and societal level (Ebersöhn, 2014c). Drawing on development theory (Department for International Development (DID), 1999) the range of resources, or forms of capital

(financial, physical, human, social, infrastructural, political) need to be accounted for in high risk settings, and has relevance for education research.

Protective resources (forms of capital), like risk factors, are also scaled. Protective resources include individual traits, such as personal grit, positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001, 2003), and positive temperament (Seligman, 2011). Besides human capital, contextual protective resources also exist. Such contextual resources include positive institutions (Seligman, 2011) that provide necessary services (such as schools, clinics, faith-based organisations, social development). Knowing how to access and make use of governance through political- and decision-making capital (DID, 1999) is of specific relevance in a young democracy.

A Propensity for Case Studies in Education Research

I base my contention on my own propensity towards case studies – here specifically several ongoing (2003–2016), school-based intervention and participatory studies. These studies have each accomplished limited impact with dissemination in publications and conferences, as well as building research capacity of students and emerging scholars. However, each fall short of offering significant impact on an education system where the need far exceeds the effect of small scale findings.

The issue in smaller scale studies is not the significance of theory-building. In each instance, we were able to build knowledge on resilience responses in schools given high risk, high need and resource constraint (Ebersöhn, 2014a; Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2012).

Nor is the issue the robustness of methodology. Our sampling was rigorous, where twenty schools (primary = 16, high = 4; rural = 6, peri-urban = 14) were sampled in three South African provinces (Mpumalanga, Eastern Cape and Gauteng) based on quintile indicators of socio-economic status, as well as preparedness to collaborate in long-term school-based inquiry. To build knowledge on teacher resilience given these school-contexts, teachers ($n = 116$, female = 87, male = 29) in these schools were purposively sampled to contribute their experiences on resilience. Data on educational psychology services in a rural school is nested in a higher education community engagement partnership (2005–2015) with a rural high school. Participants include Grade 9-students ($n = 1109$), who annually received educational psychology services, as well as yearly cohorts of Academic Service Learning (ASL) students ($n = 117$), who provided these services.

School-based data sources were rich and triangulated, including visual data (photographs and audiovisual recordings) and textual data (field notes and researcher diaries of multiple re-

searchers) of prolonged observation of school-contexts over time; verbatim transcriptions of interviews (participatory, and face-to-face) with teachers, young people, ASL-students; school documents (statistics on enrolment, academic performance and progress); clinical educational psychology data (textual and visual) of assessment and therapies; as well as reflective narratives by ASL-students. Data analysis entailed thematic analysis of the above data sources by multiple coders, in order to derive in-case and cross-case results. These case studies afford process awareness over-time, rather than merely cross-sectional insights. The data is delimited to similar school settings and participant populations. The qualitative data provide nuanced, deep understandings of multiple perspectives, but lack quantifiable comparison across province, school and participant profiles.

Rather, the issue is the lack of impact of small scale studies by many other South African researchers like me. To create opportunities for many young people to experience ‘firsts’, given extreme inequality, it cannot be business as usual for education research. In the next section, I illustrate how education evidence of ‘what works’ given contextual hardship consists of multiple mini-masterpieces. Due to the proclivity for case studies, there is no coherent framework to guide the systematic analysis, comparison and integration across smaller studies. In the absence of synergies across data sets, it remains an elusive endeavour to construct a representative quilt of validated education interventions, given an emerging economy with ongoing poverty and less equality.

The Prevalence of Case Studies to Investigate Supportive Interventions in High Risk Schools

Like myself, many South African scholars, in a variety of education and related disciplines, have been contemplating supportive school spaces to counter adversity. Each study provides very particular textured understandings given discipline-specific foci. These include studies on policy, leadership and management (Heystek, 2015; Heystek & Lumby, 2011; Hlalele, Masitsa & Koatsa, 2013; Hoadley & Galant, 2015; Maringe, Masinire & Nkambule, 2015; Motala, Govender & Nzima, 2015; Ntho-Ntho & Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Perumal, 2009; Pillay, 2014a; Spies & Heystek, 2015); support in challenging contexts (Bhana & Bachoo, 2011; Ebersöhn, 2014c; Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2012; Heystek, 2015; Mabasa, 2013; Mampane & Bouwer, 2011; Masinire, Maringe & Nkambule, 2014; Pillay, 2011, 2014a; Spies & Heystek, 2015); strategies for assessment (Braun, Kanjee, Bettinger & Kremer, 2006; Kanjee, 2007; Omidire, Bouwer & Jordaan, 2011; Scherman, Zimmerman, Howie & Bosker, 2014; Van Staden, 2016), innovations for instruction and learning (Cho, Scherman &

Gaigher, 2012; Krog & Krüger, 2011; Langa, 2013, Maringe et al., 2015; Ngidi, Sibaya, Sibaya, Khuzwayo, Maphalala & Ngwenya 2010; Scherman, Smit & Archer, 2013; Van Staden & Bosker, 2014; Zimmerman & Smit, 2014); lenses on curriculum development (Griessel-Roux, Ebersöhn, Smit & Elof, 2005; Kanjee, Sayed & Rodriguez, 2010; Modipane & Themane, 2014; Nieuwenhuis, 2004; Ntho-Ntho & Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Pillay, Smit & Loock, 2013; Themane, 2011); multilingualism and language of instruction (Breton-Carbonneau, Cleghorn, Evans & Pesco, 2012; Evans & Cleghorn, 2010; Howie, Venter & Van Staden, 2008; Joubert, Ebersöhn, Ferreira, Du Plessis & Moen, 2013; Matjila & Pretorius, 2004; Omidire et al., 2011); and student learning support and inclusion (Landsberg, Krüger & Swart, 2016; Marais & Krüger, 2014; Motala et al., 2015; Theron & Dalzell, 2006). Socio-cultural aspects have also been studied, including support towards wellbeing, given student risk behaviours and contexts (Bhana, Mellins, Small, Nestadt, Leu, Petersen, Machanyangwa & McKay, 2016; Groenewald & Bhana, 2016; Hall & Theron, 2016; Hlalele & Brexa, 2015; Krüger & Osman, 2010; Lethale & Pillay, 2013; Mampane & Bouwer, 2006; Mashita, Themane, Monyeki & Kemper, 2011; Meyer-Weitz, Reddy, Van den Borne, Kok & Pietersen, 2000; Perumal, 2015b; Pillay, 2011; Steyn, Van Wyk & Kitching, 2014; Theron & Dunn, 2010); psychosocial support in school-communities (Ebersöhn & Ferreira, 2011; Ferreira, Ebersöhn & Botha, 2013; Mampane, 2014); support for teachers given high adversity (Coetzee, Ebersöhn, Ferreira & Moen, 2015; Loots, Ebersöhn, Ferreira & Elof, 2012; Perumal, 2016; Sibaya & Sibaya, 2008); as well as school-community support and partnerships with schools (Bhana & Bachoo, 2011; Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2012; Hlalele, Manicom, Preece & Tsotetsi, 2015; Mabasa & Themane, 2002; Mayombe & Lombard, 2016; Omidire, Mosia & Mampane, 2015; Themane, 2014).

By and large, the majority of studies follow cross-sectional, single case study designs and qualitative methodologies (Groenewald & Bhana, 2016; Heystek, 2007, 2015; Hlalele & Brexa, 2015; Hlalele et al., 2013; Krog & Krüger, 2011; Krüger & Osman, 2010; Lethale & Pillay, 2013; Marais & Krüger, 2014; Modipane & Themane, 2014; Omidire et al., 2015; Perumal, 2015a, 2016; Pillay, 2014a; Smit, 2001; Steyn et al., 2014; Themane, 2014; Theron & Dunn, 2010). The strength of these studies lie in their richly nuanced insights of a variety of geographical spaces, and different participant perspectives.

In some instances, mixed-method designs are followed to investigate barriers and buffers given the particular education context (Bhana et al., 2016; Hlalele et al., 2013). In other studies, there is

evidence of process data given prolonged engagement with students, teachers and school-communities (Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2012). There is also education evidence derived from larger scale survey studies (Cho et al., 2012; Fockema, Candy, Kruger & Haffejee, 2012; Mashita et al., 2011; Sibaya & Sibaya, 2008; Van Staden, 2016; Zimmerman, 2010). Some studies have multiple cases of sampled schools (Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2011; Hall & Theron, 2016; Hlalele et al., 2015; Howie et al., 2008; Mabasa, 2013; Maringe et al., 2015; Omidire et al., 2011; Pillay, 2014b; Scherman et al., 2013), and in some instances, samples span across more than one province (Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2011).

An umbrella criterion of convenience to access participation (be it schools, teachers, students, management and leadership, families) often drives decisions regarding sampling criteria. As a result, the scope of sampling is usually that of convenience and/or purposive sampling in single, bounded school-systems across Southern Africa (Heystek, 2007, 2015; Heystek & Lumby, 2011; Hlalele, 2012; Hlalele & Brexa, 2015; Hlalele et al., 2013; Krüger & Osman, 2010; Lethale & Pillay, 2013; Marais & Krüger, 2014; Motala et al., 2015; Ngidi et al., 2010; Ntho-Ntho & Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Perumal, 2016; Pillay, 2011; Sibaya & Sibaya, 2008; Smit, 2001; Smit & Fritz, 2008; Spies & Heystek, 2015). Consequently evidence related to education is characterised as multiple small-scale and robust insights. The sampling repertoire leaves little room to knit fragments of evidence together into one distilled body of education knowledge.

The unique perspectives of small groupings are necessary to include in order to craft a full understanding of that which is required to support learning, teaching and development, given hardship and difficulty in accessing formal, government support (Braun et al., 2006). Studies provide such perspectives of small numbers of teachers (Coetzee et al., 2015; Lethale & Pillay, 2013; Modipane & Themane, 2014; Ngidi et al., 2010; Perumal, 2016; Scherman et al., 2014; Smit, 2001; Smit & Fritz, 2008); students (Fockema et al., 2012; Hlalele, 2012; Hlalele & Brexa, 2015; Krog & Krüger, 2011; Lethale & Pillay, 2013; Marais & Krüger, 2014; Perumal, 2015b; Pillay, 2011; Omidire et al., 2011; Themane, 2014; Theron & Dalzell, 2006; Theron & Dunn, 2010); school leaders (Heystek, 2007, 2015; Heystek & Lumby, 2011; Hlalele et al., 2013; Ntho-Ntho & Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Olujuwon & Perumal, 2015; Spies & Heystek, 2015); policymakers (Motala et al., 2015; Pillay, 2014a); school-community stakeholders (Bhana & Bachoo, 2011; Hlalele, 2012; Mayombe & Lombard, 2016; Omidire et al., 2015; Pillay, 2011).

Given the absence of a uniform conceptual framework to map education research, there is great

variability in how both hardship and support is conceptualised – and consequently, operationalised. In some instances, indicators for learning (Archer, Scherman, Coe & Howie, 2010; Cho, Scherman & Gaigher, 2014; Van Staden, 2016) or health and wellbeing, do lend themselves to comparison (Bhana & Bachoo, 2011; Bhana et al., 2016; Fockema et al., 2012; Zimmerman, 2010) – albeit with global, rather than local studies. Consequently, it remains challenging to compare education data and transfer education findings, given the lack of uniformity in indicators to measure learning, teaching, and development outcomes – as apparent in the prior discussion. Similarly there is variability on how to measure teacher and student development and wellbeing (Edwards, Govender,

Nzima, Hlongwane, Thwala, Singh & Mbele, 2013; Edwards, Nzima, Govender, Hlongwane, Kent, Hermann, Mathe & Edwards, 2014; Hlalele & Brexa, 2015; Lethale & Pillay, 2013; Mampane, 2012, 2014; Meyer-Weitz et al., 2000; Omidire et al., 2015; Pillay, 2011; Theron, 2012).

If this is the current education research scenario, what can be done to change, and/or capitalise on these practices? In the next section, I propose a framework that might direct conceptualisation, research questions, shared operationalisation using comparable measures and indicators in order to co-generate a coherent body of knowledge on effective education interventions given inequality.

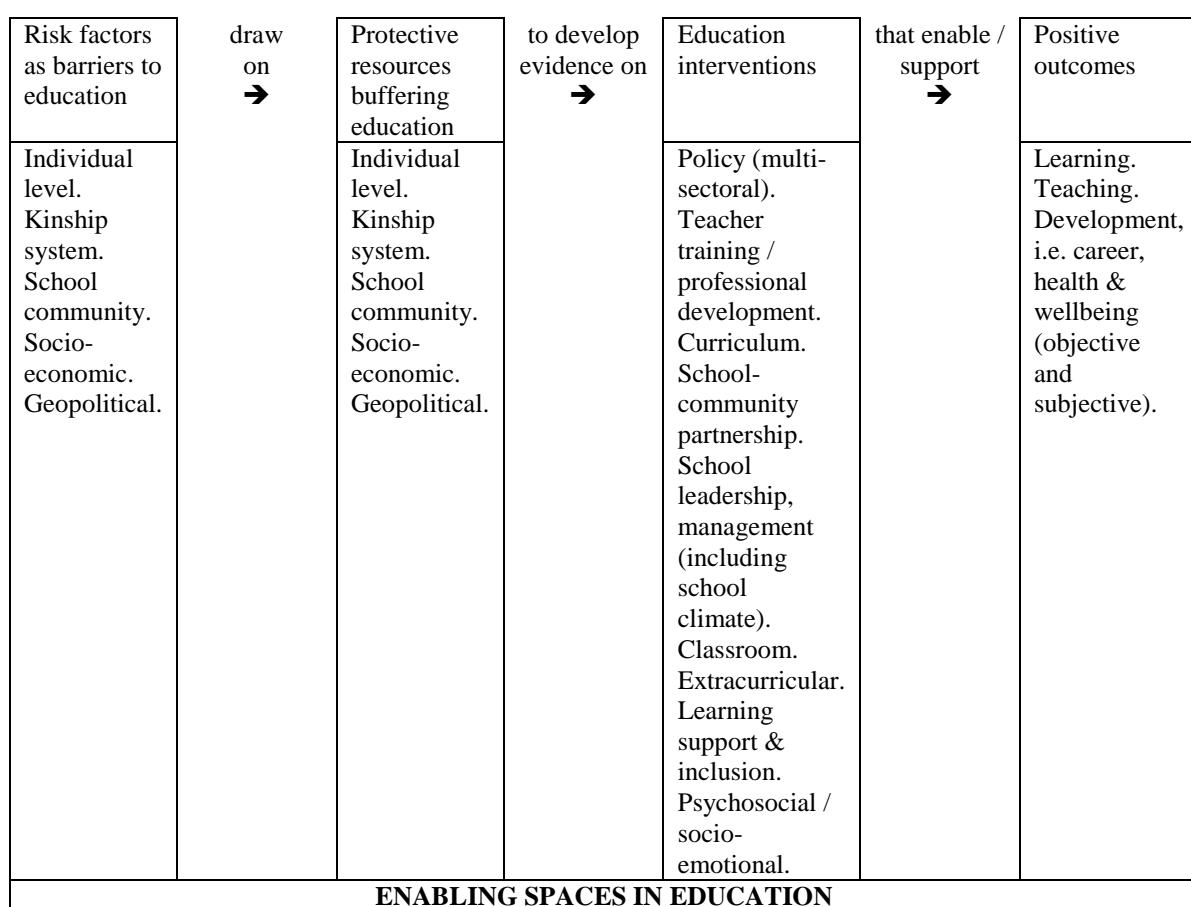


Figure 3 Conceptualising enabling spaces in education within a context of high inequality

Enabling Spaces as Education Research Agenda
In Figure 3, I present an education research agenda informed by lenses of opportunities for equality (Page & Roemer, 2001; Roemer, 1998; Roemer et al., 2003). The agenda includes several theoretical assumptions. Education (learning, teaching and development) will be considered in terms of enablement, viz. what are the ecological enables that support positive education opportunity? Ecological constraints need to be acknowledged as significant risk and accompanying need – what are the

ecological constraints that inhibit positive education opportunity? In addition, risk factors in a highly unequal society do not provide equal opportunity, and act as barriers, disrupting equal progress (refer to Figures 1 and 2). Consequently, opportunities for ‘positive deviance’ (Moore, 2001) require intentional interventions to support progress to positive outcomes. Furthermore, interventions can draw on available protective resources to mediate the negative effect (buffer against) of risk factors (Ebersöhn, 2016a). In response to high

inequality, education needs to include an emphasis on multi-scaled intervention (individual, socio-logical, economic and policy) so as to query, strategise, and change unequal structures (Page & Roemer, 2001; Roemer, 1998; Roemer et al., 2003).

Naturally, engagement is required by means of which to deliberate scenarios for collaboration on an integrated research agenda. In September 2016, there was an invitational meeting between education researchers and policymakers from national and local Departments of Education from nine South African universities (Tshwane University of Technology; Northwest University; University of KwaZulu-Natal; University of South Africa; University of Pretoria; University of the Free State; University of Limpopo; University of Johannesburg and University of the Witwatersrand), as well as international researchers from three institutions (Pennsylvania State University, American Institutes for Research, American Education Research Association). The focus was on considering the following question of how research findings can inform learning and wellbeing in high risk and high need schools.

It was decided that one priority for an education research agenda would be to collaborate in order to integrate autonomous, small-scale research, on how evidence can promote resilience in high risk and high need schools. Collaboration would follow an inclusive approach, to network, collaborate and include relevant researchers in operationalising an education research agenda (Ebersöhn, 2016b). In order to ensure the opening up of pathways, engagement would take place with key role-players in government, NGOs, foundations, business sector stakeholders, non-governmental organisations, school-community partners, and funding organisations, so as to raise awareness of and seek collaboration in the vision and activities of a collaborative research agenda (Ebersöhn, 2016b).

Several priorities exist to make an education research agenda actionable. Systematic reviews require focused on: (i) knowledge synthesis on schools where high performance and well-being of students and teachers are outcomes despite adversity; (ii) international and national policy a related policy review; and (iii) a review of relevant indicators and measures. A dedicated electronic space provides a platform on research information related to enabling spaces in education (<http://www.up.ac.za/centre-of-the-study-of-resilience>).

A research agenda could include the long-term aim of a large scale, national randomised control trial on evidence-based interventions that enable high risk, high need and resource constrained schools to support learning, teaching and wellbeing (Ebersöhn, 2016b). The rationale for this

aim would be to counter the often small-scale, regional case study nature of studies that investigate interventions by means of which to buffer against barriers and support learning, development and wellbeing in schools.

Given the limitations in research funding in an emerging economy context, it is, however, plausible that multiple case studies (single and multiple) could each focus on an aspect or aspects of enablement. Pragmatically, even if case studies continue being used, their combined evidence could each fit into a larger picture of education as an enabling space. Consequently, mid-term objectives for a research agenda could include: (i) using similar indicators and measures in studies generating knowledge on enabling schools; (ii) creating digital object identifiers (doi) for data sets on enabling schools; (iii) data-sharing; (iv) a digital repository of measures and methods; and (v) deciding on core research questions based on a common conceptual understanding (Ebersöhn, 2016b).

Against the background of an overarching question on evidence-based support to teachers, students and leadership, other research directions (Ebersöhn, 2016b) include: determining the purpose of schooling; what type of youth/learner may be desirable for a school to produce; how might we enable, professional support leadership/education leaders or provide support for teaching and learning that use multilingualism as asset rather than barrier in education; what might be the infrastructural support leveraging opportunities for innovative forms of collaboration and networks; as well as what constitutes relevant core knowledge and measures.

At the crux of an enabling school's research agenda is the intent to unravel and disseminate evidence that shows how strategies that drive agency towards positive outcomes (on the scale of individual, school, household, school community, government) enable education, faced with significant adversity, to function.

Conclusion

As per definition, less equal societies with fewer opportunities for equality are characterised by overwhelming adversities. I discuss both the benefits and limits of existing studies within South Africa, where knowledge on such enabling interventions has been done in recent years. I argue that a collective endeavour to construct and implement an education research agenda could culminate in systematic data from an emerging economy country. Such robust knowledge could be significant for local implementation, and for use in analyses in other settings where poverty persists, where societies are correspondingly less equal, and chances are slimmer for accelerated progress towards more equal distribution of services. I drew

on egalitarian political philosophy to provide an argument for an education research agenda that builds integrated, comparative and representative evidence, which can inform interventions aimed at equalising the coverage, distribution and access to educational services (sparse as they may be in a poverty ecology). I explained how such an education research agenda could look into circumstances where education can function as enabling space that support teaching, learning and development, alongside continued hardship characteristic of structural disparity.

Note

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