

## Editorial

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## Education in transition: Navigating challenges and embracing opportunities

In an era characterised by rapid and unceasing technological advancement, shifting socio-political landscapes, and the recent unparalleled impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the South African education system finds itself at a critical juncture. This crossroads is marked by uncertainty, and devoid of a reassuring and predefined route map or discernible destination. In acknowledgement of the multifaceted dynamics, both apparent and latent, within the educational sphere, Freud aptly described our field as the “impossible profession” (as quoted in Bibby, 2011, p. 4). Thus, as we stand at this juncture contemplating the future, the only certainty in education is the pervasive presence of uncertainty.

This juncture forces us to critically assess the relevance and value of the work of great scholars such as Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Jerome Bruner, among others. Even though the contributions of these cognitive psychologists are by no means obsolete given that they offer valuable models and metaphors for understanding learning and developmental processes central to education, it is imperative to question the currency of their applicability in our rapidly evolving educational landscape. For instance, to what extent can we steadfastly rely on Piaget’s developmental stages and their influence on educational structure and content, or on the socio-cultural psychology of Vygotsky and Bruner? It would seem that, despite the enduring appeal of their work, the modern educational milieu has transformed into a multi-

layered interplay between technological tools, web-based applications, the advent of generative artificial intelligence, and the indeterminate advancements of the future—all within the context of intriguing governmental agendas for their citizenry. One wonders how those esteemed scholars might respond today, to the demands of this impossible profession.

This rapid technological progress, as elucidated by Suleyman and Bhaskar in their 2023 publication, *The Coming Wave*, offers a glimpse into the potential direction of education with a focus on the creation of artificial intelligence with human capabilities. Education remains inseparably linked to the accelerating pace of technological advancements and the shifting socio-political landscapes. The Covid-19 pandemic ushered in an unprecedentedly profound transformation in education as teachers, learners, academics, and students, both locally and globally, found themselves immersed in a psychological and intellectual maelstrom. From within the prevailing confusion and uncertainty regarding the trajectory of education, a fundamental question arises: “How do we maintain the vibrancy and vitality of the educational core—the classroom?”

The insights and perspectives presented in this special issue provide a deeper understanding of the forces shaping education in South Africa, and offer innovative solutions to harness the opportunities presented during this transitional moment. From this perspective, the South African Education Research Association (SAERA) is delighted to present a collection of 13 papers in this special issue, all addressing the theme of “Education in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities.” In these papers, readers will discover an array of insights—a testament to the unwavering commitment of South African researchers dedicated to understanding and shaping the future of education in our rapidly evolving world.

Botha, de Jager, and Evans, in the introductory article titled “21st-Century South African teachers in turbulent educational waters,” look into the challenges faced by teachers in the South African education system, their impact on teachers’ well-being, and how they contribute to high attrition rates in the profession. They employ a combination of the force field model and the PERMA model to examine various contextual, institutional, programmatic, and biographical factors influencing teachers’ well-being. Their study identifies factors such as inadequate compensation, resource shortages, and workload as pushing teachers away from the profession, whereas factors like career stability, feeling valued, and a passion for teaching attract them to it.

In his article titled “Re-thinking support for university teachers in the context of decolonising higher education: The role of academic developers,” Mgwashu explores the challenges and strategies faced by the Centre for Teaching and Learning’s Directorate at North-West University, which was formed by merging three historically distinct South African higher education institutions. He emphasises the need for responsive academic development support for both students and academic staff to achieve equity, not equality, of outcomes. Drawing from New Literacy Studies, the author argues for a restructured work strategy that considers the situational and contextual nature of academic support in the context of decolonising higher education.

Feldman and Czerniewicz framed their article in Archer's (2007, 2012) nuanced concepts of agency to show how educators working within the structures of very stratified educational contexts negotiate their educational projects. It is noteworthy that this takes place as the rules are being rewritten, given that the socio-technical systems in which they teach were—and are—being transformed in ways that are not yet fully understood.

Sasere and Makhasane ventured into addressing the importance of integrating information communication technology (ICT) into education in South Africa, and highlight a deficiency in educators' ICT skills despite policy support and financial backing. Their article recommends reforming teacher professional development policies, adopting a decentralised approach to ICT training, and conducting comprehensive ICT needs assessments for more effective, needs-based school-based teacher professional development training.

Johns and Sayed's main argument in their paper sheds light on public–private partnership schools in the Western Cape, South Africa, where management is outsourced to school operating partners, and continuing professional development for teachers primarily focuses on teaching and learning—potentially at the expense of a broader and more holistic notion of education. They recommend a deeper understanding of how these schools provide professional development support and its impact on the provision of equitable and high-quality education.

Msomi and Akhurst, in their thought-provoking article, highlight the political nature of community psychology in South Africa, emphasising the need to identify and challenge the power dynamics that perpetuate privilege and discrimination in education. They address persistent inequality in the country's education system and present a Foucauldian analysis of prominent discourses in the basic education sector. The paper calls for the consideration of counter-discourses, and a collective emancipatory perspective to promote transformative educational change to address the challenges facing South African youth.

Nyamupangedengu and her colleagues discuss the appropriation of the social media platform, WhatsApp, as a significant teaching tool for mathematics and science pre-service teacher educators during the Covid-19 lockdown at a South African university. Drawing from connectivism learning theory, they explore how WhatsApp was used in certain teaching and learning arrangements. Their findings reveal that although WhatsApp provided benefits such as ease of access and use, it also had constraints related to students' smartphone access and intrusion into the personal lives of educators.

Gcabashe explored business studies teachers' understandings and implementation of flipped learning in technology-enhanced classrooms. His findings reveal that some teachers do not fully understand and implement flipped learning. Therefore, he recommends that teachers undergo in-service training to orientate themselves to novel teaching methods such as flipped learning.

In her case study, Palte examines the negative impact of incorporating generic skills into a curriculum that is rooted in disciplinary expertise, using the Visual Art Curriculum and

Assessment Policy Statement for Grades 10 to 12. She argues that even though infusing generic skills like visual literacy and critical thinking into the curriculum may have noble objectives, they can obscure the specific requirements needed by students, teachers, and exam setters.

Hlatshwayo and Ngcobo used an intersectional lens to investigate the experiences of Black women academics in a South African research-intensive university. Their study found that many of these academics entered higher education as “accidental academics” due to their unique pathways, and it underscores the significance of formal and informal mentoring in helping Black women academics access, navigate, and succeed in university settings. Their paper concludes by advocating for well-structured mentoring systems in higher education to support Black women academics’ access, presence, and sense of belonging in academia.

In preparing prospective teachers for diverse teaching spaces, Mosito explored the effectiveness of a responsive teacher education curriculum underscoring the importance of addressing the needs of a diverse learner population. Her paper focuses on student teachers’ experiences of curriculum reforms towards inclusive education at one university in South Africa. Her findings highlight that an approach where student teachers are positioned as knowledge collaborators leads to a more meaningful appropriation of aspects of the curriculum related to inclusive education.

Winberg, Garraway, and Wright’s review addresses the application of change laboratories (CLs) as problem-solving initiatives in the African context, providing valuable insights into their use and impact. The findings suggest that CLs in Africa not only contribute to understanding the efficacy of this methodology but also play a significant role in addressing global societal challenges.

The final article, by Ajayi and Luckay, investigates the impact of digitisation on art education in Nigeria. The authors draw on the scholarly work of van Dijk’s (2005) resource and appropriation theory to examine trends and challenges related to the availability, accessibility, and usability of digital teaching and learning tools. Their findings highlight the role of technological literacy in guiding fine and applied arts academics to enhance digital usage and access for teaching and learning, and suggest the need for curriculum planners to develop policies that promote technological literacy in art education to meet global needs.

The authors of this special issue, therefore, by carefully addressing the theme of “Education in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities,” invite us all to revisit our understandings and dispositions towards our profession, and to honour scholarly conversation seeking what is educationally desirable and possible for the students we serve.

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