

Editorial

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This Special Issue of the *Journal of Education* marks the tenth anniversary of the founding of the South African Education Research Association (SAERA). It appears also, not unrelatedly, as South Africa commemorates 30 years of democracy. Against this background, it is entirely appropriate that we refer to the words of Nelson Mandela about education that many of us have heard many times. “Education”, he said, “is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” As members of the broad social sciences community, however, it is equally if not more important for us to recall the caution of one of the twentieth century’s foremost sociologists, Pierre Bourdieu, who, with Jean-Claude Passeron (1990), wrote many insightful analyses about how the process of education works. Bourdieu helped us understand how deeply implicated schooling, perhaps one of the most important socialisation experiences in education, is in reproducing inequality. So here is where we as South Africans stand: 30 years of democracy have yielded undoubted benefits and almost all our children enjoy the right of access to school. Unequal funding, one of the hallmarks of apartheid education, has been equalised. South African children’s right to education, however, has been compromised by old and new inequalities. The spectre of racial profiling hangs heavily over their learning experience in both its quality and its substance. Disconcertingly, new social class forces have created deep fissures between the 10% of children who are economically and socially privileged and the large majority who lead precarious lives and attend what can only be described as fragile schools in poorly resourced and poorly managed townships and informal settlements. Significantly, and we need to work carefully with this fact, these

privileged children are no longer only white. We have complex social dynamics in play regarding experiences related to education.

How the scholarly community of educationalists, against the backdrop of what has been achieved and what remains to be attended to, manages the task of looking back is not straightforward but we try to do this in this Special Issue. We recognise that much more needs to be done. Formally, SAERA's main aim is to professionalise, give coherence to, and improve educational research and academic work in South Africa. In practice, for many of its members, it is much more than this. It is to take what Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) and the whole rich community of scholars, theorists, and commentators who have thought, and continue to do so, about the extraordinary power of education for individuals and communities, in both its negative and positive ways, and to develop praxes which might play a role in remedying inequality in South Africa. In reflecting on the articles in this Special Issue we consider the extent to which education is emerging as a powerful weapon towards just change.

The conceptual framing to which we sought to give expression in this Special Issue is that of a critical and reflective look at our educational scholarship and how it has responded to the specific and distinct challenges of South African education, and how it has illuminated issues of educational development and educational justice elsewhere in the world. Is the scholarship in general opening new conceptual and theoretical ideas 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?

The contribution of Carol Bertram and Maureen Robinson, both founding members of SAERA, titled "The contribution of the South African Education Research Association to strengthening education research in South Africa" opens, appropriately, this Special Issue. They analyse documents and present information about interviews from their lived, first-hand, insider perspective on the establishment of SAERA. The article, against this background, seeks to ensure that the history of the association is not lost to current and future members. They point to a dearth of published research about such associations and the roles and contributions they make. This helps us to situate and juxtapose this Special Issue with SAERA's valuable collected papers, edited by Flanagan et al., (1994) that commemorate the 21st anniversary of the Kenton Education Association that preceded SAERA. Bertram and Robinson's article serves to contextualise and commemorate SAERA's place in the scholarly landscape.

As they reflect on SAERA's contribution to strengthening education research in South Africa, Bertram and Robinson (along with others) raise questions about whether and how education research itself and researchers in this field of applied science and practical engagement ought to be engaging with the public sphere. The embeddedness of testing in education and other social phenomena such as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, members' workplace demands, and the politics of publishing are also considered in this article. Notably, Bertram and Robinson also raise questions about how SAERA has, specifically with policy makers, taken its work into the public sphere. One might, however,

also ask to what extent SAERA has engaged with other education stakeholders such as teachers, teacher unions, student organisations, and other civil society ones.

One of the core mechanisms for deepening its engagement is SAERA's notion of a Special Interest Group (SIG) that is common to cognate associations around the world. Aside from noting that SIGs enhance opportunities for focused discussion, Bertram and Robinson also offer general reflections on how some have been more successful than others. This anticipates other articles in this Special Issue; the second to the fifth offer critical insights into two SIGs that have been among the more successful with respect to activities, events, and output. In the second article, members of the Curriculum SIG (CSSIG), Lesley le Grange, Petro du Preez, Suriamurthee Maistry, Shan Simmonds, Sylvan Blignaut, Labby Ramrathan, and Chris Reddy document the becoming of the CSSIG in "The becoming of a Curriculum Studies special Interest Group: Reactive, interactive and intra-active complicated conversations." They describe it as a relational entity or an assemblage with a national and transnational character. In this article they show how personal histories and trajectories come together to create a discursive space at a particular moment in time. When we sent out this contribution for review it elicited spirited responses from the reviewers who raised a range of questions that we decided would produce, for this Special Issue, the reflective register that a commemorative issue should invite. We decided to include two reviews in this Special Issue so that the debate, in its vigour, would not remain restricted to the authors and the reviewers so we asked the latter to expand the already substantial comments they had made into self-standing contributions. Unfortunately, since one of them was unable to do, Michael Samuel's review, "The quest for magnanimity: Tensions and paradoxes A rejoinder to the article 'The becoming of a Curriculum Studies Special Interest Group: Reactive, interactive and intra-active complicated conversations'" stands alone. He delivered what we offer here and, it was, as should be noted, peer-reviewed. One of the reviewers noted that the author "raises significant criticisms regarding the structure and ideological underpinnings of a Curriculum Studies Special Interest Group in SAERA." This critique centred on "the paradox of advocating for openness and inclusivity while simultaneously enacting a form of exclusion against traditional, classical or other approaches to curriculum studies." We offered the authors of the article, Le Grange et al., the opportunity to respond to Samuel's review. This they did in a rejoinder, "Let the conversations continue: A rejoinder to the review 'The quest for magnanimity: Tensions and paradoxes'" that we did not send out for review. Together, the three pieces, the article, the review, and the rejoinder to this, illustrate robust scholarly work. The article and the rejoinder indicate intense personal connections that enable these CSSIG members to pursue vigorous intellectual and research collaboration. With the inclusion of all three pieces, we aimed to make this Special Issue productive, provocative, and generative and we hope to have instituted a new practice.

The theme of assemblages is picked up in the contribution of Kathleen Jane Pithouse-Morgan, Inba Naicker, Daisy Pillay, and Linda van Laren in "Imaginative, embodied scholarly assemblages': A poetic analysis of the Self-Reflexive Methodologies Special Interest Group scholarship" in which they revisit special issues edited by this SIG. In this way they engage with the intersection of the SIG and the *Journal of Education* in responding to

challenges in education as well as illuminating issues of educational development and justice. In the process they seek to show the compounding impact of SIG activities and of the *Journal of Education* and illustrate how cohesive, coherent, and inclusive academic and research identities are established in education. They point out that these developments do not simply happen; they take hard work.

In the sixth article, “Social justice in community music and music education: Praxial musicking”, Ronel de Villiers and Esmari Oellermann elaborate on social justice in relation to community music-making and music education and argue that musicking offers us “a practical vehicle for community musicians and music educators through which social justice principles can be advanced.” This article is the only one that deals with building educational bridges between schools and communities. While these authors argue strongly for using music education as a mechanism to nurture social justice, they acknowledge how significantly socio-economic and political barriers act as limitations to what education can achieve.

In the seventh article, “Potholes in the academy: Navigating toxic academic practices in South Africa”, Marcina Singh reflects on academic knowledge production. Singh raises important questions about the capacity that exists in our institutions to develop the next generation of researchers in the context of the neoliberal policy that frames the conditions of knowledge production.

Undoubtedly, the issue of educational theorising, practice, and teaching—decolonisation—is one that galvanised students’ protest and this Special Issue includes two articles that engage with this phenomenon. The eighth and ninth articles are responses to the issue of decolonisation.

In “Towards a phenomenology of the broken [South] African body as the site for research in education”, Oscar Koopman and Karen Koopman invite engagement with dominant positivist research methodologies. These, they argue, are abstracted from our lived experiences and our corporeal realities and self-understandings. Their contribution, “Towards a phenomenology of the broken body as a site for research in education” is an invitation for us to think about subjectivity in embodied ways. Joanne Hardman, in “Decolonising pedagogy: A critical engagement with debates in the university in South Africa”, draws significantly on established theory in psychology, pedagogy, and philosophy and makes a compelling argument for how this work can be read to enable us to teach in decolonial ways.

Finally, this issue includes a piece that we felt would stretch our definitions of what constitutes scholarship beyond its usual parameters. It could be described as critical commentary in that it provides insights into the broad thinking of three education researchers who have been recognised by the National Research Foundation as having made an exceptional contribution to the field. The value of “On becoming and being an A-rated researcher: Conversations with South African A-rated scholars in education” by Labby Ramrathan, Tohida Cassim, and Indran Pather, lies in grounding the scholarly biography

against an academic context that is largely determined by bibliometric markers of what is valuable. It is, in this sense, a provocation.

Together the articles and commentary in this Special Issue demonstrate that SAERA has gone a long way towards achieving its aims. At the same time, it can rest assured that its reason for existing has not yet vanished. Work towards enhancing the coherence and improving educational research and academic work to foster social justice and reduce inequalities in South Africa remains paramount.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the President of SAERA, Professor Labby Ramrathan, for asking us to undertake the important task of overseeing the publication of this Special Issue. We would not have been able to do this without the vigilance and assuring presence of Rosemarie Milburn, the Managing Editor. Our deep gratitude goes to an exceptionally responsive, supportive, and marvellously eagle-eyed editorial team—Moirra Richards and Ann Smith, copy editors, and John Richards, typesetter—at the *Journal of Education* for helping us bring this Special Issue to a conclusion.

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