

# Educational Leadership and Management during COVID-19: A Call for Criticality and the Legitimation of Social Theory

Farhana Amod Kajee

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6269-0025>

## Abstract

Research internationally and nationally highlights that the field of Educational Leadership and Management (ELM) has pressing problems. One of the problems emanates from existing theory in the field which has been chiefly concerned with efficiency and organisational functioning. With the onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the already existing reduction in leadership as an organisational phenomenon, this paper argues that these problems are exacerbated if leadership is not viewed as a social phenomenon. Drawing on the theoretical tenets from a doctoral study which focused on master's coursework programmes in ELM at six South African universities, this paper commences by providing a genealogy of the field using 'frames' (functionalist, subjectivist, and critical). Trends from this genealogy are then surfaced and critiqued. The paper calls for a critical stance and argues that adopting social theory is essential to surface and address inequality and social justice issues in leading during the COVID-19 pandemic. A curriculum leadership case during the COVID-19 pandemic of adopting the Legitimation Code Theory as a social theory is offered for illustrative purposes.

**Keywords:** Educational leadership and management, critical frame, social justice, social theory, COVID-19, Legitimation Code Theory

## **Background and Context**

Educational leadership and management (ELM) has gained prominence in South Africa during the last few decades and exhibits characteristics found in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America where the field is more established (Van der Mescht 2008). Against the backdrop of international and national debates on the nature of the field, it is evident that challenges do exist. These challenges are manifold and focus on, but are not limited to, strands related to the orientation of the field which have chiefly been concerned with efficiency and organisational functioning; although leadership thinking has evolved, it is still a troubled research terrain lacking in robustness and possessing a diverse knowledge base which lacks unity. In this paper these strands are seen as integrated but are intentionally separated to facilitate a discussion.

In developing the argument for this paper which calls for educational leaders to work from a critical premise and embrace social theory as tools to understand leadership practices during complex times, it is necessary to contextualise the field of ELM by focusing on the already existing challenges in the field prior to the onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The discussion below focuses on these challenges:

*Firstly*, my attention turns to the practical and managerial orientation of the field, coupled with political interference and the tendency to view leadership and management as an organisational phenomenon rather than a social one;

*Secondly*, I turn to the terrain of research in the field and consider some of the challenges, e.g. the lack of robustness of research and the philosophical grounding in the field; and

*Finally*, the diversity of the knowledge base in ELM is highlighted as a possible challenge.

## ***Politics and a Practice Orientation: Implications for the Field***

The field of ELM is often strongly driven, even shaped, by politics (Ryan 2017). This is because education is a worldwide public right and providing

basic education in the form of schooling is universally acknowledged to be one of the state's most important obligations. Naturally then, the state will want to control and guide this basic education provision which it tries to accomplish through policy. This could have favourable outcomes; for example, promoting the quality of education and addressing social justice issues in contexts where it is most needed. The administration of these policies will require a careful alignment of educational policies and school leadership policies (Weinstein 2016) to ensure that the intended outcomes are attained. However, we should also be aware of the dangers in this scenario of politics and control. Hoy and Miskel (1996: 73) warn that politics can become so powerful 'that it creates its own configuration, becomes the dominating process which could be exercised in illegitimate ways'.

Nevertheless, the political nature of education cannot be ignored (Bush 2020) and this has recently led to questionable COVID-19 education policy decisions (Sayed & Singh 2020). Policies tend to influence the field of ELM through the provision of practical and professional guidelines. Since policies tend to dictate best practice, they are inclined to promote an adoption of a managerial and functionalist perspective. As Bush (1999: 246) warns, the ideologies of government 'drive the agenda, replace the values of practitioners to the implementation of prescribed agendas'. He further explains that 'policies embodied in [the] educational reform movement during the past two decades have brooked little compromise, relying on the excessive resort to leadership and management that we will term managerialism to ensure implementation' (Bush 2020: 19). This culminates in a stronger focus on functional knowledge and leading/managing is viewed as an organisational rather than a social phenomenon.

Some researchers seem to support the notion that ELM is an applied field with a knowledge-base that is problem-oriented to improve practice (Oplatka 2008). This orientation has been challenged by scholars, such as Hoy, from the late 1970s. Hoy (1978, as cited in Oplatka 2008: 14) posits that:

The 1970s bear witness to the vitality of the practice orientation. There is a visible press to focus on practice – a press to train leaders to practice, to perform research to inform practice, and to make decisions to shape practice, a press for development and for practical research.

The focus on addressing practical problems also indicates that knowledge producers borrow from functional approaches, usually from business where description and explanation are the norm (Gunter 2012: 338). Bush extends this argument by mentioning that the field is ‘accused of managerialism by stressing procedures at the expense of educational values’ (1999: 240). He further posits that practitioners tend to be ‘dismissive of theories and concepts for their alleged remoteness from the real school situation’ (Bush 2020: 19). The practical, managerial and political influence interference has left the field members in a ‘dynamic arena of conflict as occupants seek to determine what knowledge and practices are to be regarded as legitimate and in what knowledge forms and practices they are prepared to invest’ (Fitz 1999: 313). As field members we need to concede that theory and practice are no longer dichotomised (Gunter 2000) but rather we should acknowledge their interrelationship and the relevance of theory to good practice (Bush 2020).

This political and practical challenge has left education, it would seem, ‘to answer for the collective inability of South Africa as a country to withstand the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic on almost all fronts, with schools serving as a battleground for ideological control over a new educational nirvana’ (Fataar & Badroodien 2020: 4). This heightens the complexity of leadership and management practice. Attention now turns to highlight the problems of research in the field.

### ***A Troubled Research Terrain***

Scholars have highlighted the difficulties experienced by theorists and researchers in the ELM terrain. The question, both internationally and in South Africa, seems to be: Is research sufficiently related to theory or is it largely a technical activity? Is research rigorous? Are methodological orientations keeping abreast of dynamic contexts? Is small case study research sufficient to contribute to the field’s knowledge base? (see Fitz 1999; Le Grange 2007; Oplatka 2008; Christie 2010). Writing in the South African context, Grant argues that to strengthen the field ‘there is little choice but to build its scholarship through high quality, relevant and large-scale research’ (2014: 89). Gunter (2006: 6) argues the need to ‘resuscitate research’ as the field ‘is terminally ill in England’. This harsh opinion possibly holds true in other parts of the world. Drawing on Ribbins (2007: 19), she says that good research:

aims systematically, critically and self-critically to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and in doing so has a key purpose ... the informing of leadership judgements and decisions in order to improve the educational action.

Oplatka (2008: 15) argues that previous debates on the field's knowledge base, methodologies, and paradigms generated a need to understand what field members studied and researched. It was evident that it 'covered a multitude of ideas and activities representing considerable differences of views between various groups within the profession'. Although more research is being conducted, it is still insufficient as it lacks robustness (Oplatka 2008). Unpacking his reference to 'robustness', Oplatka suggests the need for research to be 'rigorous and relevant scholarly work that enhances linkages among and utility of educational policy, practice and research arenas' (2008: 24). Fitz (1999: 7) sums up the research challenges by stating that:

The lack of an 'ology' and the tendency for management to be situated in isolation from other domains is strongly represented in that genre of writing we call the MEd dissertation. My experience suggests that the genre tends to be dominated by the small case study, qualitatively focused, [offering] analytically descriptive accounts of practice. In the main, the genre lacks theoretical ambition and in general fails to explain very much. These accounts also suffer because they do not seem to measure very much, by virtue of their sampling sizes and their research design.

His reference to 'ology' clearly points to what he perceives to be a need for stronger philosophic engagement, an intellectualising of the field through appropriate research. Field members need to understand the interplay between researching, theorising and practicing in educational settings. In this regard, Gunter and Ribbins (2003: 254) argue that 'agency to make choices within practices as researchers, theorists and practitioners is exercised within a complex setting of cultural, organizational and social structures'. As a way forward, writing in the South African context, Le Grange (2007) posits the need to re-imagine method and methodology due to the nature of the field. He argues that due to the complexity and multiplicity of the field, method

should not be enacted so that it produces singularity but ‘should perform modes of crafting that apprehend multiplicity’ (Le Grange 2007: 428). In essence, there is a call for researchers to widen their lenses and theoretical tenets to advance the field. In this regard, Christie (2010: 695) suggests that instead of ‘singular or monolithic constructs’ it may be useful to seek multiple perspectives of the phenomenon studied. Another suggestion recommends that agency must be practised in the close-knit relationship of theory, research, and practice (Gunter & Ribbens 2003). The COVID-19 pandemic has been an eye-opener in this regard. Educational leaders found themselves engaging in nuanced and flexible leadership practices having to draw on research and theory that provides the ‘analytical basis for determining the response to events’ (Bush 2020: 178).

### ***A Diverse Knowledge Base in the Field Of ELM***

Educational leadership and management scholars have highlighted ‘the absence of clear boundaries and a unified, cumulative knowledge base, coherent conceptual unity and consensus over theoretical issues in the field’ (Oplatka 2009: 2). As a result, topics in scholarly work as well as in programmes in ELM vary widely; ELM does not come across as a ‘unified profession’ (Hills 1978, as cited in Oplatka 2009: 2). Hoy (1994) points out that knowledge workers in the field are, at different times, focused on different issues. These include social and cultural influences on schooling, teaching and learning processes, organisational studies, leadership and management processes, policy and political studies, legal and ethical dimensions of schooling, and the economic and financial dimensions of schooling. While these issues are all central to ELM, the fact that they have received – and continue to receive – unequal emphasis at different times strengthens the notion that the knowledge base appears to be diverse. Even more worrying is the belief that research does not impact on the field and address substantive problems and hence does not advance knowledge and practice (see Foskett *et al.* 2005).

In summary, the knowledge base in the field of ELM lacks continuity for the reasons described above. Oplatka also confirms this by mentioning that ‘little cumulative building of knowledge’ has taken place in the field (2008: 13). Bush (2020) argues for critical reflection by educational practitioners in complex times. He suggests that theory (knowledge) serves

to provide a rationale for decision-making and facilitates an explicit awareness of the framework underpinning our practice (Bush 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is indeed an example of complex times. While it would be unfair to say that the field has no theory, the notion of a central unifying theory is a pipe-dream.

Against this background of pressing problems highlighted in the field, one would need to familiarise oneself with the origins and developments of the field to comprehend the contemporary field, with all its challenges as discussed. My attention now turns to the field as it stands today, by surfacing and critiquing trends from this genealogy and arguing for the need to work from a critical frame as presented in the genealogy. We need to ‘develop strong critiques of leadership ideology as a general source of domination’ (Alvesson & Spicer 2012: 28) but also supplement this with a more nuanced appreciation of how to lead organisations during challenging times. The paper’s methodology is now briefly outlined.

## **Methodology**

This paper emanated as a consequence of the engagement with certain theoretical tenets during a doctoral study which focused on master’s coursework programmes in ELM at six South African universities. These theoretical tenets are of relevance and facilitate a deeper understanding of existing leadership challenges in an age of unpredictability. It encourages us to move beyond and lead from a critical premise – embracing social theory to help us make sense of many aspects of contemporary education – in particular, by providing insights into leading during unprecedented times. One of the purposes of this paper, as previously indicated, is to depict the conceptual landscape of the history of the field of ELM by discussing the major eras marked by distinctive thinking and/ or publications. This paper draws on the seminal works that capture these major eras. This presentation of the genealogy of the field illustrates how thinking in the field has evolved and the need to consider the social context. As leaders it has become evident that current leadership practices need to be more responsive to both internal and external factors. Education Leadership and Management (ELM) field members need to work from a critical frame and adopt social theory as a lens in decision making and their practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. A curriculum leadership case drawing on my personal experiences through

reflection during the COVID-19 pandemic adopting the Legitimation Code Theory as a social theory is offered for illustrative purposes.

Various authors have provided different labels for these eras, but for the purposes of this discussion, Foster's (1986) use of 'frames' (paradigms) is drawn on because he works in the critical dimension which aligns with the approach promoted in this paper (see English 2008). Some of these texts are dated, but have been drawn on as these are seminal works in the field. Foster posits that frames 'provide boundaries for research questions and areas of concern' (Foster 1986: 54). He cautions that evaluating each frame and choosing one compatible with one's views could be a mistake because a frame 'is as much a set of blinders as it is a lens' (Foster 1986: 57). Furthermore, he argues that 'objectively no one paradigm is as good as any other, yet each is subjectively better' (Foster 1986: 57). This alludes to the notion that shifts in the frames happen through insight and discovery and not through neutral evaluation. At this point the reader is alerted that the frames present a genealogy of the field – and it should be acknowledged that there have been developments.

## **Frames Governing Thoughts: Trends Identified & Critiqued**

According to Hoy and Miskel (1996), theory forms a frame of reference for the practitioner by providing practitioners with the analytic tools whereby events can be analysed and decisions made. Theory and practice exist in 'dialectical relation' to each other (Foster 1986: 12). Hence what we do depends on how we see, and how we see depends on what we do. My attention now turns to the organisational thought that has continued to develop and change due to the complexity of educational organisations. This organisational thought comprises a functionalist, subjectivist, and critical frame. In this genealogy I commence with the functional frame and conclude with the possibilities offered by a critical frame during complex leadership and management practices.

### **Functionalist Frame**

#### ***Functionalist Frame – Surfacing Some Trends***

The functionalist frame has its roots in classical organisational thought. The father of the scientific management movement was Frederick Taylor (1815 -



1915) whose seminal work, *The Principles of Scientific Management* was published in 1911. Taylor's ideas of scientific management were widely accepted. This frame embraces the assumption that the social world is 'objective, real and concrete and that scientists standing outside of this world can record facts about it' (Foster 1986: 55). The key premise of this thinking was to 'use people effectively in organisations' (Hoy & Miskel 1996: 9). The metaphor synonymous with this period was that of a machine with a strong focus on increasing the yield. The discourse was managerial with intense connotations of control, rigid conceptualisations of organisations, and management associated with vigorous authority. In this way, the field of educational leadership and management was also influenced by the principles, trends, and practices of business and industry (Hoy & Miskel 1996).

Many concepts that have arisen in business administration have been incorporated into education with the emphasis on school effectiveness, examination results, and the role of the principal (Angus 1989: 63). As a result, educational administration university courses aimed to prepare principals 'who were going to scientifically manage education' (English 2008: 149). According to Codd (1989: 159), this industrial model with an emphasis on efficiency 'treats teachers as workers rather than professionals, thereby diminishing their commitment to the values and principles which define the field of educational practice'. Over the years, fortunately, this practice has been changed with the principles of leadership being foregrounded.

Research in a functionalist paradigm assumes that a systematic study of organisations and people will contribute to a knowledge base that is reliable and predictable. Watkins (1989: 9) goes further, warning that the 'functionalist researcher and manager are joined in a search of predictability and control', driven by positivistic orientations. Ultimately, this results in a kind of over-simplification of a complex phenomenon. Angus (1989: 63) argues that in a school situation with an undue emphasis on the role of school leaders a 'functionalist perspective is tacitly assumed' which has a tendency 'to reduce complex educational problems to administrative issues'.

### ***Functionalist Frame – A Brief Critique***

The obvious shortcoming of this approach is that it does not take cognisance of the human element in organisations, schools in particular. Hoy and Miskel (1996) point out that when theory is based on systems that are logical,

rational, explicit, and quantitative, practice will be seen to be similarly rational. But for learners, teachers, and administrators, school life is anything but logical, rational, and quantifiable, and the danger is that a rational, simplistic approach glosses over the dark face of school life that managers and leaders sometimes prefer to ignore – as Foster (1986: 60) puts it, ‘practitioners need a science of administration based in functionalism to rescue them from their own humanity’. Bush (1999: 239) warns that one needs to be cautious when drawing on business principles, as thinking about relationships within an educational institution in these terms, runs the risk of people behaving in ‘ways that are antithetical to certain fundamental educational values’. It becomes evident that working from the premise of a functionalist frame ignores the social context and would not be able to respond to the leadership demands during heightened complex times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Subjectivist Frame**

### ***Subjectivist Frame – Surfacing Some Trends***

This frame is also known as the social science or human relations approach (Hoy & Miskel 1996). This approach draws on perspectives from psychology, sociology, political science, and economics. Various scholars have contributed to this school of thought by including experiences from many disciplines, governments, and industry. They went beyond Taylorist notions of efficiency and confronted a range of more complex issues experienced by leaders in an organisation. The discussion below briefly draws on a few key thinkers of this frame, namely Follett, Mayo, and Greenfield, whereafter research trends representative of the subjectivist frame are highlighted.

Mary Parker Follett made an important contribution to human relations thinking in several publications in the 1920s. She developed ideas on management ahead of her time, many rediscovered as late as the 1960s and appreciated for their ‘depth and consistency’ (Massie 1965, as cited in English 2008: 151). Her work focused on achieving a sophisticated understanding of human relations, with particular reference to inter-group co-ordination. Furthermore, she was the first to integrate the idea of organisational conflict into management theory by drawing on the concept of the law of situation which she introduced. This concept was based on the premise that

authority was not solely determined by hierarchy but by the situation itself (English 2008). Follett laid the groundwork for organisation development (French & Bell, 1973 as cited in English 2008). In a 1924 essay she coined the phrases ‘power over’ and ‘power with’ to differentiate between coercive power and participative decision-making (Elektroskolarb.com). Considering how topical the issue of power is in leadership thinking today, Follett’s contribution to an understanding of these dynamics was remarkable. This seminal thinking sowed the seeds of contemporary leadership theory, evident in the movement away from headship to more distributed forms of leadership.

Elton Mayo is widely recognised as the progenitor of the human relations movement and his work formed the basis for later management and organisational thinking (Marsh 2014). Mayo was involved in the Hawthorne Studies which focused on the relationship between physical working conditions and productivity. His research was initially intended to extend Taylor’s work by investigating industrial conditions that led to an increase in productivity. By varying the physical environment of factory workers, such as the level of lighting, researchers hoped to find a correlation between these variations and productivity. However, they found that production increased whatever the environment (Foster 1986: 40). In further studies to explain this anomaly, the researchers found that the manipulation of the physical conditions in the work environment did not affect productivity. In fact, researchers found that ‘being the subject of attention coupled with the type of social relations that emerged in the test group influenced the output’ (Foster 1986: 40). The experimental groups developed their own group norms and ways of working. This study concluded that human relations were more important in the workplace than was reflected in the work of Taylor and other functionalist theorists.

In 1974, Greenfield (as cited in Bates 1989) attacked the notion of organisation as ontological reality. He argued that organisations were not objectively real phenomena but rather constructs created by our imagination, the products of individual perception, and group agreement. He argued that organisations did not have a life of their own; they were not things and did not have an ontological reality. He felt that ‘organisations have reality through human action’ (Greenfield, 1986 as cited in Smyth 1994: 136). Organisations were seen as ‘being the product of human will’ (Foster 1986: 60). Contrary to functionalism, which creates a dichotomy between objective

facts and subjective values, this subjective view argues that there is a need to understand and acknowledge values *as facts*. He called for a humanising of the organisation and an acknowledgement of the human face of organisations, evident in an interview with Peter Ribbins (Greenfield & Ribbins 1993: 262), where he posits:

The wielding of power is terrible ... I am convinced that there is a kind of horror in administrative rule ... if there is to be a kind of humanising of that power, a contemplative, philosophical dimension should be brought to it. Perhaps to do the thing at all requires the kind of withdrawal which I advocated and a need for a mediation on values.

Greenfield (as cited in Bates 1989) argues that administration science does not work as a science since it has not brought increased understanding and control of organisations. Greenfield's orientations towards the subjective resonates with phenomenology and the experiences of the heart. In the same way as phenomenology honours lived experience as the most important source of data, Greenfield's radical subjectivism privileges individuals' perspectives and experiences as the true reality of organisational life.

Research came to be dominated by interpretivism, the organisation considered to be a 'social construct rather than an objective reality' and organisational life involved constructing and interpreting meaning (Foster 1986: 56). The methodology involved questioning natural structures and events and probing how individuals came to understand one another and their environment. The role of the researcher was 'trying to understand common sense notions' (Foster 1986: 56). Unlike the functionalist frame, the subjective frame acknowledges organisations as value-laden, conflict-ridden phenomena.

### ***Subjectivist Frame – A Brief Critique***

The work of Greenfield is not without its detractors and critics. According to Bates (1989: 137), Greenfield leaves us with 'a world of illusion where leaders embody the values of particular groups and grapple with each other through symbols and moral preferences'. He cautions that the rejection of behavioural science would deteriorate into the adoption of 'moral relativism,

mysticism, existentialism and organisational voluntarism' (Bates 1989: 138). These insights of Greenfield can be detected in the work of contemporary theorists such as Giddens and Foucault, particularly in the renewed interest in agency that characterises contemporary social theory. However, the fact that Greenfield plays down the role of structure can hardly be denied.

Subjectivism as an approach has positives but there are other obvious weaknesses. Power is virtually ignored, and the over-emphasis on subjective experience runs the risk of relativism. As Angus (1989: 80) puts it, there is a need to focus on 'inequality in power relationships which could be disguised and not surfaced in human relations theories'. The issues of power and politics are very evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Black *et al.* (2020) discuss the generative structures (including power and politics) that have rendered educational institutions vulnerable during the pandemic and make an argument for alternative educational imaginaries. Subsequently, a number of critical alternative approaches have developed to facilitate an understanding of organisations. A brief discussion of this now follows.

## **Critical Frame**

### ***Critical Frame – Surfacing Some Trends***

A number of alternative critical perspectives were developed which pose a major challenge to earlier knowledge on organisational behaviour and problems. In essence, the critical frame allows us to see society differently by 'helping to demystify through critique' (Hoy & Miskel 1996: 19). A critical theory requires us to reflect on 'what we do and how what we do affects all who encounter us' (Foster 1986: 70). There are many theories that fall under the umbrella of a critical paradigm (e.g. feminist theory, post modernism, critical race theory, and queer theory). However, for the purposes of this discussion the focus is on generic aspects pertaining to the critical frame.

The development of critical theory in organisational contexts, especially in the arts and education, has a distinguished history. Dewey, Kant, Hegel, Marx and others were amongst the American and European thinkers who contributed significantly to this thinking. According to Dewey (as cited in Angus 1989: 66) a critical theory is more than a conscious self-reflection: it is a structured reflection on economic and cultural conditions and the ideologies that support them. This paper agrees with Collinson (2011: 11) that there is a need to 'develop more nuanced accounts of the diverse

economic, social, political and cultural contexts in which leadership dynamics are typically located'. In this regard, Angus (1989: 67) hopes that administrators can turn to critical theory as it helps them to understand how technical and bureaucratic forms of management have come to dominate institutions. An adoption of a critical stance is premised on the underlying assumption that social structures are constructed, echoing Greenfield's thinking, which highlights that they are man-made conventions that serve somebody's interest (Angus 1989: 67) which was not part of Greenfield's thinking. For Greenfield, the key interest was in individual's conceptions of reality; for critical theory, the interest lies in understanding social conceptions. If structures are man-made, it follows structures can be changed (re-made). This requires individuals taking up an agential role and bringing about the necessary transformation required after engaging critically with issues at hand. Giddens and Foucault's work builds on Greenfield's critique and also contributes to a critical way of thinking. Collinson (2011: 11) argues that focusing particularly on shifting power relations between leaders, managers, and followers' dialectical perspectives can facilitate new ways of thinking about their complex, ambiguous, and potentially contradictory interrelations and situations.

Research in this approach requires a deeper interrogation and 'examination of forms and expressions of power with an end goal of creating more equitable and just social structures' (Foster 1986: 57). Researchers will be encouraged to transform their practices by questioning social domination and repression. Collinson (2011: 12) argues that 'critical researchers become reflexively aware of their underlying assumptions and how these can shape leadership theory, research, development and practice'. This promotes a new form of analysis and opens up innovative lines of enquiry (Collinson 2011: 12.).

Against this backdrop, this paper argues in favour of working from a critical stance or premise, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Educational leaders need to take up their agential role during these complex and unprecedented times when everything is in a state of flux. The status quo cannot be maintained and decision making and leading needs to embrace criticality in our unjust and inequitable societies. Similarly, Alvesson and Spicer (2012: 5) remind us that we need to develop a suspicious engagement of the concept leading, because 'such an engagement asks how valuable relations of authority can be produced, revised and limiting'.

## **A Call for Criticality and The Legitimation of Social Theory**

Leaders are expected to play a creative and constructive role in their institutions during the pandemic, to ensure that the educational imperatives are met. The heightened complexity of leading stems from the need to take cognisance of a number of factors such as health and socio-economic factors. I argue that leaders need to work from a critical frame and to legitimate social theory in their practice, more so during these unprecedented times. Attention now turns to the constructive possibilities of embracing these theoretical underpinnings.

### ***Critical Frame: Addresses Inequality, Social Justice Issues & Issues of Power***

The critical paradigm requires a movement away from functionalist approaches and beyond subjectivism to identify and work against the unequal power relations within an institution. Smyth (1989) argues that class relations are inherent to a superordinate and social hierarchy within a school. The unequal power relations within organisations must be challenged as a critical frame is embraced.

Critical thinkers take up ‘activist’ and ‘transformational’ roles (Gunter 2012: 338). Taking into consideration the discourse of the concepts in this frame such as ‘transformational’, ‘activist’, ‘critique’, and ‘power’, it is evident that a critical frame, and the research approaches within this frame, seeks the moral base of decision making and challenges us to make a difference in the lives of individuals in our institutions. Following a critical frame will inevitably lead to questioning the way we do things, the first step in any change process. There will be a tendency to break away from drawing on business practice and the organisational theories that were developed for business contexts. The moral aspect will focus on values and one will critique ‘how created social structures impede the attainment of values such as democracy and freedom’ (Foster 1986: 72). Amid the climate of uncertainty (COVID-19 pandemic), what remains certain is the need for educational leaders to engage in an ‘on-going monitoring and critical examination of our presumptions for understanding and approaching matters of justice’ (Kedie 2019: 54). In summary, the critical frame is future oriented by addressing inequality and social justice issues.

### ***The Need to Legitimate Social Theory***

The earlier discussion of the critical frame revealed the need for individuals to take up an agential role to bring about the necessary transformation. Gunter in her paper 'Thinking theory: The field of education management in England and Wales' published in 2000, illustrates the value of utilising social theory (Bourdieu's theory of practice) in her intellectual analysis of the field. She mentions that the inclusion of social theory enables 'issues of power and social justice to be included' (Gunter 2000: 632). Furthermore, Delanty (1997, as cited in Gunter *et al.* 2013: 202) affirms that the social sciences need a theory of society which interprets and guides the changes that prevail in our modern societies. Supporting this notion, Foster (1986: 32) posits that ELM is a 'moral science, which means no easy answers, no prescriptions to follow, no recipes, scientific or otherwise, to guide behaviour'. This highlights that ELM is about working from a value-laden premise and elements of understanding and critical inquiry are necessary. Education Leadership and Management (ELM) is about social change, transformation, and empowerment (social justice).

Various knowledge workers internationally and in South Africa support a socially critical approach. For example, in South Africa, social theory such as Cultural Historical Activity Theory is included amongst others, in knowledge work (see Grant 2017). Social theories are utilised in socially critical projects to 'ensure that researchers are not both busy and blind' (Gunter 2012: 339). Furthermore, operating as a critical theorist will assist in an 'in-depth analysis of the context within which institutions exist and the object of study' (Fitz 1999: 319). Finally, this paper calls for the adoption of socially critical approaches in leading to help challenge the unjust realities and bring about the transformation required in educational contexts, especially against the backdrop of a pandemic. In the next section a case of critical leadership of curriculum drawing on social theory is offered (Legitimation Code Theory).

### **The Adoption of Social Theory: Leading Curriculum During COVID-19 – An Illustrative Case**

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, globally, universities and schools were closed for instruction at their respective educational institutions and the practices of education at schools and universities were suddenly disrupted.



As educational practitioners it was vitally important to embrace this new norm by carefully reflecting on the ethical challenges as we transformed our practices almost instantaneously. Aligning with a socially critical approach as discussed earlier, in making this transition I was reminded that equity and justice should underpin my decisions as I responded to the realities faced as an academic at a higher education institution.

In this section, I attempt to illustrate how the adoption of social theory as a curriculum leader facilitated my teaching of a module at honours level as I made the transition to online teaching and learning. In sharing this illustrative case, the discussion below is organised around three themes. The themes are: firstly, some tensions encountered in making the decision to an online transition; secondly, the theoretical tenets of Legitimation Code Theory – the social theory I had explicitly drawn on; thirdly, I link my experiences to some of the tenets of the social theory and discuss how I became aware that a physical absence of students led to a stronger legitimation of knowledge and the need for stronger interactional relations in online teaching and learning; and finally some future possibilities in the adoption of social theory are highlighted.

### ***To Transition to an Online Platform or Not?***

A university finds itself in a complex environment and its relationships are far from static. It remains ‘integrally part of a social world’ and there is a reciprocal relationship of influence on how society and the university constructs itself (McKenna 2012: 16).

Few would argue with the claim that universities are constantly changing in order to keep abreast of the changing needs of society. In South Africa, these changes were brought about chiefly by market-related factors and political and policy imperatives. These policy imperatives were an attempt to re-dress the inequalities of the past and ‘bring about transformation through widening access’ (Webbstock 2016: 19). In aligning with these policy imperatives, one needs to take cognisance that the ‘organisational and interactional aspects of curriculum and pedagogy, have the capacity to either reproduce educational

inequity or transform it' (Hoadley & Muller 2010: 71). I argue that South African higher education has complex curricular-related matters to tackle to ensure that access is widened in a meaningful manner, considering the needs of a diverse student body. Against this backdrop, with COVID-19 coercing universities to turn to online teaching and learning platforms, the complexity was heightened.

'Transmogrification in South Africa has manifested in the emergence of a pandemic pedagogy based on the rapid move to online education' (Fataar 2020: 27). Online education has rapidly become the new norm during the pandemic. However, in a country like South Africa the issue of unequal access needs significant consideration. I concur with Fataar (2020) that online teaching and learning is normally presented as a way of expanding access to learning opportunities, but one needs take into consideration that South Africa is a country where the right to breathe is vastly unequally distributed. One is reminded of a socially just pedagogy – as 'educators ... we should reject forms of schooling that marginalize students who are poor, black and least advantaged' (Giroux 2003: 10).

I faced this very challenge of whether I should make the transition to an online platform or not. The challenge stemmed from two main reasons: firstly, personal preparedness and secondly, student access to online teaching and learning. I viewed this as a lack of resources. In terms of my personal preparedness, I had not been trained as an online teacher and my courses were designed for face-to face interaction. I realised that this challenge had to be overcome with me being prepared to learn and fulfil my role as a lifelong learner. However, the challenge of students making the transition was a deeper problem; with the inequality that exists in our diverse student body access to devices and data were some of the problems encountered. I engaged with the issues with mixed feelings – bearing in mind that every reform may not be positive – while attempting to steer clear of widening the inequality gap, which is a social justice issue. I was aware of the point made by Fataar that despite its prominence in the curriculum imagination under the pandemic, online education is a minority experience (2020). I embarked on this reform when the vice chancellor arranged free data for every student and provided devices to students who needed them (email communication 24/03/2020). In terms of efficiency, I argue that the adoption of Legitimation Code Theory (social theory) facilitated teaching and learning of a postgraduate course on an online platform.

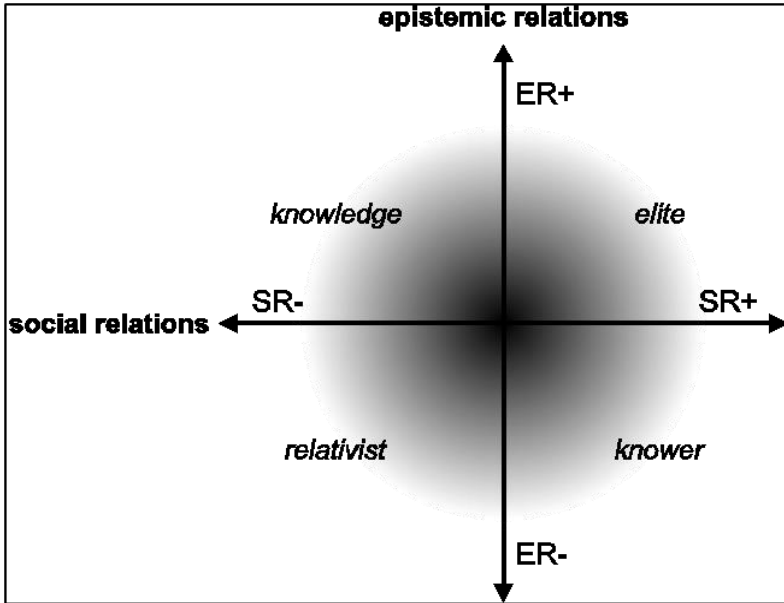
### ***Theoretical Tenets of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT)***

The LCT is an explanatory framework that is regarded as a practical theory which provides a conceptual toolkit for ‘analyzing actors’ dispositions, practices and contexts, within a variegated range of fields’ (Maton 2014: 17). This practical theory enables one to characterise knowledge practices (which translates to curricular related matters), highlight the organising principles of the practice, and investigate their effects (Maton 2014). This theory facilitates an analysis of the underlying structuring principles of curriculum through its provision of tools which contribute to solving problems. These tools are also referred to as dimensions of legitimation (Maton 2014). Each of these five dimensions can be set to different modalities which, in combination, form the legitimation code (Maton 2005). For the purposes of this paper, I will be drawing on the dimension of ‘specialisation’ and other useful concepts such as ‘semantic gravity’ and ‘interactional relations’.

### ***Specialisation***

A social field of practice has both knowledge and knower structures. Maton (2009) emphasises that there are always knowledge and knowers, always epistemic and social relations; the question is which of these relations is emphasised in practices and knowledge claims. Underpinning LCT (specialisation) is the notion that educational practices set up what is legitimate to know and who the ideal knower is. Specialisation refers to the basis of distinctiveness, authority, and status, or ‘what makes actors, discourses and practices special or legitimate’ (Maton 2007: 98). This then translates to the notion that human practices are about or positioned towards something and are concerned with the relations to subjects. This dimension was relevant as it provided an insight into what the basis of legitimacy was; in other words, what was valued as I made the transition of my programmes to an online platform. Of significance to this paper is the argument that epistemic and social relations can be used both to describe the focus of curriculum, as well as to analyse the basis of practices (Maton 2014: 31).

Different specialisation codes are associated with different possibilities and constraints and therefore the specialisation codes underpinning practices, in this case curriculum practices, will explicate the principles shaping practice by addressing the question of the relative strength of knowledge, social relations/ disposition, neither or both.



**Figure 1: Specialisation Codes (Maton 2014: 30)**

Figure 1 above depicts the specialisation codes developed by Maton (2014). There are four specialisation codes, namely:

- Knowledge codes (ER+, SR-), where possession of specialised knowledge of specific objects of study is emphasised as the basis of achievement and the attributes of actors are downplayed. There is no social restriction on who may claim legitimate knowledge as long as they master the accepted procedures of knowledge building.
- Knower codes (ER-, SR+), where specialised knowledge and objects are less significant and instead the attributes of actors are emphasised as measures of achievement, whether they are viewed as born, cultivated, or socially based.
- Elite codes (ER+, SR+), where legitimacy is based on possessing specialist knowledge and being the right type of knower.
- Relativist codes (ER-, SR-), where legitimacy is determined by neither specialist knowledge nor knower attributes.

In summary, specialisation was a useful lens to establish the organising principles as I made this transition to remote teaching and learning. I could determine what was privileged or valued in my practice by interrogating the degree to which knowledge or knowers were legitimated.

### *Semantic Gravity*

Semantic gravity (SG) can be described in terms of the degree to which meaning relates to context. Semantic gravity is thus defined as stronger when meaning is more closely related to its social or symbolic context. One can describe the process of strengthening SG as moving from abstract and generalised ideas toward concrete and delimited cases. Weakening SG will involve moving from concrete particulars towards generalisations and abstractions, whose meanings are less dependent on the context (Maton 2014: 110).

This concept was useful in helping me ensure the inclusion of practical and esoteric knowledge forms as Maton (2014: 123) argues that ‘movements in semantic gravity provide a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for the recontextualization of knowledge and thus the possibility of cumulative knowledge-building and learning’. The inclusion and the exposure of students to different knowledge forms and social issues increases the ability of students to act as responsible citizens, adds value to society, the economy, and political life (Du Toit 2011: 61). This concept from a social theory made me consciously aware as a curriculum leader of the content I uploaded on the online platforms as I made the transition to teaching remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Interactional Relations*

Interactional relations refer to the ways of engaging with legitimate knowers so as to be inducted into the field (Maton 2014). The pedagogical approaches and assessment practices embraced in the curriculum determine the strength of these interactions with the knowledgeable other. This is particularly challenging as one makes a transition to online teaching and learning.

This section provided an overview of the theoretical concepts of the social theory that were pertinent in facilitating online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the next sections, I link my experiences to some of the tenets of the social theory highlighted and discuss how I

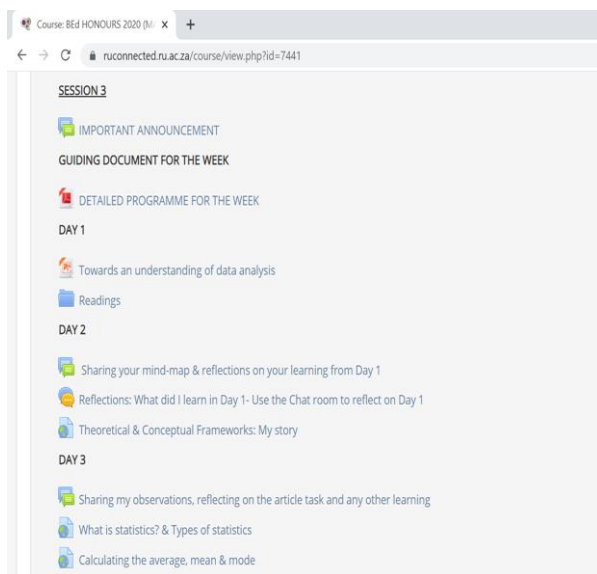
became aware that a physical absence of students led to a stronger legitimization of knowledge and the need for stronger interactional relations in online teaching and learning.

### ***Physical Absence of Students Led to a Stronger Legitimation of Knowledge***

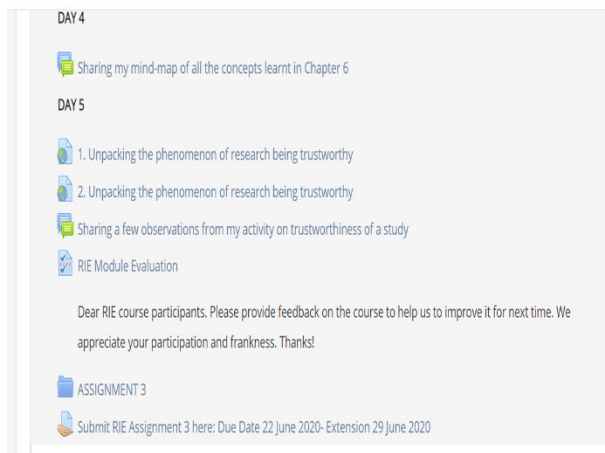
Wheelahan (2010) argues that theoretical knowledge must be at the centre of all higher education qualifications. Scholars argue that access to theoretical knowledge is a matter of distributional justice (see Shay 2012). Thus, in agreement with Shay I commenced developing the postgraduate programme focusing on the knowledge or content as the transition was made to online teaching and learning. I populated the platform with the programme for the week, readings, PowerPoint presentations – a very content driven package. This translates to a stronger legitimization of knowledge which is indicative that knowledge is valued in the curriculum.

The privileging of knowledge in the curriculum is not problematic but the pedagogical approaches to support teaching and learning should not be ignored. Initially I had focused on the content only, as the transition was made to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. A possible reason for this could be attributed to the absence of the lively energetic students in a classroom space, and the familiar known teaching and learning spaces to which many of us are accustomed. Fortunately, I became aware of this oversight and was reminded of the words of Maton that every practice has knowledge and knowers (2014). Through the explicit adoption of social theory, I was then able to lead the curriculum transition to an online platform in a socially just manner by focusing on the content and appropriate pedagogical practices. The 2019 work of Leibowitz and Bozalek helps place the scholarship of teaching and learning into a social justice framework.

Drawing on the concept of SG, I ensured that the content included practice- oriented and more abstract forms of knowledge and ensured that a movement between these two knowledge forms existed to promote cumulative learning (Maton 2014). It was evident that the students (knowers) needed to be considered, in addition to the knowledge to which students were exposed. The illustration below (Figure 2) depicts the transcending between theory and the empirical/practice (online teaching and learning).



**Figure 2: Illustration of the Online Plan for a Week – Guided by the LCT Tool of Specialisation**



**Figure 2: Illustration of the Online Plan for a Week – Guided by the LCT Tool of Specialisation**

**Knowledge -  
epistemic relations  
Knower - social  
relations**

Purpose was to ensure that both knowledge and knowers were the organising principles of the online teaching session.

***Questions I asked myself***

What form does ER take here?

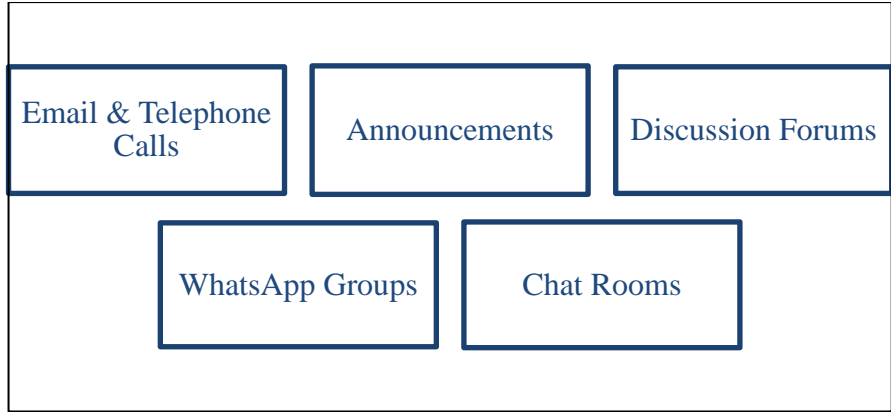
What form does SR take here?

Is ER stronger or weaker? Is SR stronger or weaker?

What is being legitimated or valued?

***A Need for Stronger Interactional Relations in Online Teaching and Learning***

I argue that for students to be inducted into the field of the postgraduate programme, the pedagogical approaches adopted must facilitate engagement with knowledgeable others. I was aware that student-centred teaching creates an environment conducive to learning and has an important bearing on the development of the knower. I argue that the pedagogical approaches embraced should be progressive and support student learning, more especially during a pandemic, using on-line platforms. As leaders of a curriculum learning through ‘sharing and exploring’ there is a movement towards a scholarly community of learners. Research indicates that groupwork encourages students to work towards a joint understanding through active processes such as critical thinking and developing arguments, rather than merely gathering information. Furthermore, working in groups and adopting a community research learning approach, can grow a committed body of field members (see Grant 2014: 93). With a strong call to resuscitate pedagogy imagination in pandemic times (Fataar 2020) it was also necessary to embrace some practical means to facilitate stronger interactional relations as a leader of curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these are highlighted diagrammatically in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: Ways to Facilitate Stronger Interactional Relations During the COVID-19 pandemic**



## **Future Possibilities in the Adoption of Social Theory**

This paper concurs with Shay (2012: 312) who posits that by adopting social theory ‘we are more likely to understand and resolve the seemingly intractable problems facing us in higher education’. Hence, as a curriculum leader the exposure to social theory explicitly provides one with access to ‘understand what happens, what does not happen and what potentially could happen’ (Wheelahan 2010: 68).

Social theory could provide a lens to address injustices and ensure practices are transformatory. In addition, adopting social theory to theorise about practice encourages one to think about ‘social constructs which is a reflection on the function of science in human existence’ (Harrington 2005: 12). This form of reflection promotes critical thinking which is a necessary practice in leading during this unprecedented and disruptive period of COVID-19 to ensure quality teaching and learning takes place in these challenging times.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, this paper has surfaced trends in the genealogy of the field of educational leadership and management and provided a critique of these trends. The potential of making a transition to viewing leadership as a social phenomenon rather than an organisational one was also highlighted. The argument for the need to lead from a critical premise and the adoption of social theory has been developed in the context of curriculum leadership. I argue that it will play a role in elevating the issues besetting the field to a level of seriousness that demands deep reflection, especially against the backdrop of a pandemic. This begs the question of whether as educational leaders our imaginaries can emerge and enable us as an ELM community to be proactive in bringing about the transformation required in our leadership practices at our educational institutions in an equitable and just manner.

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Farhana Amod Kajee  
Senior Lecturer  
Education Department  
Rhodes University  
Makhanda  
[f.kajee@ru.ac.za](mailto:f.kajee@ru.ac.za)