



## 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”*

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This reflective piece stems from a critical review of, or rejoinder to, “The becoming of a Curriculum Studies Special Interest Group: Reactive, interactive and intra-active complicated conversations.” The original article could be characterised as tracing the evolution of the South African Education Research Association (SAERA) from the perspective of examining the shifting agendas and activities of the Curriculum Studies Special Interest Group (CSSIG). My reflections here may be considered a way of highlighting some of the tensions and paradoxes that exist in any organisational development in relation to forging new identities, examining structures and governance, and accommodating the manifestation of varied ideological assumptions that co-exist in a growing national organisation. These tensions are neither signs of weakness of the SAERA organisation, nor evidence of a lack of academic rigour on the part of the authors in depicting the multiplicities of competing forces, nor a slur on the purpose of the authors of this article.

Section one of the article under discussion focuses on its value as an *organisational* commentary on the goals of promoting an open and all-encompassing approach. It notes the milestones of the organisation as it attempts to move from its conference-only format towards an intended more dialogical contested space promoted through the CSSIG structures.

Section two of the article explores the *theoretical tensions and paradoxes* inherent in the CSSIG. While the stated goals profess inclusivity, I raise questions about whether the CSSIG’s work is dominated by specific theoretical preferences that are implicitly favoured over traditional approaches and methodologies. The paradox of inclusivity is counterpoised by an approach that may inadvertently exclude more traditional, possibly rigid, or other approaches to Curriculum Studies.

Section three of the article celebrates the freedom of the methodological and representational choices about thinking *without* theory, thinking *with* theory and activating a process of *thinking differently*. Nevertheless, I expose the paradox that the article *critiques theoretically* the field of identity studies as being perhaps too rigid or trait-bound, yet the *practical methodological approach* adopted in the article draws (indirectly) from more recent approaches to recognising identities studies as consciously multi-disciplinary and polyglot. The field of identities studies (a plural), like Curriculum Studies, is complex and is evolving with new perspectives, for example, that expand beyond a focus on singular personality typologies and individualistic conceptions of identity towards an over-arching perspective on the importance of groups or organisational spaces in social life that stimulate new areas of socio-cultural and political analyses of identities studies in social spaces (Brown, 2020). The data presented as narrative vignettes of the core group members represent a form adopted by a branch of research on identities studies, namely, narrative research and life history approaches that were critiqued earlier. This methodological contradiction is apparent: it critiques that which it uses. I suggest, too, that the article lists a declared diverse scope of the CSSIG's activities, but it does not provide adequate representation of all the diverse perspectives within this range. Could this be considered a form of methodological silencing?

In this reflective piece, I make some concluding remarks on the value of the article as a sounding board for other SIGs and SAERA as an organisation, to enable some critical reflection on their own and related multi-dimensional research agendas.

## Shifting SAERA organisationally: Beyond conferencing only

The article is a welcome contribution to the agenda of the 10th SAERA anniversary special issue of the journal since it provides insights into the story of the organisation and its quest to develop a shared democratic space in which divergent researchers might present varied perspectives on selected fields of study. In a historical sense, the article represents the evolution of the organisation in its shifting away from being merely an annual conference assemblage towards becoming an organisation that activates research agendas on an ongoing dialogical elaboration outside the conference, and in many formal and informal spaces. Similarly, the building of the field of Curriculum Studies, like the organisation of SAERA itself, is not confined only to official spaces, and the article signals the varied scope of the field which may or may not be brought into the official realms of conference attendance and participation.

Over the ten-year history of the conference, SAERA has tended to be repetitive in its thematic foci, dominated by the shifting institutional local organising committee's intentions to document the organisation that not only foregrounds past and current research but signals the direction for future research action (see Appendix One). However, the conferences, too, have become performance spaces in which many flippant nods are made to sharing formulaic ways of reporting on research. The article shows why the CSSIG members were exploring alternative ways of contesting their habituated ways of presenting research such as defining a problem, identifying a theoretical perspective drawn from literature reviews, identifying a

methodology, and reporting on findings, and analysis leading to recommendations. The article is critical of whether this kind of performance was indeed promoting the dialogical, disruptive intentionality of the organisation, or the field of Curriculum Studies. At a meta-level, the article serves as a commentary on the discourses of the management of research productivity that steers the agendas of many academics. In so doing, the article is indirectly offering advice to the organisation about how not to become complicit with an agenda of productivity discourses that do not question the hallmarks and agenda of higher educational research that contributes to innovation, theoretically, contextually, and methodologically, and serves more socially responsible agendas.

The article should be understood against the backdrop of the organisation offering professional research spaces in which contested ideas can be presented, critiqued, and elaborated. Each of the threads of the tapestry that fashioned SAERA is valued by the executive leadership of the organisation since they have deliberately chosen to have the organisation woven from the ground up.<sup>1</sup> To this purpose, the Special Interest Groups (SIGs) are increasingly considered to be the potential lifeblood of the organisation since they place into the research space the kinds of targeted foci that the organisation is, and should be, promoting.

This growth, like the wafting and weaving of most educational fields and disciplines, interlaces the agendas that exist in the broader educational context. These contexts are also not devoid of power contestations since competing forces vie for supremacy. By definition, SIGs should represent the many variants of perspectives on the nature of knowledge itself, and on its custodians and forms of representation. It was expected that the SIGs should activate this (re)volutionary agenda, but in the organisation, this growth has not been a consistent or robustly critical one. Instead, many of the SIGs have provided enclaves for groupings of like-minded colleagues who aggregate around their parochial preferences.

The article represents one of the SIGs that has been more forthcoming in asserting its role in opening up the field of Curriculum Studies, suggesting that many viewpoints must drive the process of constructing the research space.

## Examining tensions and paradoxes: About the theoretical orientations of the CSSIG

This rejoinder recognises that the original article acknowledges that the relatively new organisation (SAERA) draws into its fold a large and diverse historical legacy of theoretical perspectives that were and continue to be part of the landscape of a continuum of possibilities, or a network of contested spaces about any field of study in the academic terrain. Our sources of ideological influences are varied, and so, too, should be our theoretical and research positionings. In this case, the article shows the field of Curriculum Studies to be shifting, evolving, and juxtaposing contested complicated worldviews. However, is this

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1 This metaphor confirms the schematic of a weaving loom which facilitates multiple movements horizontally and vertically orchestrated by the patterns of the weaver's conscious design.

pluralism indeed bounded by levels of mis-representing or under-representing underlying tensions and paradoxes?

Perhaps the article would have benefitted from its authors making more overt the continuum of possibilities of how to research Curriculum Studies. If the idea of a continuum is considered too linear or mechanistic, then perhaps the presentation of the network of possibilities for reading Curriculum Studies as an entangled field should have been presented. Merely the listing of the core group's efforts at generating diversity and contestation is a beginning in this direction. However, a more systematic review of the literature could have served as a basis to show how diverse the field of Curriculum Studies has been historically. Furthermore, what is the view of the article's authors about how one could respond to this diversity?

### Pluralism and paradox

This process of jockeying for ownership and definition of any space cannot be presented as a platitude of politeness; it is a robust space for engagement and critique of our past, and our selections for the future regarding the field of Curriculum Studies. Advocates and adversaries embed contested views that are not always coherent or harmonious even within themselves. The contested space includes the questioning of the advocates who claim to stand for openness in tolerating the intolerant, yet perhaps, surveil the space in un-intended ways. As Königs (2021) pointed out, Karl Popper, in his exposition of a *paradox of intolerance* suggested that to maintain a tolerant society, the society must be intolerant of intolerance (see, too, Kühler, 2021). The paradox highlights the challenge of maintaining an open, inclusive society while protecting it against forces that would undermine its openness. This situation invites reflection on the nature of inclusivity itself, the limits of pluralism, and the responsibilities of those who wield power in intellectual communities. It calls for an understanding of how inclusivity can be practised in ways that genuinely broaden perspectives and dialogues, rather than simply reinforcing a different set of exclusions under the guise of openness (Drerup & Kühler, 2021).

My reflections suggest that while advocating for openness and inclusivity, the article might indeed be simultaneously enacting a form of exclusion against traditional, classical, or other approaches to Curriculum Studies. The article is a snapshot of that turbulent, virulent, vibrant academic field, as well as of an organisation in quest of conceptual/theoretical clarity and purpose, and its translation into its governance and structural features. Inspirationally, this article might, potentially, be valuable in examining how the debates about theoretical, paradigmatic, and or philosophical diversity buttress the tensions and paradoxes that co-exist in and between the numerous SIGs across the SAERA organisation as a whole. How are these strains and stresses recognised, affirmed, or not? This could be the future direction of a national research association.

## No definition of Curriculum Studies as a field? A silent power

I am left wondering WHY there is this preoccupation in this article with *not recognising* any singularly-defined theory from which the authors operate. What explains the obsession of the core group in attempting not to pre-define the worldview of the CSSIG's operations or the core group's interpretations of the field of Curriculum Studies? I am concerned that the matter of the power of the powerful core group itself is not sufficiently interrogated. The article hints that the success of the CSSIG was because a core membership provided a kind of think-tank to steer the management of the ship. This group shared like-minded views that challenged the rationalist approaches to mechanistic curriculum studies, or simply the analysis of curriculum design, development, and policy implementation. Theoretically, the group already holds a set of theoretical assumptions about "Curriculum Studies" that can be located as occupying one section of the field. This is despite the magnanimous claims to profess a catholic,<sup>2</sup> all-embracing stance that accepts all variants. Why, then, is it that certain worldviews of theoretical conceptions (e.g., intra-action, complicated conversations, entanglements, posthumanism) are presented as if they are seamlessly flowing out of the space of the CSSIG itself? Where do these ideas come from? While the space is presented as opening up many possibilities, why is the core group concerned about the surfacing (gelling) of particular trends or counter-trends? The holding of the viewpoints of one sector of the broader field by the managers of the CSSIG activates a power differential over other points of view. While the intention might not be to silence contestations, the power is embodied structurally by the managers.

Disappointingly, the article does not tell us whether these spaces are constituted or not by the dominance of this core group's theoretical worldviews. The concern not to consolidate the theoretical worldview seems to me to indicate an interest to ensure a democratic sharing of the space to co-define, co-establish, and co-contest the nature of the field of Curriculum Studies, but I am still left with the question of WHY this democratic space needs to be focussed on. What then are the *anti-democratic or contested forces* that exist within the CSSIG? Do these other forces counter the worldview of the core group? Is there a disquiet about the series of *divergent views* of Curriculum Studies that indeed the CSSIG has come to adopt over its history? Are CSSIG members claiming to want more defined (and/or divergent) theoretical positionings?

Perhaps the core group sees itself as serving an administrative facilitative role in activating the agenda of the CSSIG, but it does not adequately address its own power dynamics. By not interrogating critically its power structure, the group inadvertently imposes its own theoretical preferences on the CSSIG, perhaps sidelining other valid perspectives.

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2 I use the adjective catholic in its broadest sense of embracing a wide-range of preferences, tastes, or interests. It is sometimes regarded as generously liberal or universal in extent and involves all perspectives. This is not a reference to the prescriptive orthodoxy of the Catholic Church.

## Rethinking research habits: Exploring the methodological and representational matters of the article

I found the article a provocative and sophisticated argument that challenges the dominant conventional expectation of a published research article that usually privileges the presentation of an *a priori* defined declaration of enunciated theoretical frameworks and perspectives, and their applications into prefigured methodologies to guide the reporting of the engagement with fieldwork. The article claims to be about thinking *without* theory, thinking *with* theory and activating a process of *thinking differently*. Moreover, the article suggests that it adopts an approach of using writing not as a representational mode, but as a form of *activating the dialogical conversations* that promote an “intra-action” between the participants in constructing this joint article. The new knowledge is constructed in the process of the dialogic fostered across the writing partners. The article is primarily an attempt by the core group of the CSSIG to use the writing process to document the *unfolding directions* of the CSSIG as it morphed into varied foci. The strong presence of the steering group in this unfolding process is a matter to which I will return presently.

The writing process itself is never neutral, nor uncontested, nor without contested and “complicated conversations” (Pinar, 2004) as is declared by the overarching choice of framework the article does in fact adopt. The authors are preoccupied with how the process of engaging with the field constitutes a form of looking that is an agentic, “respectful”, dialogical responsibility. The article aims to shift seeing theory as *noun* towards engaging theory as *a verb* that activates new potential activities. My reading of this is that the article is making a case for critiquing how particular vantages have come to infuse the space/time of the CSSIG and the field of Curriculum Studies itself. Put differently, it argues that while this intra-actional activity claims to document a worthwhile agenda for a ten-year anniversary issue of SAERA, it could also, potentially, provide a perspective on the richness of the field that is claimed to be presently unimaginative and uncritical by some critics.<sup>3</sup>

### Biographical being and becoming: Re-tuning identity studies

The article draws on empirical work of biographical reflections about their “meandering in the field of Curriculum Studies” by the core members of the CSSIG whom, we note, are also among the co-authors of the article itself. One notices immediately in the reading of the biographical vignettes that none of the authors could indeed escape having been influenced by a host of dominant and divergent theoretical orientations that influence their own being and becoming. However, as one progresses later into the argument of the article, this form of identity recognition<sup>4</sup> is seen to be not the stance that the authors seem to prefer since the article challenges the notion of identity representations as being too categorical and stereotyped, and suggests that one is forever in the state of fluid and entangled becomings as

3 For me, paradoxically the article proffers another theoretical way of looking at the field of Curriculum Studies, which the authors claim to be non-prescriptive. However, the article cannot escape being entangled with theory or being theoretical.

4 One notes these biographical offerings are also individually polyglot in their theoretical worldviews.

multiple forces intersect and “(re)create the individual.” The notion of identity itself is contested by the article as remaining fettered to a historical past way of thinking by the authors themselves. The article is attempting to suggest the dynamism, fluidity, and entanglement of the self in its intersection of time, space, and material realities (Crocetti et al., 2023). It chooses to argue that these entities themselves are not considered prefigured states of being, but come into being only through the process of dialogical engagement. Hence individuals and the field are forever in becoming.

It is a paradox of the representation of this article that it critiques yet adopts the position of the critique to lead the article’s argument. The choice of a particular branch of identity studies, i.e. life history and narrative research, is adopted to lead the case on how to provide insights into the complexities and contestations of the field of Curriculum Studies and the (for-ever) negotiating process that the authors suggest. Their narrativised vignettes are exemplars of the entangled shifts within the field and in themselves as authors. The choice of biographical vignettes is a form of auto-reflection that the authors themselves reveal to be not only about the historical past but also about their imagined future (Pillay et al., 2016). The vignettes epitomise individuals as varied embodied interpretations of the field of Curriculum Studies itself. They are products and are producers of the field they inhabit. The field, too, is depicted as intersecting with many other cognate correlates, not all necessarily from the orthodox traditional homes of “Curriculum Studies.” Perhaps the article is commenting on the previously dominant versions of psychology which pigeonholed identity as a stable entity trait. More recent offerings of identities (plural/ multiple) studies are resonant with the authors’ viewpoints of fluidity, impermanence, and responsive complexity (Brown, 2015; Ramarajan, 2014; Oyserman & James, 2011).

### CSSIG’s diverse activities: A dynamic of power

I note the engagement of the CSSIG in numerous forms (journal publications, books, formal and informal discussions) and activities (conference presentations, webinars, seminars) to activate the opening up of the space for divergent viewpoints. But why is this divergence not indeed represented in the article? What the article presents paradoxically is again the dominant core group’s presentation of their views about what Curriculum Studies could constitute. Are these other views *silenced and not represented* in the SIG?

I believe that the article is indeed celebrating the scope of the activities of the CSSIG which could be inspirational to other SIGs in the organisation about how to organise and document the emerging worldviews and contestations within them. The article suggests the value of the SIG being a contested space. However, for me, the article does not fully put on the table what these alternative contestations themselves are. And from where/whom do these alternative perspectives come? It points to the debates that are presented in the generously stimulating list of outputs of the CSSIG, which seem to be coming predominantly from the core group’s publications and activities.

## Closing comments

So, indeed the article itself is a complicated conversation (Pinar, 2004), and my writing here, too, represents the kinds of thinking with and through the article. It is, nevertheless, a scholarly and inspirational piece of engagement giving more insight into the core group itself and its worldviews. I would suggest some kind of critical reflection on the dynamics of power that exist in the CSSIG members themselves, rather than a representation (yes, this is what the written product does—it re-presents a view) of the CSSIG as constituting only what the core group’s worldviews are. It would be useful to hear about the challenges to the notions of “complicated conversations”, “inter-actions” or whether the dialogical space indeed does exist/ is seen to exist in all CSSIG members? How the CSSIG sees itself in relation to other SIGS in the organisation would also be an interesting addition.

As with all valuable arguments, the article raises more questions than provides definitive categorical answers. *Viva catholica* (with a small “c”)!

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## Appendix one: The SAERA conference themes (2013-2023)

YEAR	#	HOST INSTITUTION	VENUE	LOCATION	PROVINCE	CHAIR of LOC	THEME	FORMAT
2013	1	UNISA	ATKV Klein Kariba	Bela Bela, Warmbaths	Limpopo	Eldric Gouws	<b>The state of play in educational research in South Africa: practices and perspectives</b>	Face-to-face
2014	2	UKZN	Elangeni Hotel	Durban	KwaZulu-Natal	Michael Anthony Samuel	<b>Researching education: Future directions</b>	Face-to-face
2015	3	UFS	UFS Campus	Bloemfontein	Free State	Sechaba Mahlomaholo	<b>Strengthening Educational Research for Sustainable Futures</b>	Face-to-face
2016	4	Stellenbosch	Cape Sun Hotel	Cape Town	Western Cape	Aslam Fataar	<b>Reimagining Education: Poetics, Practices and Pedagogies</b>	Face-to-face
2017	5	NMU	Broadwalk Hotel	Port Elizabeth	Eastern Cape	Shervani Pillay	<b>Education in an era of Decolonization and Transformation</b>	Face-to-face
2018	6	North West University	St George conference centre	Centurion	Gauteng	Lesley Wood	<b>Education 01? In search of a new operating system: making education more relevant, responsive and authentic</b>	Face-to-face
2019	7	DUT	Elangeni Hotel	Durban	KwaZulu-Natal	Nonhlanhla Mthiyane	<b>Beyond boundaries: Exploring possibilities through research and innovation</b>	Face-to-face
2020	-	No conference due to COVID-19					-	-
2021	8	WITS	Online	Virtual	Gauteng	Thokozani Mathebula	<b>Education for Inclusivity and Sustainability in Times of Increasing Inequalities</b>	Online
2022	9	University of the Western Cape	Two Oceans Aquarium	Cape Town	Western Cape	Karen Koopman	<b>Education in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities</b>	Hybrid (face-to-face and online)
2023	10	Rhodes University	Premier Regency Hotel	East London	Eastern Cape	Eureta Rosenberg	<b>Education(al) Foundations, Education(al) Futures</b>	Face-to-face