



# Towards a phenomenology of the broken [South] African body as the site for research in education

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## Abstract

In light of the pervasive influence that neoliberalism has on the country's higher education sector and, subsequently, its research agenda, we argue that a recalibration of the philosophical and theoretical perspectives of education researchers is warranted. To this end, we advocate in this paper for a shift from the research subject being viewed, according to Barnacle (2009, p. 16) as a "brain in a vat" customary to positivistic thinking to a phenomenology of what we think of as the broken African body that views the African research subject in their fullness as a living, intersubjective, epistemic, bodily being shaped by invisible socio-political structures that condition both mind and body. This approach that centres on the search for understanding the structure of human consciousness, emphasises the influence that the historical, cultural, and social forces have made intrinsic to the African lived body. Accordingly, we argue that when we are conducting educational research the African body should be reframed as a vessel imbued with distinctive memories of various traumas of colonialism and apartheid, along with its resilience in regaining its balance from such perturbations. From this perspective we animate the crucial need by researchers to embrace the African body to enrich education in South Africa by engaging with the profound complexities of the South African context.

**Keywords:** educational research, South Africa, universities, African bodies, phenomenology

## Introduction

In celebrating its tenth anniversary with a special issue, the *Journal of Education* invited Crain Soudien and colleagues to formulate a call for papers that encourage deliberation on the following questions. How has this scholarship responded to the specific and distinct challenges of South African education, and how has it illuminated issues of educational development and educational justice elsewhere in the world? Is the scholarship opening new conceptual and theoretical pathways with which the research community might and can work? What opportunities has this scholarship overlooked and missed? Where should it be going in the future?

To join in the celebrations and contribute to these discussions, we argue for a shift from viewing the research subject as merely a “brain in a vat,” as is often the case in positivistic thinking, to adopting a phenomenology of the broken African body. This perspective considers the African research subject in their entirety as a living, intersubjective, epistemic, bodily being shaped by invisible socio-political structures that condition both mind and body. Nancy Lesko (2013) in a thought-provoking paper on the place of the body in the teaching and learning space wrote, “Historically, the body has been written out of learning and teaching, and only mind, distinct from and superior to the body remains” (p. 249). Over the years, we witnessed in teaching and learning the increasing overreliance on cognitive neuroscience that has, arguably, strengthened this assertion, affirming that the mind is identical to the brain. Consequently, in educational research the human mind is viewed as the main actor, the important center of information, the dominant and ascendent entity (Greene, 1995). According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), however, perception is not just a mental process contained in the brain as the mind, but it is deeply rooted in the body’s ongoing engagement with the world. The body, for Merleau-Ponty, serves as the co-constituting medium through which we experience and make sense of our surroundings. He introduced the concept of the lived body or the body-subject, in emphasising that our consciousness is always already embodied, and our situated and historical bodily experiences shape our perception in a reciprocating, co-creating event. Reveley (2024), drawing on Foucault, highlights that teaching and learning involves more than just neurological functionality and that embodied knowledge also plays a crucial role in how individuals are shaped and controlled through education. Jagodzinski (1995) like Reveley (2024), reminded us that beyond the brain of an individual exists the body’s pre-reflective consciousness and the preconsciousness that shapes different forms of knowing. For example, our mood, he explained, is like a blanket that “covers us when we reflect upon a conversation” (p. 163). The truth about the psychological and physiological tolerance of the body, he wrote, can be found only in the blanket spaces. Psychologically, Western epistemology gradually exorcised these blanket spaces that give colour to our lives, and, in so doing, they minimise, eliminate, or otherwise alter an essential constituent of the experiential structure for the subject, as if, as in music, the meter of a song is only an accidental aspect of its melody.

In the African tradition, the body is not just perceived as a physical entity but as a lived extension of nature whose consciousness is deeply connected to the ancestral spirit world.

For example, consider the various vital cultural practices, such as *imbeleko*, a ritual conducted at a child's birth or *ulwaluko*, the Xhosa male initiation ritual. *Imbeleko* involves the slaughtering of a goat, and the drying of its skin so that it can be used as a blanket for the newborn, thus symbolising a connection to the ancestors for the child's protection and well-being as they grow up. Additionally, there is the customary practice of *ulwaluko*, the Xhosa male initiation ritual, alongside several other crucial life journeys collectively termed *imfundiso* that denote essential lessons garnered while navigating through life in a spiritual way. Each of these practices contributes to the cultural richness and transmission of significant values in the isiXhosa tradition. Ogunniyi and Ogawa (2008) explained how the African body and the Japanese body are conceived of as vessels through which spiritual, social, and cultural dimensions are expressed. Consciousness is not solely confined to the mind, these authors argue, but is believed to manifest through the culture as expressions of the body. Thus, the essential interconnectedness of the body and consciousness reflects a more accurate understanding of the self in the community and in the natural world. Thus, in the African tradition, we think with our whole bodies; some communities believe that the body is a vessel for spiritual energy and certain physical actions or rituals are considered the means of manifesting and honouring the connections with ancestors or of channelling their influence. Dance, music, and other forms of expression may be used to commune with the spiritual realm that includes ancestors. The body is seen as an organ, or a medium/vessel or a permeable perceptual contact structure representing the fact that *I am* (as opposed to the typical western<sup>1</sup> reduction to thingness) through which a person can establish a link to the spiritual world and receive guidance, protection, or blessings from ancestors.

During the colonial era, the severe suffering endured by non-white [South] Africans has led to a painful process of re-membering—the act of reconstructing a dismembered past to make sense of present trauma. Fanon (1968) personally experienced the psychological trauma of being objectified, stigmatised, and humiliated into an alienated/alienating form of consciousness that revealed the inevitable impact on the experience of the lived body. As curriculum scholars, we recognise how colonial education served as a tool to psychologically interpellate Africans from extrication by the colonizing regime. This interpellation has persisted for generations among indigenous peoples, fostering deep-seated tendencies toward mimesis that implies self-contradiction and even self-destruction. Fanon, through a self-conscious recovery of his own interpellation—initially achieved through academic study in France—grasped the inseparable interrelationship between the political and the psychological, the subjective and the social.

Contemporary observations reveal that dominant research philosophies, theories, and methodologies often disregard the African body in emphasizing its history while focusing predominantly on the mind and, in so doing, bypassing the essential and lived medium of the interconnection. This neglect of the body is in itself a serious problem in any culture—both for the lived well-being of the people and for our best understanding of them, but when that original lived cultural world of the people has been then reshaped and replaced by a colonising culture, the effects and alienation are greatly amplified. Approaches to research in

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1 We refuse to capitalise western as a purposeful de-centering of western hegemony.

Africa frequently neglect to acknowledge the cultural preferences and practices of African people, as well as the entrenched trauma and the impact of their economic position on intellectual development. For instance, 55% (30.4 million people) of South Africans live in poverty, with 61% of poor households relying on the child support grant, although it changes annually, that is currently R500 per month per child, making it difficult for South Africans who rely on these grants to make ends meet (Stats SA, 2017). Despite these alarming statistics, research methodologies, philosophies, and theories persistently align with the cultural preferences and practices of the western world that dismiss the inflicted trauma on the African body (Higgs, 2012). Such practices perpetuate an ideology of cultural superiority, diverting attention from the physical effects on the bodies of African children and students while disproportionately focusing on their minds.

Although the critique of disembodiment of thinking, knowing, and acting prevalent in positivistic thought, is now widely acknowledged, education research in South Africa continues this dismemberment, this fragmentation of human knowing. This has been done purposefully in an attempt to eliminate the body so that we can view the human being as a “*res cognita*” (Jagodzinski, 1995, p. 160, emphasis in the original). Therefore, we argue that researchers need to embrace the African body [*res extantia*] as a site for research to enrich education in South Africa by engaging with the profound complexities of its context. To this end, we advocate for a shift towards a phenomenology of the broken body that regards the research subject as a living, subjective, epistemic, embodied, and experiential entity. This approach that centres on the structuring of consciousness, emphasises the influence of the historical, cultural, and social forces intrinsic to the African lived body. Accordingly, we argue that when we are conducting education research, the African body should be (re)framed as a vessel imbued with distinctive memories of various traumas of colonialism and apartheid along with its resilience in regaining its balance from such perturbations. From this perspective, we emphasise the need of researchers to embrace the African body to enrich education in South Africa by engaging with the profound complexities of the South African context in which it finds itself.

## Impact of the neoliberal agenda on research in South Africa

Our main argument in this paper for a shift towards the phenomenology of the broken Africa body, demands an examination of, and direct confrontation with, the overarching neatly concealed philosophical neoliberal machinery that profoundly influences learning and teaching as well as research in South African universities today. Here we are referring specifically to the discernible entanglement of universities in the web of economic and social advancement. In the preceding decades we have witnessed how universities in South Africa (and globally) have emerged as conduits for the propagation of neoliberal-capitalist ideals (Koopman, 2019; Pinar, 2010, 2012, 2015). Scholars like Peters and Jandric (2018), Maistry (2019), and Koopman (2015, 2019), among many others, have described how educational researchers tend to relegate the research subject to a mere sequence of procedural steps

leading solely to data acquisition. This trend is evident in higher education research over the past two decades, because of the significant escalation in academic workloads and responsibilities. Additionally, in higher education the workload is further amplified by large classes, and the augmented pressures on scholars to achieve copious research outputs. These prescriptive benchmarks exert considerable strain on the culture of performance expected of South African academics since their work is now underscored in relation to a framework of performance metrics, wherein the sheer quantity of research outputs, as opposed to their substantive impact, assumes precedence as the paramount evaluative criterion.

However, it is discernible that such a culture, imposed upon academics, is, however inadvertently, diluting the core essence of research that has become an embodiment of the larger politics in higher education, through which education is construed from the perspective of economic and efficiency protocols (Koopman & Koopman, 2023; Maistry, 2019; Peters & Jandric, 2018). Maistry (2019) explained further how the very core ideals of neoliberalism place a vice on his own research and that of other education researchers, when he wrote that

surveillance machinery that monitors our performance, our research production. . . in somewhat problematic calendar year intervals. So, we might do it for this reason, for fear of being judged as performing below the expected norm. (p. 11)

This statement by Maistry, (see, too, Waghid, 2015) reveals the forms and structure of the surveillance happening in universities today because its performative role is reinforced through the government's funding formula for research outputs; for every one produced, the university receives a unit point that translates into a subsidy in monetary terms. As Waghid (2012) explained,

It seems as if more emphasis is placed on producing a large quantity of academic papers which often appear in local journals rather than the production of fewer papers in perhaps more reputable journals. From my conversations with colleagues, it does seem that academic rigour and caring supervision are waning and that research in the university has been pledged in advance to some utilitarian purpose. (p. 73)

The adage, publish or perish, has transitioned into a financial imperative; the primacy of quantity eclipses considerations of quality. Annual quantification of outputs, serving as a metric to gauge academic productivity, has spawned a neoliberal ethos that places an undue emphasis on volume that is secondary to quality and social value. For this reason, in a personal conversation with one of the leading and most productive scholars in education in South Africa, the first author was cautioned when welcomed to his new place of work, when he was told, "People here where we work, won't value you, they will value your productivity, so work smartly as I wish you all the success." When sharing this comment with a friend in the United States, the response was, "This curse is also [an]epidemic in the US, and much despised, and especially so at highly competitive universities, so please take it serious[ly]." This pervasive predilection, in ensnaring researchers, curtails their capacity for deep reflection on the educational landscape in South Africa. Furthermore, it stifles their ability to engage intimately with their research subjects and neglects the body in the process of

becoming. It involves the splitting of mind and body as well the splitting of reason from body and feelings. When this happens, we deny the body its place to speak. This temporal constraint, compounded by the exigency to perform, precipitates a cascading impact on what we publish especially in the area of postgraduate studies. The many toxic effects of this affect researchers and teachers, and also spill over onto the body of the student population, diminishing still further the quality of the educational experience.

This consequence manifests as a relegation of quality, scholarly rigor, and overarching impact, consigned to secondary considerations. This phenomenon unfolds as a by-product of the overarching culture of surveillance and control enveloping the academic sphere in South Africa. Maistry (2019), in his comprehensive exposition titled “(Re)counting the high cost of predatory publishing and the effect of a neoliberal performativity culture”, artfully elucidates the perils and pitfalls that academics who embrace the publish or perish ethos face in their professional trajectories. His discourse captures the lamentable repercussions that a neoliberal culture steeped in performativity can demand from academics, periodically yielding devastating consequences because of the attendant policies. Maistry (2019) wrote,

I want to emphasise how important this kind of nuanced understanding is because it is precisely a lack of this kind of understanding that may lead one to place one’s work in the wrong (dubious) place of predatory journals. (p. 11)

This statement captures the way in which academics find themselves under considerable duress to publish because a university’s ranking hinges on the volume of research outputs. Maistry highlights astutely that institutions with reduced autonomy tend to prioritise rankings rooted in prolific output, often at the expense of rigorous quality. Maistry’s first hand encounter, having subscribed to the publish or perish concept, serves as an exemplification of the adverse consequences in the neoliberal paradigm. This narrative possesses significant validity and ought to function as a caution for researchers on a broader scale. It also emphasises the harmful consequences of actively participating in extensive publishing in predatory journals. Thus, this neoliberal-capitalistic agenda to which universities in South Africa subscribe, encourages researchers to prioritise quantity over the substantial quality of scholarly contributions. This brings us to the question of which philosophical and theoretical perspectives exert their predominant influence over educational research in South Africa.

## The research subject as a “brain in a vat”

In the course of our examination of diverse national and international education journals for studies conducted in and by South African researchers, a conspicuous point emerged: most publications are entrenched in western philosophical and theoretical discourses. We observed the excessive reliance exhibited by South African education researchers on propositional and explanatory theories imported from European and western paradigms. This tendency warrants attention because of its implications for the quality of research outcomes. Propositional theoretical frameworks, although widely employed, inherently limit the flexibility available to researchers for presenting a comprehensive and precise depiction of the *reality* in

educational settings or in relation to the actual experiences of their research subjects. This limitation is attributed to the structured and inflexible nature intrinsic to propositional theories. Consequently, researchers find their exploration of the research subject significantly guided and constrained by these rigid theoretical perspectives. The work of prominent theorists like Bloom et al., (1956), who introduced Bloom's taxonomy, Gagne (1965), renowned for his formulation of the conditions of learning theory, Shulman (1986) and his pioneering notion of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), along with Bruner's (1990) seminal concept of knowledge scaffolding, Jean Piaget's (1975) influential theory on the cognitive development of children, among others, can be identified as examples of such propositional theoretical orientations.

In contrast, there exists another strand of research that draws heavily on explanatory theories, known for their greater adaptability and eclecticism in comparison to their propositional counterparts. These explanatory theories offer insights not only into the cognitive and social dimensions of learning but also into the emotional facets. Noteworthy is the scholarly engagement with constructivist thinkers such as Vygotsky (1962) and his conceptualisation of the zone of proximal development, Bandura (1977) and his elucidation of social learning, Gardner's (1983) proposition of the theory of multiple intelligences, and Dewey's (1938/2006) advocacy of progressive education promoting experiential learning, to name a few. However, critical evaluation underscores several concerns regarding the applicability of these theories. Primarily, the work of these theorists, while historically significant, has become somewhat outdated, leading to the emergence of supposedly incomplete or overly generalised representations of the lived realities of research subjects. Moreover, these theories inadequately address the nuanced lived experiences and daily realities of African individuals, thus potentially perpetuating cultural biases. Last, the prevalent emphasis on the mind in these theories aligns with the philosophical tradition of Descartes's mind-body dualism, overshadowing the embodied dimensions of human experiences.

To address these limitations and provide a robust, meticulous, and suitably accurate portrayal of research participants, there is an evident need for novel and contemporary philosophical and theoretical frameworks. Such frameworks should be derived from the actual lived experiences of participants, acknowledging the inextricable interplay of historical, cultural, and social factors that shape these experiences. A more holistic approach necessitates researchers encompassing the entirety of the participant's lived world, with a particular focus on the body, allowing the intertwined forces to serve as guiding elements in the research endeavour. This paradigm shift offers a promising avenue for producing research outcomes that align more closely with the complexities of lived realities and provide a more equitable representation of diverse cultural contexts. Therefore, William Pinar, who is described by many scholars as the leading curriculum scholar alive today, reasons that when researchers dismiss the fullness of the body, it is difficult to decode the nature of the historical subject as well as the true "character of reality itself." He observed, correctly, that a historical understanding not only unveils the inherent nature and "character of reality itself, but it also facilitates an introspective grasp of oneself as a historical entity" (2012, p. 127). This is because it is unmistakable that one's existence is deeply enmeshed in historical and societal

forces, a perspective resonating with Freire's (1970) notion of individuals as historical-social entities or Heidegger's (1967) view that we are historical beings. Drawing upon the insights of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (1962), we recognise that our past maintains an ever-present presence, threading through time's tapestry. This comprehension reshapes the perception that the living body, endowed with its subjective historical essence, functions as a repository of life's myriad events. Hence, it is reasonable to anticipate that educational researchers ought to perceive their research subjects not merely from an epistemological perspective, but also within the ambit of their relational and historical context. Our contention here rests on the observation that in recent decades, numerous South African education scholars have adopted a stance that undermines the intrinsic significance of the corporeal form or embodied knowledge. They tend to embrace an idealist or rationalist perspective regarding the manifestation of reality. This inclination bears resemblance to Descartes's correlationist and interactionist philosophical paradigms. Such frameworks, unfortunately, tend to marginalise the human body, prioritising the mechanistic facets of the mind. This often leads researchers to crude materialist reductions, inadvertently distorting their understanding of the research subject and, in the process, of education. This is because educational research in South Africa has become akin to perceiving the research subject as a mere "brain in a vat", as characterised by Barnacle (2009, p. 16). To delve deeper into the meaning behind the metaphorical "brain in a vat", we engage in a closer examination.

In the annals of philosophical thought, Descartes occupies a seminal role as the proponent of the reduction of human nature to a singular phenomenon—the mind. The term mind—in Latin, "mens", denotes the "self" or "person." This reveals a conception that isolates the self as a disembodied entity, detached from the historical, cultural, and social contexts—hence Descartes's idea of the human race as a cognitive race or *race cogito*. This isolationist outlook perceives the physiological brain as a mechanical apparatus governing bodily functions, relegating consciousness, reasoning, and suffering/trauma to a field separate from corporeal existence. This worldview likens the mind to a pilot and the body to a vessel and led to the term mind-body duality. Damasio (1994) explained this division, illustrating the schism between the tangible, divisible body and the intangible, indivisible mind when he wrote,

the abyssal separation between body and mind, between sizable, dimensioned, mechanically operated infinitely divisible body stuff, on the one hand, and the unsizable, undimensional, un-pushpullable, nondivisible mind-stuff; the suggestion that reasoning, and moral judgment, and the suffering that comes from physical pain or emotional upheaval might exist separately from the body. Specifically, the separation of the most refined operations of the mind from the structure and operation of a biological organism. (pp. 249–240)

Damasio's (1994) description above is explicated by Carman (2008) as a crude, mechanical perception, characterised by isolated pulleys and levers, each functioning as a distinct entity. Descartes's mechanistic interpretation relegating cognition to the mind, can be seen in many publications that push the body to the margins as a passive vessel. This perspective also circumvents the interaction between historical, cultural, social, and political dimensions,



perpetuating an inadequate representation of reality. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) contended, this reductionism obfuscates the intelligent situatedness of individuals in their world, presenting the individual as a world-less, incorporeal, mental realm. Such reduction ignores the complex interconnectedness of the body to its multifaceted dimensions. Descartes dismisses the historical, cultural, social, and political units of reality in which the body is located. In his philosophical tradition, how these units interact, their movements and effects on the human body are often ignored. In South Africa, these historical and cultural experiences, including the oppression endured during colonialism and apartheid, that significantly impacted individuals' consciousness and historicity, cannot be dismissed. This conceptual description subscribes to Descartes's famously mantra "*Cogito, ergo sum*" or "I think, therefore I am" and views the human being as a thinking being. Simply put, the human being is reduced to what Barnacle (2009) referred to as a "brain in a vat."

We go on to contest the idea of the research subject as a "brain in a vat" and discuss how the human being develops self-consciousness to show that intelligibility is not a function of the mind alone but a mind-body process in which both are deeply interconnected.

## The research subject as a "subjective conscious and bodily being"

Over the last few years as we studied diverse national and international education journals for studies conducted in and by South African researchers, a conspicuous picture emerged; most publications are entrenched in western philosophical, theoretical and methodological discourses. We also observed the use of propositional and explanatory theories that lean towards the Cartesian mind-body duality. Using propositional theoretical perspectives, on the one hand, gives researchers limited flexibility to offer a meticulously and accurate description of reality in the classroom or the lived reality of their research subjects. This is because propositional theories are very structured and inflexible in guiding the researcher in their examination of the research subject. Explanatory theories, on the other hand, although more flexible and eclectic, compared to propositional theories, provide an incomplete or an oversimplified and generalised account of the lived realities of the research subject. Each research participant is unique and lives in a diverse and dynamic context.

However, to give a robust, meticulous, and fairly accurate depiction of a research participant, what is needed are research perspectives that capture accurately the lived world of the research participant and that require researchers to allow the flow of the lived world of the participants, in particular the embodied lived world, and the inextricable forces, such as the historical, cultural, and social in which they are immersed to guide the study. Pinar (2012) reasoned that when a researcher dismisses the fullness of the body, it is difficult to decode the nature of the historical subject as well as the true "character of reality itself" (p. 127). He observed, correctly, that a historical understanding not only unveils the inherent nature and "character of reality itself" (p. 127), it also facilitates an introspective grasp of oneself as a historical entity. This is because it is unmistakable that one's existence is deeply enmeshed in historical and societal forces, a perspective that resonates with Freire's (1970) notion of

individuals as historical-social entities or Heidegger's (1967) view that we are historical beings. Our contention here rests on the observation that in recent decades, numerous South African education scholars have adopted a stance that undermines the intrinsic significance of the corporeal form or embodied knowledge. They tend to embrace an idealist or rationalist perspective regarding the manifestation of reality. This inclination bears resemblance to Descartes's correlationist and interactionist philosophical paradigms. Such frameworks, unfortunately, tend to dematerialise the human body in prioritising the mechanistic facets of the mind. This often leads researchers to crude materialist reductions, inadvertently distorting their understanding of the research subject and, in the process, of education. Put differently, Walkerdine (1988) argued that, when we separate mind and body, we are also splitting off emotions and all irrational, and arational, and non-rational aspects, like inclinations, dreams, desires, loves, and story lines of identity, memory, and history, etc. When we refer to irrational, we mean suffering that elicits emotions such as rage, anger, impatience, frustration, among others. Jaggar (1989) explained what emotions mean in the context of teaching and learning.

Emotions, then, are wrongly seen as necessarily passive or involuntary responses to the world. Rather, they are ways in which we engage actively and even construct the world. They have both mental and physical aspects, each of which conditions the other. (p. 153)

Jaggar asserted that a comprehensive understanding of the body may lead researchers to make more unconventional and critical observations about their research subjects. Given, the fact that education research in South Africa has become akin to a process of disembodiment of the research subject, the individual as discussed in the previous section is perceived as a mere "brain in a vat."

This perspective sidelines the interaction between and among historical, cultural, social, and political dimensions, perpetuating an inadequate representation of reality. Merleau-Ponty (1962) contended that this reductionism obfuscates the intelligent situatedness of individuals in their world in presenting the individual as a world-less, incorporeal, mental realm. In South Africa, the historical and cultural experiences, including the oppression endured during colonisation and apartheid, that significantly impact on individuals' consciousness and historicity, cannot be dismissed. To put this statement in the words of Chabani Manganyi (2019) "There is a black mode of being-in-the-world" (p. 99). He went on to describe blackness as a form of consciousness.

I have often said that the existential fact of the black body has also meant certain specific ways of relating to the world and to others. This relating may be understood as involving both positive and negative features. In its negative form we recognise the fact of a specific form of suffering—that of having been a colonised people. It stands to reason that part of our consciousness of being black people amounts to a mutual knowledge of this suffering at the hands of white domination. We must hasten to say that this consciousness of mutual suffering must not be mistaken for self-pity, for that

would be a tragedy. The black people share the experience of having been abused and exploited. This is part of our consciousness. (p. 21)

This above extract from Manganyi emphasises the existential reality of the African body that includes both positive and negative aspects of relating to the world and others. The negative aspect refers to the specific suffering experienced as a result of colonisation and apartheid and this, of course, speaks to white domination. This suffering is seen as a shared experience among colonised African people, contributing to their collective consciousness. However, Manganyi warned against mistaking this consciousness of mutual suffering for self-pity, in his emphasising the importance of recognising and acknowledging the historical abuse and exploitation endured by African communities. In other words, being-broken-in-the-world for Africans in their not being white, necessitates an understanding of the historical, cultural, and political conditions and their effect on being. Often our research overlooks this because the human being is reduced by his very own presuppositions to a “brain in a vat.”

Next, we contest the idea of the research subject as a “brain in a vat” to discuss how the human being develops self-consciousness to show that intelligibility is not a function of mind alone, but a mind-body process whose aspects are deeply interconnected and to be properly understood must be understood in context as a whole.

## **A brief review of contributions of scholars in the West to advancing education**

Over the span of the past six decades, select scholars have played a pivotal role in shaping and advancing the field of education on a global scale, with their endeavours deeply grounded in the phenomenological paradigm. An illustrative case can be seen in the work of Dwayne Huebner (1967). As documented by Pinar (2015), he stands out as one of the early proponents of infusing phenomenology into the field of curriculum studies. Similarly, Maxine Greene (1995) Huebner’s contemporary, drew significantly on phenomenology, notably existentialism, to underpin her explorations in educational philosophy. Central to Greene’s scholarship was the notion of a phenomenology of the imagination, from which she carved out her perspectives on learning as a landscape as expounded by Pinar and Irwin in their edited collection (2005), offering a way of delineating the intricacies of teaching and learning in the educational context of the United States.

The scholarly impetus led by figures like Huebner (1967) and Green (1995) reverberated throughout subsequent generations, influencing notable scholars such as William Pinar, Madeleine Grumet, and Janet Miller. This lineage flourished in Canada, where luminaries like Ted Aoki and Max van Manen championed and propelled phenomenological research in the educational domain, and were described emphatically by Pinar (2015) as having done so “forcefully” (p. 238). These scholars were deeply nourished by the profound contributions of phenomenological luminaries like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. Notably, Pinar characterised Max van Manen as the origin of the application of phenomenology to curriculum. Van Manen’s engagement with phenomenology stretched back to 1962 and was

nurtured by Ted Aoki's engagement with this philosophical framework during his pursuit of a PhD under Aoki's guidance (Pinar, 2015). Aoki's support for Van Manen's dissertation, in which he probed the application of phenomenology to curriculum studies, marks a seminal instance of scholarly collaboration.

A second wave of phenomenological scholars, operating within the intellectual legacy forged by their predecessors, emerged in the global north.<sup>2</sup> These second-generation thinkers, including William Reynolds who was mentored by Pinar and Grumet, endeavoured to carry the torch of phenomenological inquiry forward. Reynolds's doctoral thesis, eventually published as "Reading Curriculum Theory: The Development of a New Hermeneutics" (Pinar, 2015), exemplifies the generational continuity in the pursuit of phenomenological exploration. Notably, scholars like Margaret Hansburger, David Smith, and Walter Werner, who were nurtured by the pedagogical insights of Pinar and Aoki, espouse an existentialist point of view to dissect multifaceted aspects of education, spanning curriculum, policy dynamics, pedagogy, and other facets integral to the art of teaching and learning. These scholars have collectively amassed an extensive body of scholarly work, each offering a distinctive contribution to the field of education. An exemplar of this legacy is William Pinar, who made several contributions to the field of curriculum studies, acclaimed by Carson (in Pinar, 2015) as a leading curriculum scholar, thus lauding his enduring impact on the field. One such invaluable contribution to curriculum studies was Pinar's notion of *currere* or curriculum as a course to run that is often used by many decolonial and postcolonial curriculum scholars in South Africa.

The trajectory of phenomenological inquiry in education, catalysed by a succession of scholars, transcends temporal boundaries and geographical borders. These intellectuals, anchored in the phenomenological paradigm, have reshaped the contours of educational thought and practice indelibly through their incisive explorations, leaving a mark on the educational landscape. Carson (in Pinar, 2015) wrote in the foreword of Pinar's book entitled, *Experience as Lived: Knowledge, History, Alterity: The Selected works of William Pinar*

William Pinar is one of the major curriculum theorists of the past forty years. While he launched the reconceptualization of curriculum studies, subsequent events have shown that he has set the scholarly direction for the field in the 21st century. (p. i)

During a personal exchange with William Pinar, the first author of this paper once posed the question, "How can I advance the field of education in South Africa through research?" In response, Pinar offered a succinct directive in saying, "Allow your writing to flow from within." The term "from within" conveys the notion of tapping into personal, experiential reservoirs, as well as those of the research participants as the bedrock of the writing endeavour. It also refers to his historicity, culture and social world in which he was born and raised. This is because her inner world is a confluence of both mind and body. Such an understanding of who we are or our inner world, as asserted by Van Manen (in Pinar, 2015), matures into theory. Thus, when a researcher perceives the inner world and everyday lived

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2 We also refuse to capitalise global north as a purposeful de-centering of western hegemony.

experiences of her research participant as a reflective praxis, it culminates in a heightened self-awareness and a deeper comprehension of others.

We go on to discuss why there is a need to establish a phenomenological community of researchers in South Africa.

## Towards a phenomenology of the broken African body as a site for research

Phenomenological scholars such as Heidegger (1967), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Sartre (1955), among many others, have reframed human consciousness and being as inextricably linked to the surrounding world. As educational researchers strive to grasp the complexities of the individual in an ever-evolving cultural and social landscape, the phenomenological approach proves necessary. It was Heidegger (1967) and Sartre (1955) who raised the idea that a person's thinking and being cannot be separated from the social world in which they exist and Merleau-Ponty (1962) stressed the significance of the body thus leading existential psychologists to look towards phenomenology to develop new theories of who we are as individual selves. These scholars helped researchers look beyond the surface of what they consider to be normative action and behaviour and if educational researchers truly want to understand the individual who lives today in an even more culturally and socially mediated space, they need to transcend the narrow-minded construct of viewing the human being as a brain in a vat, as discussed above.

In contrast to objects and equipment, humans, according to Heidegger (1967), emerge as self-sufficient, cognisant entities endowed with conscious awareness of their temporal and spatial context. These sentient beings, uniquely equipped with a certain form of thought and intelligence, undergo shaping and influence from cultural constituents such as trees (objects) and hammers (equipment), alongside the social spheres they inhabit. Following Merleau-Ponty (1962) we are a form of life that engages with these kinds of bodies and sensory faculties in accord with our being. Within these domains, humans engage in reflection, fostering a sense of self-awareness intrinsically tied to consciousness. Unlike the deterministic modes of being embodied by objects and equipment, humans constitute complex amalgams of physical and mental facets imbued with relational attributes, ultimately rendering them comprehensible and self-aware (Heidegger, 1967). If this view holds true, it raises the question: How were the phenomenological ideas of these scholars implemented in apartheid South Africa?

In South Africa, the roots of phenomenology extend back to the 1960s, marked by the contributions of figures such as Oberholzer (1968), Nel (1968), Landman et al., (1975), and Van der Stoep (1969), all affiliated with the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria (see Koopman, 2018). Their engagement with phenomenology primarily centered on its potential as a pedagogical framework, aimed at breaking free from the prevailing mechanistic and instrumental paradigms that governed teaching and learning. However, this movement failed to gain traction because phenomenology inadvertently underpinned the apartheid-era

fundamental pedagogical doctrine that rejected enlightenment principles. Manganyi (2019), in the chapter titled *Postscripton "African time"* explains how the African body was misunderstood under apartheid. He cites a published piece by Engelbrecht in 1972, which he criticises vehemently.

The tempo of life of the Bantu is slow – slower than that of the white. You can see a different time in their bodily movements, in the things of their world, in their places, in the whole landscape in which they exist. There is a remarkable difference between the lived-time (vital time) of the white and the black. We find two different tempos in two different worlds. When these two different worlds and realities come into contact, distortion and dislocation of human time takes place. Since time is a fundamental dimension of human existence the total existential situation of the individual and society will also be affected and distorted. The life-world of the Bantu is totally different from that of the white. Integration and equation would not only create confusion but also psychological and social disturbances. On the other hand, the tempo of life of the Bantu is perhaps too slow for a too rapid development and change. (2019, p. 97)

This extract reflects a misrepresentation of being-black-in-the-world by perpetuating racial stereotypes and essentialising the experiences of different racial groups. Phenomenology, as a philosophical approach, seeks to understand human experiences from the perspective of the individuals themselves, without imposing preconceived notions or stereotypes on them. Also, the extract presents a simplistic and reductionist view of the lived experiences of Bantu people and white people, suggesting that their “tempo of life” is inherently different given their racial identities. By attributing characteristics such as a slower tempo of life to Bantu people and a faster tempo to white people, the extract, in lacking empirical evidence, oversimplifies the dynamics of interracial interactions. Furthermore, it reduces human experiences to racial categories and perpetuates stereotypes, rather than embracing the nuanced and individualised nature of lived experiences. In essence, Manganyi’s critique also highlights how the architects of phenomenology in apartheid-era South Africa failed to appreciate the rich diversity of African peoples’ ways of life.

In recent times, a renewed push by educational scholars like Christopher Stones, Hennie van der Mescht, and Thomas Groenewald, among others, has emerged. They aim to promote and propagate the use of phenomenology in education. We have undertaken a similar endeavour as evidenced by the body of work documented in Koopman (2017, 2018) and Koopman and Koopman (2020, 2023), among others. In line with our Western predecessors, we assert firmly that the multifaceted history of South Africa—shaped by over three centuries of colonialism, fifty years of apartheid, along with pervasive poverty and violence—demands a more pronounced integration in our research endeavours.

To advance the field of education, the establishment of phenomenological communities of practice is imperative. This perspective does not view the body merely as a vessel for the mind, but, rather, as an experiential entity deeply intertwined with the historical, cultural, social, and political fabric. For an enhanced understanding of the worlds inhabited by

educators and learners, researchers should turn their focus towards the bodily passions encompassing emotions such as love, hatred, excitement, enthusiasm, anger, rage, agitation, fear, joy, powerlessness, and desire. These visceral experiences must be positioned at the epicentre of research pursuits.

Hence, acknowledging both the sensory and passionate dimensions of the embodied self will emerge as an indispensable contemporary discourse, poised to propel the advancement of the educational landscape in South Africa. By affording due recognition to the lived experiences profoundly embedded in the African body, the trajectory of educational research is poised to create knowledge and scholarship more profound than what propositional and explanatory theories have to say about an individual.

Husserl (1989) elucidated the profound interconnection between the surrounding world (*Umwelt*) and the personal world. Yet, the nuanced exploration of this interconnectedness, particularly concerning the African body, at a sub-microscopic level, remains notably absent in the discourse of educational researchers in South Africa. This conceptualisation of the world, as delineated by Husserl, defies easy classification within the confines of natural science. Grollo (2022) put it thus:

. . . from a methodological point of view, the lifeworld is not about causality but about motivation. More precisely, 'the lifeworld is the natural world—in the attitude of natural life we are living functioning subjects.' Phenomenology, as 'apriori description,' has to address the life of the subject in order to identify 'the essential form of a surrounding world' and, correlatively, 'the essential form of personality.'

In line with the above extract, we are convinced that knowledge is not confined solely to books or the mind. Rather, it permeates every intricate aspect, imbued within the essence of the African body and its corporeal lived experiences.

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