

## Book Review

### *Teaching in and beyond pandemic times (2021)* edited by Jonathan D Jansen and Theola Farmer-Phillips

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### Professionals in pandemia: Our reimagined new world

In "*Essays 2003–2020: Languages of Truth*" Salman Rushdie (2021) unapologetically celebrated the potential of stories as catalysts for nourishing the imagination. He suggested that, as adults, we lose some of the awe children have for repeated stories with which they fall in love.

I believe that books and stories we fall in love with make us who we are, or, not to claim too much, that the act of falling in love with a book or story changes us in some way, and the beloved tale becomes a part of our picture of the world, a part of the way in which we understand things and make judgments and choices in our daily lives. (p. 4)

In this explanation, Rushdie suggested that stories are a way of creating a reading of our world. They are simultaneously an evocative, philosophical, and educative agent. Readers see themselves co-constructing images not only of the characters that float in the pages; they are concurrently re-reading their own lived and experienced past and present selves, along with imagining their future selves. The reader is also making critical judgments about what the storyteller has silenced or fashioned for the readers. Often, literary scholars are examined against their ability to read the text's social, cultural, and political times, not just read the unfolding plot or the messaging of the fictive characters of the story. These literary choices of the staging of the text, along with its structure and ambience also come to be reviewed in the act of reading the wor(l)d. For example, we often view skeptically a didactic narrator of the tales we read while open narratives invite us to create worlds within the world of the storyteller. The literary storyteller as wordsmith initiates the potential to question the vantage point, the authenticity, and the truth value of the personae and/or the narrators of the text, in their temporal and spatial orchestrations. A magical reality is created in the work of fictional writing that chooses to mask and celebrate the flow of ideas and events.

Jansen and Farmer-Philips's edited anthology expands the potential of stories by drawing not on imagined fictive spaces and personae but, instead, on sharing the lived experiences and reported emotional traumas and triumphs of teachers who had to negotiate sustaining schooling in the context of the rapidly changing social, health, and pedagogical landscape of the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic. We are gifted with the perspectives of many storytellers in the book. The editors have chosen to allow the stories of the teachers to speak for them. Yet, the anthology is not just about the teachers' stories; it examines, too, how we are reading the potential of our pandemic times as present and future educationalists. The anthology is about the kind of society we wish to establish prospectively since pandemia is with us now.

This anthology consciously claims that it is not "a standard academic book with dutiful reference to theory, literature reviews and methodology" (p. 3). The editors emphasise their orchestration as a capturing of the moment as a historical record. They invite a wider audience than just academics, teachers, educational researchers, and policymakers in this choice. I believe that the book's strength lies in its ability to provide a counter-narrative to a broader public myth that during the pandemic teachers were simply on an extended holiday break. We share the world of teachers negotiating their growing anxieties about colleagues and children who were being left behind and of systems being unresponsive to, and confused about, the situated realities of context. We hear the personal and professional traumas of inadequacy enter the world of those driven by passionate hope. We also hear the counterpoint of these selected teachers about the affordances of technology. We hear the voices of teachers who embraced the need for new etiquettes of engagement with technology and learn that not all new technological literacy practices necessarily encouraged learner cheating and fraudulent behaviours. The stories attempt to present a reinterpreted vision in the general public eye of the tellers of the tales while all the while, the realities of demise lurked in their midst.

The fashioned plan of the text unashamedly evokes a celebratory tone, one that applauds teachers as (s)heroes and activates hope and courage despite the vulnerability these teachers encountered. Underpinning the 65 stories of the anthology is the repetition of fear and anxiety along with possibility since teachers are presented (or have represented themselves) as active professional learners who embraced the uncertain times.

The curated stories constitute the response on social media to a request for teachers to respond to the questions of the researchers in the project upon which the book reports. This methodological strategy is not a departure from traditional narrative inquiry approaches in research since the editors declared their critical interest in asking a nationally diverse set of teachers to question what it is that we have learned from the pandemic. The researcher-editors defined the critical reflective research questions and encouraged the teacher-writers to refrain from straight-jacketing their responses. Who and what were the affordances and drawbacks in teachers' situated contexts across racial, geographic, class, and levels of teaching experience in different subject specialisations? Who were the collaborators and what were the obstacles on this journey? How were peers, managers, district officials, the

Departmental officers, learners, and parents implicated in the upheaval of previous rituals and habits of schooling? I will return presently to the matter of whose voices indeed came to be heard in this anthology.

The editors chose an organisational approach to selecting, reviewing, and categorising the texts they gathered from the social media platforms in clusters of themes: pressure; pedagogy; (p)reparation; pioneering; poverty; privilege; perspective; parents/parent-teachers; peer teaching; perseverance; and pastoral care. None of these suggest any deflection from the seminal research tradition of fieldwork analysis of life history and narrative inquiry that chooses to argue that stories activated in a research agenda are vehicles for examining a theoretical phenomenon. The analysis of the stories, as the editors argue, can take many forms. Instead of the imposition of an *a priori* theoretical framework, the research choice was to develop a bottom-up, data-driven, grounded theory approach to generate an interpretation from the fieldwork.

Following Polkinghorne (1995), the stories themselves constitute an assemblage of narratives paying attention to the voices from the field. The curators of the narratives in this anthology then reassembled the narratives into cognate thematic groups to develop synthetic theoretical insight across the data set. Accordingly, the narrated stories are loosely edited versions of what the teachers said. The editors, of course, attended to requests for anonymity and addressed matters of linguistic and stylistic preference. They declared that their concern was to use their editorial scissors only to sanitise overt Departmental bashing.

What percolates through the anthology's stories is the teachers' recurrent critique of the ambiguity that resulted from the Department of Education's repeated fluctuations of policy that created more turbulence and added to teachers' work stress. Teachers had to mediate the vacillating uncertainties of their managers and of the Departmental directives in relation to the learner and parent body. Consequently, teachers came to be misinterpreted as being under-prepared or disorganised. For example, most teachers, on pedagogical grounds, resisted the Department's directive to disregard existing Term Two curriculum content and concentrate on the expected Term Three scope of work. The Department suggested that the lost curriculum time in 2020 because of the closure of schools during the lockdown could be restored during the next academic year. Trying desperately not to appear officious, the Department suggested that these decisions could be made by *in situ* school management teams and their teachers. Teachers (at least those whose stories we hear here) believed the original curriculum to be the foundational basis of future curriculum learning, yet they were supposed to market the Departmental notion of "curriculum trimming" and "curriculum reorganisation" as a pragmatic strategy for managing in pandemic times.

Most stories reflect concerns about the long-term effect of such naïve thinking. Other commentary offered by some of the teachers suggests that this heralded an opportunity for major national curriculum policy rethinking of the overloaded current school curriculum. But this was a missed opportunity since the Department seemed intent on saving political face in defending its original curriculum reformulations. Much talk was directed to what must be jettisoned, but little was offered about anything that could be included to address the present

circumstances of learners, their parents, and their teachers. Some teachers saw this as an acknowledgement by the Department that their policy statement with its overloaded curriculum needed overhauling. But was the Department ready to make such courageous decisions? Were contextual realities indeed being acknowledged in the new official choices?

Amin and Mahabeer (forthcoming) have detailed their critique of the paradoxical messaging that Departmental structures infused into the system. A curriculum reconfiguration was being professed that was, seemingly, about recovery, renewal, equity, and inclusion. However, the *Draft framework for curriculum recovery plan policy: Post COVID-19* (Department of Basic Education, 2020) paid no attention to the demographic specificities of educational resource provisioning across the iniquitous schooling systems. The recovery plan seemed to paper over the wide divergences of capabilities such as the lack of expertise in management skills in differing schooling contexts, under-prepared and under-qualified teachers in the schooling system who lack the sophisticated curriculum design potential to adjust and reorganise the curriculum, the lack of technological and electrical infrastructure and resources along with the lack of physical conditions for alternative pedagogical curriculum design and monitoring. The one-size-fits-all Departmental approach, as Amin and Mahabeer (forthcoming) concluded, accentuated the economic stratification of schooling in a supposedly post-apartheid society.

I believe that these stories provide a repository of lessons learnt of what it means to teach (and learn) in times of uncertainty. If anything, the anthology accentuates the existing fault lines in the bifurcated two-tiered education system in which the education offered to the under-served and to the privileged is so different and remains unaddressed in national educational policy much less eradicated in any significant way through deliberate intervention. However, this anthology suggests that all teachers, irrespective of context, had to negotiate uncertainty and had to shift towards alternative pedagogies that disrupted their lives. Here, again, the effects of poverty and privilege endure as recurrent themes across the stories.

I suggest that this anthology aims towards a shared experience among all teachers in a levelling to the same challenges and opportunities in response to the pandemic times. If so, this book, then, suggests that a future professional space is possible via the sharing of experience among most teachers across diverse contexts. Could teachers in both privileged and poor schools collaborate prospectively? What would enable such a shared cooperation?

Some school managers whose writing appears in the book were conscious that the earlier stages of survival in the privacy of online classroom teaching and learning reinforced, potentially, insular teachers' old competitive and non-collaborative agendas. However, over time as the pandemic endured, the urgency for innovative and pragmatic pedagogies in short turn-around times, coupled with the emerging reliance on the affordances of technological resources, produced new collaborative endeavours. Increased efforts were being noted across departmental, institutional, regional, and national levels that resulted in a form of collaboration that bodes well for further on-site teacher professional development. After all, working together was just sensible.

This book allows its readers to enter the everyday world of teachers, learners, parents, and managers. It shows the divided workforce of those with expertise in pedagogo-technology and those who lack it. It opens a window into a world of schooling and its silo-ed spaces. It shows the extraordinary levels of fatigue of committed teachers. Yet, the book is also a severe critique of the curricular departmental and district official management structures whose spokespeople seemingly, although not in all cases, chose to be high-handed and disconnected rather than deeply supportive of teachers. Some of what was dictated to teachers was well-received in its provision of adequate scaffolding to activate alternative exemplars. Some teachers' stories reflected how district officers choose to support teachers in pragmatic ways. These teachers appreciated that the district officers were not simply agents of the national departmental structures who ensured adherence to the official national policies. These teachers saw the district officers as supporting schools in practical rather than in officious administrative ways. This bodes well for the future. However, these district interventions could also be interpreted as an indirect way of imposing the department's preferred sets of action. Were teachers indeed being regarded as autonomous professionals capable of self-managing their professional spaces? Were new modes of collective action being forged between schools, teachers, and the Departmental regulators? Were schools indeed significantly re-examining their previous patterns of home-school partnerships with the parents of their learners?

The editors advertised that this present anthology follows on the heels of the successful *Lessons under lockdown: Voice of South African children* (Jansen & O'Ryan, 2020) a book that captured the experiences of learners under the pandemic. They announced a forthcoming anthology that will focus specifically on parents under lockdown. This points to a recognition of how valuable stories are in activating the imagination. We need other imaginative works, too, about how teacher education and higher educator students, lecturers, and managers embraced the pandemic space. How does the autonomy of professional teachers become reimagined in this new tradition of nonfictional real stories about the realities of teaching and learning under trying times? And what of the voice of teacher unions in these times? Will the agenda shift away from myopic self-interested conditions of service? Are there new stories to tell about the self-in-service of the wider society? Are there new stories of Departmental officials re-examining their responsibilities as curriculum shapers?

This anthology concludes with a well-written synthesising chapter about ten lessons learnt from the varied conceptions of technology, the nature of teaching, the processing of curriculum policy and design, the need for collegiality, the aspirations for a post-pandemic era, for leadership and a broader interpretation of the role of schools as a social institution, and of teachers as frontline workers in reconstructing a reimagined society.

I believe that this book will appeal to many practising teachers. They will see themselves represented and valued. They will, perhaps, recognise that their actions and fears have not been in vain since someone heard them. However, I note, too, that, this book accentuates the technological divide in our unequal society. These stories represent those who contributed their lived experiences via the technology of social media.

Many voices in this anthology have not yet been heard across the diversity of contexts of the South African schooling system. What about the many silenced stories of those teachers who indeed abandoned hope and are perhaps waiting nostalgically for some return to a pre-pandemic world? Do the teachers of hope represent a significant majority or minority in the teacher professional spaces? Which contexts produce teachers who are resilient and hopeful? What enables them to withstand the pressures of performativity and of political panoptical surveillance? The rituals and routines of professional teaching are unlikely to remain the same in the future because of these disruptive pandemic times. How will departmental and all curriculum developers, as public intellectuals, make bold choices drawing on these resourceful stories that encompass both hope and abandonment? Some may have already capitulated. Yet, we all will have to live collectively in post-pandemia.

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