

Editorial introduction

The story of changing education realities in the 21st century: Familiar themes, same relevance!

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The fourth issue of *PiE* for 2008 is the second general issue of the year. As always, the reader will find in this issue an interesting compilation of national, international, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary contributions that provide a compelling lens through which to view (post-) modern-day educational reality. Constructing their contributions with passion and care, and locating themselves in qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method research traditions, the authors have produced a set of discourses that collectively help us gain insight into educational processes. In this issue, the focus is on current research developments across the spectrum of educational investigation. Building on topics previously treated in *PiE*, one contribution considers ways of extending the development of teachers in rural education. Two authors consider how beginner readers learn to read in Setswana and English while another author considers the issue of literacy learning in Limpopo. One contribution deals with the effects of parent-child mediated learning experience interaction on young children's cognitive development and another with the controversial issue of how to promote transformation in the South African higher education sector. Linking up with an article in the 2002 guest issue of *PiE*, two authors advocate the achievement of academic excellence through higher order cognition in an African language. In another contribution, two KwaZulu-Natal colleagues investigate how novice educators perceive the teacher education programme proposed by the Norms and Standards for Educators. In a thought-provoking conversation piece on the efficiency of method, the author challenges established ways of thinking, acting, seeing and imagining. An international perspective is given on ways of providing career counselling to at-risk students. Seen against the backdrop of the writing of the country's first outcomes-based national Grade 12 examination, these contributions will provide much food for thought for educators locally and globally in the 21st century.

Readers will no doubt agree that the contributors have succeeded in identifying gaps in the literature and in addressing these gaps in a scholarly manner. Regular readers will be aware that *PiE* prides itself on being a conduit of critical inquiry and not of advocacy writing. Because we encourage critical voices to stimulate debate on important issues, do not expect clear-cut 'answers' to all the questions posed. Instead, expect to be required to make up your own mind

on matters under discussion. After all, the contributions were written from the authors' own perspectives, bound as they were in time and space.

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 proud of the current author spread and would like to re-extend our invitation to established and emerging researchers to use *PiE* as a publication forum.

The results of the recent *PIRLS* study (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Foy, 2007) corroborate the views of other researchers (Fleisch, 2008; Horne, 2007) that South African learners lag far behind their counterparts in terms of language skills. I am consequently pleased that several articles in this issue cover language literacy, language skills and reading ability either directly or indirectly. As in many other countries around the world, South Africa is experiencing unacceptably high levels of student dropout, and countering this phenomenon is justifiably high on the agenda of South African academics and educationists. Improving the language skills of South Africans at all levels, starting at home, is non-negotiable.

If South Africa is to stand any chance of achieving a university enrolment ratio of 40%: 30%: 30% in the humanities; business and commerce; and science, engineering, and technology respectively (Pandor, 2008) by 2010, career counselling as strategic support for all students at all levels will have to be embraced by all stakeholders. There is no denying the significance of career counselling (or guidance) as a major contributing factor to success at school, university and, eventually, one's career and life itself. Against this background, the lead article in this issue by renowned scholar Charles Chen is particularly apt. In his contribution, *Career guidance for at-risk students via social learning*, Chen confirms that students at risk of dropping out of high school encounter major challenges in their school-to-school and school-to-work transitions. He looks closely at the possibility of helping at-risk students at all levels face transitions more successfully through more effective career guidance. He acknowledges that the prevention of high school dropout requires a comprehensive and systematic helping approach. Writing from a social learning approach, he looks at some major risk factors affecting students. In order to improve throughput rates at all educational levels, career counselling should include strategies to help students stand a better chance of achieving success and completing their studies. South Africa is faced with the further challenge of securing a more equitable pass rate across the races.

Fourteen years into the new democracy, South African institutions of higher education are still contending with the effects of apartheid policies. In the second contribution, *Steering the South African higher education sector towards transformation*, Isaac Ntshoe and Pierre de Villiers look at how funding is used to steer the public higher education sector towards meeting the social, political and economic imperatives of post-1994 South Africa. The authors argue that the funding framework influenced the direction of higher education after 1994, and that funding mechanisms promote the public as well as the private dimensions of higher education. They hold that previous funding mechanisms in South African higher education were linked to the policy of separate development, which resulted in inequalities along racial lines. Concluding that the current funding framework in some ways attempts to redress past imbalances and inequities in the higher education sector, the authors contend that government needs also to create a framework for markets to form partnerships with government to address the current skills shortages. An important read for all academics interested in transformation in higher education in South Africa.

The notion of mediated learning experience (MLE) dates back many years. Curiously, though, few educators seem willing or able to apply the time-honoured MLE principles in their classrooms. In the third article, *The effects of parent-child Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) interaction on young children's cognitive development*, Christina Russell, Zaytoon

Amod and Lesley Rosenthal investigate the effect of parent-child MLE interaction on cognitive development in early childhood. The MLE interactions of 14 parents with their preschool children in the contexts of free play and structured tasks were measured, and the children were assessed on their manifest cognitive performance and learning potential. The authors found a significant correlation between the parents' MLE and the children's optimal performance and cognitive modifiability. The parents' MLE during play interactions appeared to have more impact than their MLE during structured tasks. The authors consequently questioned the role of play and playfulness when mediating young children's learning experiences. I leave it up to readers to read the surprising conclusion and decide for themselves about the possible merits or demerits of parent-child mediated learning experience (MLE) interaction on young children's cognitive development.

In the fourth article, *Achieving academic excellence through higher-order cognition in an African language: Students researching 'Small Talk' in Sesotho sa Leboa*, Esther Ramani and Michael Joseph continue a line of inquiry that was first explored in 2002 in a special issue of *PiE* on multilingual education (Ramani & Joseph, 2002) where the authors examined the thinking behind a proposed dual-medium degree (in Sesotho sa Leboa and English) at the University of Limpopo (at the time the University of the North). The authors speculate on the experience of learning facilitation since 2003 when the BA degree in Contemporary English and Multilingual Studies (BA CEMS) was first introduced. They discuss the curricular structure of the degree and analyse how students researched 'small talk' in a first-year module taught in Sesotho sa Leboa. Although the focus is on the situation at the University of Limpopo, the findings have significance for other higher education institutions in developed and developing countries alike.

Any research on ways of improving the language skills of learners warrants the attention of serious educators. In the fifth article, *Learning to read Setswana and English: Cross-language transference of letter knowledge, phonological awareness and word reading skills*, Olemme Lekgoko and Heather Winskel examine how beginner readers learn to read Setswana and English and surmise about the possibility of cross-language transference of skills between these two languages. Whereas letter knowledge in Setswana (which the pupils learnt a year before they learnt to read English) did not predict any cross-language reading of English or Setswana words, letter knowledge in English turned out to be a good predictor across and within language of word and pseudoword reading. The implications for the teaching of reading are discussed. This article, which underscores the importance of systematic and focused support to beginner readers, assumes special importance in the light of the results of multiple studies that highlight the dismal situation with regard to language teaching at training institutions in South Africa (referred to above).

In Article 6, *Developing teachers for rural education? Reflecting on the 2nd KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education teacher development conference*, Vitallis Chikoko reflects on key themes that emerged from a recent teacher development conference 'Developing Teachers for Rural Education'. These themes include the concepts 'rural' and 'rural education' in the South African context; the schism between being a practitioner and an academic; and the teacher as leader of learning. The author employed a multimethod data collection and analysis approach and concluded that 'rurality' is a complicated term that can best be understood by looking at particular contexts. The notion of 'rural education' is challenged, and the authors propose the term 'education in rural settings' instead. They conclude that successful teacher development revolves around positioning the teacher as 'leader of learning'. Reading the article, I was impressed by the implicit appeal to stakeholders to look at teacher development holistically.

In the last article in this issue, *Novice educators' perceptions of the teacher education programme proposed by the Norms and Standards for Educators*, the husband and wife team of Duduzile Sibaya and Patrick Sibaya argue that the new teacher education model that includes

competences and educator roles has significantly changed teacher preparation programmes. The main aim of their study was to determine how novice educators perceived the new teacher education programme (whether it was adequate). The novice educators perceived the programme as inadequate mainly because they thought it failed to prepare them adequately for the teaching profession. All researchers involved in teacher training will benefit from reading this article – if only for the reminder to reflect on and adapt their programmes constantly.

In the lead conversation piece, *The productivity of method*, Lesley Le Grange argues that method can never be 'neutral' or 'innocent' – it must be productive, and it must be performed and creative. He contends that 'method' does not merely embody reality (the world) but actually alters and restructures it. Instead of trying to answer questions about the essence of 'method', he asks questions and stimulates a dialogue that can bring about new insights. Because of the high premium *PiE* places on bringing something new and innovative to educational debates, we had no hesitation in accepting the contribution on the grounds of its currency in the 21 century. After all, our chances to survive these days depend to a far greater extent on our ability to think, act, see and visualise in a different way than on our ability to accept 'truths' as absolute and incontestable. The ability to read between the lines will help the reader gain a lot from this powerful think-piece!

In the context of Education Minister Naledi Pandor's (2007) remarks about the importance of helping adults to read, write and calculate, our second conversation piece, *Literacy learning in Limpopo – a multilingual environment*, by Lilian Cherian and Cecilia du Toit, has special significance. These colleagues report on their research on the development of a multilingual literacy learning software programme for adult learners in rural Limpopo. Attitudinal and metacognitive findings suggest that the learners in the study (predominantly female and Sepedi mother tongue speakers) were keen to become literate through the medium of English for personal advancement and improved interethnic communication. This article has particular significance for academics working in the field of adult basic education in South Africa. In a country that has over 14 million illiterate persons, the research warrants replication in many other areas as well. Collaborative research between various stakeholders working in this field seems inevitable and desirable.

Finally, we are proud to present Jonathan Jansen's review of the book *Opening the doors of learning: Changing schools in South Africa* by Pam Christie. Arguably the leading educationist in South Africa, Jansen presents a review that can serve as a model for all reviewers in the field of education. He praises the author as one of a very few scholars who dare "to take theoretical abstractions of the sociology of education and communicate them in a [way that is] simple and accessible ... without diluting the original meanings of such work", but he also expresses regret about her "timidity of analysis when it comes to the politics of education".

I am pleased to announce that we are at an advanced stage in the process of going online. *PiE* should be accessible online early next year if no further hitches occur. This is an exciting step that will help position the journal even more strategically in the 21st century. Likewise, we are looking at the Academy of Science of South Africa's (ASSAf) guidelines on 'open access' and the 'green' route and will report back to you in due course.

I end by once again inviting you to submit contributions to stimulate debate and advance scholarship on education in South Africa. Help us expand the existing network of scholars in South Africa, in the SADC region and elsewhere in the world. If you have suggestions about 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.

Lastly: I realise that reviewing manuscripts is a selfless task undertaken by those who have the interests of colleagues, the journal and the scholarly community at large at heart. I

accordingly extend a sincere word of thanks to everyone who reviewed articles for *PiE* during the past year.

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