



Exploring the Connotative and Denotative Meanings of “Social Distancing” and its Post-COVID-19 Impact on the Social Dynamics in Schools: A Conceptual Perspective

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Abstract

The emergence of COVID-19, a health scourge caused by the Novel coronavirus which was first identified and declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) in China in 2019, put the whole world on panic mode. Law makers the world over were faced with a duty to put plans in place to save lives and livelihoods of their countries and communities. This implies that they were expected to show leadership by putting together plans and policies that would ensure that lives were not lost and livelihoods i.e. jobs and other means of production were not affected by this outbreak. This paper acknowledges the different approaches which were adopted by the law makers and imposed on the citizens in a quest to flatten the curve of infections by this deadly virus. The approaches include handwashing with soap and water, hand sanitizing, avoiding shaking hands and hugging, and maintaining social distancing or physical distancing of at least 1, 5 metres. The focus of this paper is on the latter aspect and throughout this paper; “social distancing” will be used rather than its synonym (physical distancing) due to the fact that it has become a household word throughout the different phases that the world went through in the fight against the spread of the pandemic. This paper looks at the connotative and denotative meanings of social distancing and its long-term impact on the social dynamics of South African schools post COVID-19.

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

The writing-up of this paper begins with the acknowledgement of the fact that the outbreak of the Novel Coronavirus which

causes COVID-19 is an undisputed and bad reality that gripped the whole world. It is also evident that the impact of this pandemic will be felt in different aspects of



human life and existence for many years long after a vaccine to cure COVID-19 has been found. In support of the above view, Norrlöf (2020:1) indicates that COVID-19 is the most invasive global crisis in the post-war era that jeopardized all dimensions of human activity. The outbreak brought schools, churches, business entities, activities of governments, and social activities such as sports and entertainment to a halt. The presence of this pandemic was characterized by a myriad of finger-pointing and allegations of perceived failure by governments to deal decisively with it.

On the political front, fierce finger-pointing ensued between the United States of America (USA) with China, where the latter was accused of deliberately causing the Coronavirus and allowing it to spread to different parts of the world. In the process, (Norrlöf 2020:2) argued that the pandemic threatened USA hegemony in terms of both its capabilities and failure of its leadership to deal with it. This was viewed by scholars, political commentators, and policymakers as sheer abdication of responsibility by the US to deal with the COVID -19 crisis; by investing time and energy to defend its position as a super-power in the face of emerging powers which include China, India and Russia. While South Africa received praises from other developed countries of the world and the World Health Organization (WHO) for the manner that the country controlled the spread of the virus which could overwhelm the health department, it also had a fair share of criticism from within. Political parties and community interest groups took the SA government to court on several issues related to the control of the spread of the virus. The issues at the centre of the court cases against the state included the banning of the sale of alcohol and cigarettes, the imposition of a curfew and the deployment of police and soldiers to enforce the observance of safety protocols and

regulations. Aungo (2020) indicated that the enforced curfews deprived the people of their individual liberties and social urgency, and this was the central argument of the community interest groups that dragged the state to court. On the education front, the government was taken to court on the grounds that it deprived the learners an opportunity to receive meals which they could receive if schools were not closed.

The purpose of this paper is to critically look at the connotative and denotative meanings of social distancing, which is one major regulation that was proposed by the WHO to fight the spread of the deadly coronavirus. In carrying out this exercise, dictionary and contextual meanings of the afore-mentioned concepts will be provided to enable the reader to gain a clear understanding of their meanings and application in this paper. After clarifying the concepts, the paper will explore social distancing as a capitalist construct. The purpose of this aspect is to provide a platform to support or refute the idea that social distancing will have a long-lasting effect on the social dynamics in the education sector of South Africa long after the closure of the chapter on COVID-19. The concepts that will be clarified include connotative and denotative meaning, social distancing, and social dynamics.

Connotation and denotation are methods of describing the meanings of words, i.e. they acknowledge the fact that one word may carry more than one meaning depending on where (context) and how (syntax) the word is used. Connotation refers to the negative and positive associations that some words can portray or carry with them. Denotation, on the other hand, is the precise, literal definition of a word that one would find in a dictionary. Social distancing, according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, is the practice of maintaining a greater than usual physical distance from other people or of



avoiding direct contact with people or objects in public places during the outbreak of a contagious disease in order to minimize and reduce the transmission of infection. Social distancing is also referred to as physical distancing and its primary purpose is to ensure that during the prevalence of a pandemic, people from different households keep a safe space between themselves. The WHO recommended a distance of between 1,5 to 2 meters that people should observe in public spaces. Social dynamics is regarded as a branch of social physics that deals with the laws, forces, and phenomena of change in society. In the context of this paper, social dynamics focuses specifically on the changes that will take place in schools and the schooling system as a result of COVID-19.

THE ORIGINS OF THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL DISTANCE(ING)

According to Jary and Jary (1991) in Mishra and Majumdar (2020:221), social distance is a social science concept which refers to feelings or relations of aloofness and unapproachability, especially between members of different social strata. It is an age old concept that was made popular by Bogardus (1926) about a century ago in the USA and its chief significance was to maintain status between different groups of people as well as between persons. This concept morphed with time and became used as social distancing in the health sector; particularly during pandemics as a non-pharmaceutical health measure and this was inspired by practices during the Middle Ages (Mishra et al., 2020:225). The modern day social distancing emanated from research in the USA which was commissioned by then president George W. Bush out of his concern about bioterrorism after the September 11, 2001 (Lipton and Steinhauer, 2020:6). It later became part of the USA federal policy and used during the outbreak of the N1H1 influenza and

continued to be used across the USA and other countries including South Africa to fight the spread of COVID-19.

Mishra and Majumdar (2020:226) cautioned that a protracted adherence to social distancing may have, over and above the health gains, negative effects on the socio-cultural norms of societies. Some of the possible changes that could affect communities as a result of social distancing include gender relations in families, and schooling and working patterns which may go digital. This perception of social distance(ing) fits into both the denotative and connotative expressions which are associated with this construct and gives credence to the subject matter of this paper.

SOCIAL DISTANCING AS A CAPITALIST CONSTRUCT

Language is like a tool in the hands of a craftsman; the only instrument that humans proudly have for communication. Words are the building blocks of every language and in order for humans to communicate effectively; they need to master the art of arranging the words in a particular pattern to enable them to convey messages that contain meaning. In the context of this paper, social distancing is the central construct around which the argument of this paper will be centred. Social distancing is conceptualized in different ways by different scholars and social commentators. In the face of a pandemic like COVID-19, the Department of Health (DoH) presented its own meaning and application of the concept. This paper will draw from the works and perceptions of scholars such as Aungo (2020), Buchholz (2020), Grootes (2020), Mishra and Majumdar (2020), Kanji (2020), Naime (2020), Norrlöf (2020), Mansouri (2020), and Panayotakis (2020) to mention just a few.

As indicated above, social distancing means different things to different people. In the



hands of capitalists, as argued by Panayotakis (2020:1), it suggests a loosening of social ties, when in fact, the pleas that authorities and public health officials make on behalf of physical distancing appeal to such feelings of social solidarity as still exist in otherwise competitive and individualistic capitalist societies. Furthermore, Panayotakis (2020) views social distancing as an unaffordable luxury for the most underprivileged groups in rich and low-income countries alike. What this implies is that capitalism has the potential of eroding social ties through individualism which is the major defining feature of social distancing. Individualism is also a loaded concept which carries its own denotative and connotative meanings, thus making it subject to critical interpretation. Individualism discounts the presence of unity by advocating separatism on the basis of cultural, nationality, race and social orientation. It is in this area of human existence that the issue of social dynamics comes into play.

Capitalists as the owners of the means of production will always display an attitude of entrenched individualistic development and association. According to Kanji (2020), social distancing as an emergency public health protocol, is a misleading concept because what is being called for is physical withdrawal and it is better suited as a descriptor for business as usual under capitalism. In other words social distancing as a health protocol advances capitalist socialization by portraying humans as merely economic units of production and consumption rather than biological beings who are interdependent on one another for survival (Kanji 2020). On the other hand, (Buchholz 2020:2) argues that the practice of social distancing (fighting the coronavirus by simply changing where people are) casts people as the problem, rather than an unfettered and cutthroat capitalist political economy that has systematically

underdeveloped health care infrastructure and underproduced life-saving medical supplies and equipment for the purpose of minimizing costs and maximizing profits.

A capitalist orientation is also captured by Grootes (2020) in his reference to social distancing and the South African government's handling of issues related to the livelihoods of children from needy backgrounds during the lockdowns. Grootes (2020) unleashes a series of politically charged definitions of social distancing, informed by the resistance of provinces and schools to provide feeding to the learners during some phases of the lockdown. One of the definitions is that social distancing is the difference between the life led by people making decisions, and those who live with the consequences of those decisions. This definition is further unpacked to expose the fact that the social distance between those who are supposed to provide a service and those who receive it is important; and that if the distance is too great, the person providing the service fails to realise how important the service is to someone who has nothing (Grootes 2020). These definitions carry the literal but at the same time, a deeply philosophical conception of social distance(ing). Grootes' (2020) views are also supported by Naime (2020) who contends that the dynamics of oppression and privilege always place people in distance from each other...and in times of crisis (such as COVID-19), this distance becomes even bigger.

The lessons drawn from the characterization of social distancing as a capitalist construct in the midst of COVID-19 are summed up by Mansouri (2020), in the article titled *The socio-cultural implications of COVID-19*. He indicates the difference between physical distancing and social distancing; where physical distancing prevents social connectedness while social distancing presumes disconnectedness. In concert with Mansouri (2020), Naime



(2020) laments the disconnectedness that is advocated by social distancing as a strategy of the capitalists to dismantle people's solidarity that would enable them to dream of a different, more peaceful society. Capitalists use the outbreak of the virus as a strategy to advance their own agendas and they use social distancing for this purpose. Finally, Naime (2020) indicates that social distance may be a vital tactic in the here and now but it can't be a roadmap for the future. To this effect, (Aungo 2020) raised a red flag by referring to the adopted strategies of governments across the globe as quick fixes to deal with COVID-19. He suggested that sociologists, social anthropologists, and other social scientists need to critically analyse the trajectory and effects of the adopted confinement and social distancing models on society and households in the future. The statements by Naime (2020) and Aungo (2020) above will be tested in this paper as it sets out to assess the impact of the pandemic and social distancing in schools as a tactic to flatten the curve of the spread of the virus.

SOCIAL DISTANCING IN SCHOOLS

The term "social distancing" will be used in this article to refer "to measures being taken to restrict where and when people can gather in order to stop or slow the spread of infectious disease" (Minnesota Department of Health 2020:2). Social distancing has been hoisted as one of the most effective health protocols in curbing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a preventative measure that is most effective when coupled with other health measures like wearing face masks and regular washing or sanitising of hands. Despite being accepted in many countries across the globe, in some countries like the USA some groups like President Donald Trump's supporters have defied it (Baumer 2020). In South Africa, social distancing has been advocated since the first lockdown. The need for social distancing translated

into lack of physical space in schools where they suddenly did not have enough space for all their learners when they were expected to reopen in phases after the country's first lockdown. Schools had to resort to a rotational school model of attendance which was either bi-weekly, rotation according to specific days of the week or platooning (Department of Basic Education 2020).

As it stands currently, social distancing is a luxury for schools; some can afford it and have as many learners as possible depending on their level of affluence and space to accommodate learners that are socially distanced. This means that those schools have enough teachers to teach their learners and they have more contact time for their learners than schools that are poorly resourced. ROAPE (2020) contends that social distancing is a privilege, and we believe that schools that practise social distancing and still manage to have all their learners attending together without rotation are indeed privileged. The different ways in which schools are expected to practice social distancing confirm the disparities and inequalities that exist in the education system and they increase the social distance between the haves and have-nots.

Unknowingly, COVID-19 solved the problem of overcrowding in schools which had taken the Department of Basic Education (DBE) decades to solve because this directive was adhered to by schools to flatten the curve of the spread of COVID-19. According to Bolowana (2020), this solution came at a cost as schools lost valuable contact time as it proved to be ineffective. She further indicates that schools not only lost valuable time, but parts of the curriculum had to be trimmed in some instances to cater for the reduced contact time. The DBE has also 'socially distanced' the school curriculum content by taking some sections that were supposed to be taught in 2020 to the 2021



academic year (Business Tech 2020). Apart from its challenges with ineffectiveness and the loss of contact time, social and physical distancing have proven to be difficult to police.

Buchholz (2020) criticises social distancing for being "a practice of forced isolation and incapacitation" and for being an "ambitious prison-building project." He further contends that social distancing does not change anything except the position where they are. His assertion probably explains why it is difficult to police social distancing in schools: learners are products of families and families promote social interactions that are nurtured in the society, but departmental directives dictate that schools must enforce the opposite. Social distancing challenges the sociocultural norms and values of African societies as we know them today (UNESCO 2020) because learners are expected to minimise their emotional affinity to their friends in favour of the COVID-19 distancing protocols. It calls for learners to let go of their emotional connectedness to others during school hours so that transmissions of the virus do not take place but nothing is done to curb its spread after school and this gives an impression that schools are the sources of the virus whilst all the other places outside them are not.

In a capitalist country like South Africa, it is difficult to apply social distancing because capitalism has overcrowding through industrialization and urbanization that have overcrowding as a subsequent outcome. Therefore, the call for social distancing in schools contradicts the relations that have been built in families over a long period. Teachers and other staff members are given the daunting task of breaking the social bonds during school hours only to be rekindled when the learners get out of the school premises and reunite with their families and society in general. The learners are taught from their tender ages to be

warm to their siblings and friends (ubuntu: a quality that includes the essential human virtues of compassion and humanity) and the unprecedented COVID-19 directive encourages them to stay aloof and to avoid handshakes and hugs. Furthermore, learners are beings that are taught to be inter-reliant on one another for their survival (Kanji 2020). The proponents of the social distancing initiative firmly believe that the move is likely to delay the spread of the pandemic but Panayotakis (2020), on the other hand, strongly contends that its application magnifies the "erosion of social solidarity." This view is supported by Naime (2020) who aptly states, "I feel that I'm losing myself and my sense of belonging as the distance lengthens."

Overcrowding and shortage of textbooks in schools are some of South Africa's biggest educational challenges (eBizradio 2013; Hartley 2016). Social distancing solved the problem of overcrowding as we alluded to above, but the problem of textbooks remains unresolved. In some cases eight learners are expected to share one textbook (The Herald 2010) and the question of social distancing is a side issue when compared with the learners' immediate need to acquire knowledge. The protocol discourages any form of textbook sharing but the conditions that schools are faced with dictate that schools should turn a blind eye on COVID-19 and allow their learners to continue sharing the limited resources (textbooks). Stated differently, learners compromise their own safety and ignore physical distancing regulations to crowd around a single textbook in the name of knowledge acquisition (Keeka 2020).

In a bid to alleviate the work intensification faced by teachers in schools as they enforce social distancing, the DBE introduced a youth employment initiative that temporarily employed thousands of youths as education and general assistants. Key among their duties is to "assist the teacher



to manage behaviour in the classroom, maintain a safe, secure and clean classroom environment and to oversee learners out of the classroom and during lunch breaks as a way of promoting the COVID-19 standard operating procedures" (Mpumalanga Department of Education 2020). One other backlash of social distancing came from increasing the intervals at which learners would receive their meals due to the school rotation system. Practically, a learner who attended school twice per week could only be at school twice due to the distances that they often have to travel to school as they could not, under normal circumstances, be expected to go to school only for their meals.

SOCIAL DISTANCING FEEDS INTO THE CAPITALIST CONSTRUCT OF SCHOOL 'SORTING PARADIGM'

Another capitalist construct that could, post COVID-19, get traction and influence the social dynamics in education is the school sorting paradigm. According to Slavin (1996:1), an American psychologist who studied educational and academic issues, sorting paradigm refers to the sorting of children into different categories which include high, middle and low ability groups; gifted and special education groups. Like social distancing in this paper, the school sorting paradigm construct is conceptualized in different ways by different scholars. At a philosophical level, it is also burdened with a heritage of contradicting usages and of inconclusive and interminable discussions. On one hand, sorting paradigm manifests itself in the grouping and subsequent labelling of schools as either functional or dysfunctional based on the academic performance of the learners; while on the other, the schools are sorted on the basis of their socio-economic backgrounds. Schools that belong to the latter category would find it difficult to cope with the challenges of COVID-19. Characteristics of these schools include, but

are not limited to: poor sanitation, no running water, poor and inadequate infrastructure, low learner enrolments, and under extreme circumstances, high learner enrolments.

The response of schools and their observance of the safety protocols which were prescribed by the WHO and the DBE are dependent of the characteristics outlined above. Schools that had adequate sanitation, uninterrupted supply of water and electricity, and enough classrooms sailed smoothly in their observance of the safety protocols compared to their counterparts on the other extreme. Low and high learner enrolments equally posed challenges on the observance of the safety protocols. A school with a low enrolment would not find it difficult to observe social distancing in the classrooms and on the school grounds. Furthermore, all the learners would be able to come to school every day instead of having to share the school days. The downside is that low enrolment schools cannot financially complement the Department. Schools need to provide some of the basic necessities such as toilet paper, sanitary pads for the girls, sanitizers when they run out of supplies, etc. Schools with high enrolments may not have challenges providing for themselves some of the basics that the department may not provide because they receive more money than low enrolment schools. However, social distancing the learners in the classrooms and on the school grounds is their major challenge.

In the midst of all the above, the schools are sorted accordingly and what emerges out of their sorting into low and high enrolment, sufficient and insufficient supply of resources such as water and electricity, classrooms and toilets, is channelling of more resources to one category of schools than the other. This is another example of social distancing where the schools are distanced from each other on the basis of



the characteristics outlined above. The emergence of Dinaledi schools in the early 2000s is another typical example of school sorting paradigm which resulted from the social distancing of learners and schools on the basis of differences in academic performance. The social distancing of schools, learners and teachers as a result of any of the characteristics indicated above and the subsequent unequal attention given to the schools has the potential of causing anxiety and making some of the schools to feel neglected. This foregoing reflects on the complexity of school sorting paradigm and how it feeds the social distancing construct. The sorting paradigm is both a policy and a political imperative which goes against the grain of the liberation struggle and a classical Marxist position. Furthermore, it perpetuates social inequalities; it is materialization and a testimony of cultural hegemony, a concept which originated with the Marxist theorist and revolutionary Antonio Gramsci.

THEMES WHICH EMERGED FROM THE CAPITALIST ORIENTATION OF SOCIAL DISTANCING AND THEIR EFFECT ON THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN THE POST COVID-19 ERA

The purpose of this part of the paper is to extract the main ideas (themes) which emerged from the characterization of social distancing as a capitalist construct and to analyse them with the purpose of establishing how they will feature in the post COVID-19 era. It is important to note that the focus of this paper is on social distancing (denotatively and connotatively) in the education sector and how the practice of this non- pharmaceutical health protocol will influence the direction of education long after COVID-19 has been defeated. The following themes and ideas emerged from the arguments on social distancing as a tool in the hands of capitalists and also from the school sorting

paradigm which also carried some attributes of capitalism:

- Social distancing leads to the loosening of social ties at the expense of social solidarity; promotes individualistic development and association, compromises the interdependence of people by regarding them as economic units of production and consumption, and exalts individualism which discounts the presence of unity by advocating separatism on the basis of cultural, nationality, race and social orientation. Four subthemes have been put together because all of them emphasize one idea of interdependence between people; which is under threat of being dismantled and eroded in the post-COVID-19 era.

Strauss (2020:1) shared experiences of both teachers and learners who were distanced from each other; in some cases permanently due to the closure of schools during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The temporality and permanence of the social distancing depended largely on the family backgrounds of the different learners. It is important at this point to reiterate what we indicated earlier in the article that COVID-19 exposed some socio-political and economic disparities which would remain if there were no pandemic.

- Social distancing is portrayed as an unaffordable luxury for the underprivileged groups in rich and low income backgrounds.
- Finally, social distancing portrays people as the problem in the fight in order to disguise the underperformance of the capitalists in developing healthcare infrastructure and provision of life-saving supplies.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

To sum up the arguments set out above, it is important to indicate that human beings have a biologically coded social affinity device (my own scientifically coined



concept) that unconsciously determines the physical distance between them; both connotatively and denotatively. A sense of urgency for a particular need for their (humans) livelihood will inevitably determine the distance between them. Any attempt to regulate the distance between them may have a polarizing socio-political effect on the social dynamics that hold between the concerned groups (individuals and authorities).

This paper established that social distancing; also referred to as physical distancing is a plausible construct.

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