

Editorial: Reflecting on best practice in diverse education milieus – modifying the education wheel

KOBUS MAREE
kobus.maree@up.ac.za

The first issue of *PiE* for 2009 is the first general issue of the year. As usual, the interested reader will encounter a fascinating compilation of national, international, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary contributions. Individually, these contributions represent the fruits of months, if not years, of dedication and application in different research contexts. Collectively, they provide an imposing collage of perspectives on twenty-first century educational reality. Crafting their distinctive contributions with enthusiasm and sensitivity, and locating themselves in a predominantly qualitative research tradition, the authors produce a set of discussions (and follow-up discussions) that jointly help us understand and appreciate modern-day educational processes. The authors focus on a number of pressing contemporary research developments that span the range of educational investigation.

Seen against the backdrop of the release of the results of the country's first outcomes-based national Grade 12 examination, and the numerous debates that ensued on questions such as those listed below, the contributions in this issue will provide much for educators locally and further afield to ponder:

- Were the results 'acceptable'?
- Can the results be compared with the results of previous years?
- Has there been any real improvement since the advent of democracy?
- Is it still the (largely black) rural and township sector that is being disadvantaged through inferior education in terms of inadequate provision of textbooks and learner support material, a high percentage of teachers who are not suitably qualified to teach their subjects, inadequate access to the internet, and so on?
- How can we help teachers improve their classroom practice?
- How will these results affect achievements at tertiary level?
- How will these results impact on (un-)employment levels?
- What is the longer-term predictive value of these examinations? Will tertiary institutions have to cope with a generation of learners who lack training in the three Rs?
- Will learners who passed Grade 12 in an outcomes-based education environment go on to achieve better results at tertiary level than their predecessors? Universities across South Africa have time and again expressed their concern about the academic quality of the students produced by the schooling system.

The contributors have individually and collectively succeeded in identifying hiatuses in the literature and in addressing these hiatuses successfully. As *PiE* prides itself on being a channel of critical inquiry rather than advocacy writing, we, the editors, encourage critical voices to stimulate debate on important issues. We do not expect clear-cut, uniform 'answers' to all the questions raised in this issue. Quite the contrary: we expect readers to make up their own minds on these and other matters. After all, we are aware that the contributions stem from the authors' own perspectives, which are, of necessity, bound in a unique location, time, and space.

Once again, the contributions are diverse and based on research conducted by colleagues attached to different institutions in South Africa and abroad. Since the journal is committed to the publication of contributions by black scholars, we are particularly gratified by the emergence of a

significant number of younger black authors, and we would like to reiterate our invitation to established and emerging researchers to use *PiE* as a publication forum.

What can the reader expect in this issue?

The notion of ‘new’ or ‘non-traditional’ students is a fairly novel concept in South Africa, and, understandably, South African institutions of higher learning are grappling with ways of dealing with the challenge of accommodating these students in a way that will lead to the optimal development of their potential. In the lead article, ‘*New students’ in South African higher education: institutional culture, student performance and the challenge of democratisation*’, Michael Cross confirms that South African universities are currently confronted with this challenge, and he adds that most highly developed countries are also having to deal with the increasing enrolment of so-called ‘new students’ from disadvantaged milieus. These are specifically students who are less prepared for the requirements of the traditional university culture. What exacerbates the situation is the increasing pressure to respond to this challenge in terms of a moral system that demands justice, equality and solidarity, and, at the same time, the pressure to acknowledge post- and neo-liberal discourses that emphasise competence, accomplishment, competition and individualism. Cross explains how these universities are handling the problem of ‘new student’ intake and, more particularly, how they are dealing with these students’ often inadequate achievement. This is, *par excellence*, a challenge that demands the attention of all stakeholders faced with the conundrum of managing inadequate achievement in a way that simultaneously reduces unemployment.

Globally, countries are reporting major challenges with the formulation and implementation of a religious education curriculum. In 2003, South African Education Minister, Kader Asmal, introduced the National Policy on Religion and Education with the support of all the major religious groupings and other sectors of the community in the country. More particularly, Asmal announced that “[t]he policy restates the need for children to be educated about religions, in an impartial and fair way, so that they can be better informed about these. Intolerance and prejudice are most often the result of misinformation and propaganda, and we must ensure our children are properly informed about the different religions of our country. We have developed age-appropriate outcomes for each of the Grades, and this will form part of the compulsory and examinable Life Orientation programme” (Asmal, 2003, p. 1). Despite this, schools in South Africa have experienced problems in achieving religious education outcomes acceptable to all citizens. Against this background, Sookrajh and McClouds’ article, *Contesting spaces for implementation: (im)possibilities of Religious Education curriculum policy for secondary schools in Malawi*, is particularly relevant. The authors review ‘spaces of contest’ (areas of conflict) in the formulation and execution of the religious education curriculum in Malawi and, to this end, draw on their research on the dual-mode Religious Education (RE) curriculum policy for secondary schools in Malawi. On the basis of interviews with leaders of nationally organised faith communities in Malawi and on their understanding of the dual-mode RE curriculum policy change, the authors use public theology as their preferred analytical and theoretical framework. The impact of differing opinions on curriculum policy change and the implications of such differing opinions for implementing the RE curriculum are discussed with insight, adding to the growing body of knowledge in the field. A must-read for all academics working in the field of religious education.

All researchers, at some stage or another, are required to conduct research in a researcher-unfriendly environment. In other words, they are called on to deal with the challenge of negative respondent or participant attitudes. The third article, *A researcher’s experience in navigating the murky terrain of doing research in South Africa’s transforming schools*, arose from author Bongani Bantwini’s experience of the ‘unpleasant attitudes’ shown by primary school teachers towards research in general and his inquiry in particular during a study conducted in selected schools in the Eastern Cape province. A number of respondents refused to participate in the survey, and some teachers withdrew from the research after initially agreeing to take part. Bantwini’s research re-

vealed that these teachers' reluctance to participate was mainly caused by their fear of their limited knowledge of the issues under investigation and their misguided notion of research. Novice and seasoned researchers alike can learn from (and enjoy) this interesting discourse.

"How do international doctoral students in the 'West' make the decision to return home when their studies are completed? Upon return, what types of re-adaptation problems do they face?" Most supervisors (and, indeed, doctoral students) are often confronted with these and related questions. In the fourth article, *Scholarly transitions: finding Eden in the academic periphery?*, Julie Mathews-Aydinli answers these questions. She is particularly interested in establishing whether these students are able to engage fully with the international academic community or whether they suffer from a form of 'exile-from-Eden' syndrome (Geertz, 1983, 159). By analysing the responses of Turkish scholars of foreign language education and applied linguistics, the author arrives at some interesting findings. Appropriately, she cautions against some western supervisors' inclination to identify non-native English-speaking international graduate students (or scholars) in terms of their national identity above anything else. She also cautions against attributing transition and re-adaptation problems to geographical differences only. This is a timely reminder to all of us involved in scholarly activities, irrespective of context, not to allow bias, in whatever form, to cloud our perceptions or actions when we interface with international students.

In article five, *The doctoral thesis and supervision: the student perspective*, Kiguwa and Langa argue that the doctoral thesis constitutes a negotiation of the supervision relationship as well as mastery and skill in participating in a specific community of practice. The authors discuss two models of supervision, namely, the technical rationality model (with its emphasis on the technical aspects of supervision) and the negotiated order model (with its emphasis on the negotiation of the supervision process). Focusing on the idiosyncratic challenges and experiences they themselves experienced as doctoral candidates, and discussing the significance of these experiences for cultivating professional selfhood, Kiguwa and Langa conclude that the mastery of one's 'community of practice' constitutes a significant part of a broader process of 'enculturation' that signals the beginning and not the end of active participation in the broader discursive community. This should be compulsory reading material for all supervisors and supervisees.

Fifteen years into South Africa's new democracy, Grade 12 results continue to attract wide attention, and Grade 12 pass rates are still unacceptably low. The 2008 pass rate was 62.5%, and only 20.2% of the learners achieved the minimum pass required for entry to undergraduate study at a university or university of technology (Pandor, 2008). Pandor (2008) explains: "This is because, despite the encouraging evidence of schools that are working to increase success, there are many schools that persistently under-perform". In the sixth and seventh contributions, the authors deal with these and related issues. In article six, *Teacher clusters in South Africa: opportunities and constraints for teacher development and change*, Jita and Ndlangane present the results of a case study on teacher professional development in South Africa. They state that teacher clusters are increasingly used in the place of traditional approaches to professional development in order to help teachers build their professional knowledge and modify their classroom practices. They contend that it is the interactions among (science) teachers, coupled with relationships of trust and identity, and not only the existence of these structures (clusters), that facilitate opportunities for effective professional development and make clusters an attractive vehicle for challenging and changing teachers' professional insight and practice. Although the authors concede that much work still needs to be done before there can be any degree of certainty on what constitutes successful clustering among science teachers, preliminary results suggest that the notion of teacher clusters is a viable concept that can impact positively on the standard and outcomes of teaching.

In article seven, *Preparing students to teach in and for diverse contexts: a learning to teach approach*, Amin and Ramathan present a case study on the implementation of a novel approach to teaching practice, placing diverse contexts at the centre of a programme design at an institution of higher education. First-year students and (sets of) tutors were involved in four intervention phases: a) understanding contextual diversity, b) visiting diverse contexts, c) making context-appropriate

resources, and d) engaging in micro-teaching practice. Whereas the study findings suggest that the goals of the programme were achieved (the student teachers displayed a willingness to teach in schools that differed from their own schools; their visits generated a positive attitude among them to poorly resourced schools; and lessons prepared by most of the students were aimed at accommodating contextual differences), the gains were offset by the students' technical approach to context and to lesson planning. What is particularly pleasing about articles six and seven is the demonstration of the authors' willingness to try novel approaches to teaching in diverse contexts and their refusal to view their research data narrowly.

In the last of the articles, *The 'nuts and bolts' of prior learning assessment in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria*, Julia Motaung enquires whether the implementation of recognition of prior learning (RPL), which was introduced to address issues of social justice, has achieved its stated outcomes of increasing the participation rate of historically disadvantaged groups in higher education and improving the knowledge and skills base of the workforce to enable global competitiveness. Motaung concludes that while much has been done at macro-level to ensure RPL in all the faculties of the University of Pretoria, policy intentions have neither lived up to expectations in terms of the actual practice in the Faculty of Education nor in terms of the expectations of the beneficiaries of RPL. In fact, in the above faculty between 2003 and 2006, the RPL system benefitted only a small number of persons who did not fall within SAQA's target group. The time has perhaps come to reconceptualise the entire notion of RPL and negotiate ways of implementing this well-intended strategy more satisfactorily.

Controversy is a fact of life, and South Africa, in particular, is no stranger to it and to major role players' inability/unwillingness to resolve contentious issues in an emotionally intelligent manner through deliberation. In the lead conversation piece, *Education for responsible citizenship*, Yusef Waghid shows how reflection is used in university classroom pedagogy to prompt students to become responsible citizens in post-apartheid South Africa. With specific reference to three recent incidents in South Africa — the alleged racist practices at a university, the Minister of Education's proposed introduction of a pledge of allegiance in public schools, and xenophobic attacks on foreigners — he argues that controversy can be dealt with through deliberation, particularly if students are simultaneously exhorted to have compassion for vulnerable others. *PiE* is proud to have been afforded the opportunity to publish this powerful think-piece at this vital juncture in South Africa's fledgling democracy.

South Africans have become accustomed to the release of disturbing results such as those of the PIRLS study (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Foy, 2007), which corroborate the findings of other researchers (Fleisch, 2008; Horne, 2007) that South African learners are lagging far behind their counterparts in terms of language skills. I am therefore pleased when a contribution that covers language literacy, language skills and reading ability is accepted for publication. South African secondary and tertiary institutions of learning continue to experience unacceptably high levels of student dropout, and countering this phenomenon is justifiably high on the agenda of South African academics and educationists. Our concluding conversation, *Transitional influences on early adolescents' reading development*, by Cecilia du Toit and Cecilia Bouwer, is published primarily for its currency in this particular domain and should consequently be read in the context of the high dropout rates. The authors explore the influence of transitional factors on the reading practices of Grade 8 learners in their progression from primary to secondary school and conclude that the emotional, social and physical turmoil many early adolescents experience at this time may have a negative impact on their advanced reading development. Because of the all-too-common upheavals in South African society, the findings contained in this contribution warrant wide dissemination. Too often, teachers and teaching authorities fail to grasp the full impact of such upheavals on adolescents emotionally, cognitively and conatively, in both the short- and the long-term.

The New Year has brought with it a number of changes. Sadly, after serving as editorial secretary for eight years, Ms Renette Keet has left us to take up a post in the private sector. Readers of the journal will no doubt join me in thanking Renette for her excellent work over so many years.

We will miss her effervescent smile and willingness to help at all times. In her place, we welcome Ms Moipone Williams. who, we are sure, will soon demonstrate that she is a more than worthy replacement.

Observant readers will have noticed a number of changes to the *PiE* layout. Firstly, we have changed the cover page to give the journal a more professional appearance. Secondly, we have moved the table of contents to the back page in keeping with the style followed by most journals globally. Thirdly, we have eliminated all blank pages in an attempt to save space and, in so doing, counter spiralling publication costs. Lastly, we have updated our author guidelines to reflect current publication practice and to keep readers informed about such developments. I wish to thank Ms Erna Kinsey (our newly appointed publication editor) for her help in making these changes and to wish her a long and happy stay with the team.

We have appointed Dr Cecilia du Toit and Dr Carol van der Westhuizen as copy editors to ensure that *PiE* remains at the forefront of education publication at home and abroad. We also welcome them to the *PiE* team.

We are proud to announce that *PiE* is now accessible online and that authors are welcome to submit their manuscripts either online (www.perspectivesineducation.co.za; just follow the simple instructions) or by email. This is an exciting step that positions the journal more strategically in the 21st century. Likewise, we are looking at the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) guidelines on 'open access' and the 'green route' and will report back to you soon.

I once again call on researchers and academics to submit contributions in order to stimulate debate and advance scholarship on education in South Africa and to help us expand the existing network of scholars in South Africa, in the SADC region and elsewhere in the world. If you have suggestions on making the journal even more useful to our readership, I invite you to contact the *PiE* office (kobus.maree@up.ac.za). Enjoy reading the current issue and remember to send in your manuscripts!

In conclusion, I realise that reviewing manuscripts is a selfless task undertaken by those who have at heart the interests of colleagues, the journal, and the scholarly community at large. I accordingly extend a sincere word of thanks to everyone who reviewed articles for *PiE* during the past year. Your support is greatly appreciated.

References

- Asmal K 2003. *Statement by the Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, MP*, at the GCIS media briefings, Cape Town, 11 September 2003. Retrieved from <http://www.pmg.org.za/docs/2003/appendices/030911educbriefdoc.htm> on 09 January 2009.
- Fleisch B 2008. *Primary education in crisis*. Cape Town: Juta.
- Geertz C 1983. *Local knowledge*. New York: Basic.
- Horne T 2007. *A comparative study: The language proficiency (English) and numerical skills of elite matriculants and presumptions and questions about affirmative action and ensuing actions*. Alberton: Horne & Horne.
- Mullis IVS, Martin MO, Kennedy AM & Foy P 2007. *Progress in international reading literacy study. Pirls 2006 report*. Lynch School of Education, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts: TIMMS & PIRLS International Study Centre. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA).
- Pandor N 2008. *Statement by Mrs Naledi Pandor MP, Minister of Education, on the release of the 2008 national senior certificate examination results*. Sol Plaatje House, Pretoria. 31 December 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2008/08123015151001.htm> on 31 December 2008.

Kobus Maree, a C1-rated researcher, is the editor of *Perspectives in Education* and the *South African Journal of Psychology*.