

Editorial

School and childhood

In this first issue of the SAJCE as an accredited journal of the South African Department of Higher Education and Training we have a new responsibility: While creating ample space for articles that forward solidly argued ideas and philosophies, we also have the responsibility of bringing empirical evidence to the table. Some of this evidence may come from an extensive study of the literature that reports from studies elsewhere, or from in-depth qualitative studies of what happens on the ground in education. Other evidence may come from the analysis of data that were sourced and prepared for the purpose of both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. We need all of these.

Educational research has been criticised for its dearth of research that captures change – specifically change in learning processes and learning outcomes. This is what education in schools is primarily tasked to do. It is our brief to report on how a society’s institutions are engaging with this task and how its young are responding.

As founding editor it is my duty to fulfil the promise to publish research of what happens in schools and other places of learning and instruction. As a follower of the ideas of Lev Vygotsky, I believe that learners thrive on good instruction. By that I do not mean that teachers ‘download’ information and procedural commands in class, but that they invite, explain and encourage the learners to get to know the signs and symbols of their sociocultural environment. For me the central tenet of Vygotskian theory is this semiotic mediation – the encounter with, and the use of, the symbols that make it possible for children to thrive in their environment. I believe it can happen in schools, despite the many obstacles that these institutions face. I think good education systems are activity systems in which schools flourish, and that a caring, forward-looking society can educate its youth through schools, even though many of these have become very fragile.

In the first two articles in this issue authors report on qualitative work that gives the reader a picture of the learning of teachers, children and student teachers outside classrooms and university lecture rooms. Petersen writes about student teachers who have just embarked on the journey of their education at university and who are challenged to face the harsh social conditions of the children they will teach in future. She reports on the power of role play and simulation as tools for an experiential learning of social justice. Joseph and his co-authors write a moving ethnographic account of a traditional game used by students of education. These finely crafted articles mirror what is admirable in this type of qualitative research, which interprets data artfully.

The next group of articles takes us to the chalk-face of education. Herholdt and Sapire argue, in an insightful large-scale analysis of errors in a mathematics tests for grade 1–4 learners, that much can be learned from such an analysis of data from intervention and control schools. Chirwa and Naidoo also report on school research. In four primary schools in Malawi they found that teaching life skills for HIV prevention

faces both structural and social constraints, begging the question of how this all important topic can be mediated in such challenging settings. Mdluli and her co-authors also take the reader into classrooms, where they have captured the usability of workbooks supplied by the education authorities. They make a strong argument for teacher learning that goes beyond only receiving the books and for the need to train teachers for optimal use of this potentially helpful tool. Kok and Van Schoor also take the reader to classrooms, but this time to the university, where they investigated foundation phase teachers' knowledge of the science concepts they will have to teach, suggesting an integrated pedagogical approach for their future practice. They found resistance to the idea of integration in a science-technology-society and reflect on the implications. Esterhuizen and Grosser also venture into the classroom. They report on an intervention that aimed to improve grade R learners' executive functions, using methods developed by Feuerstein and his collaborators, which still prove to be fruitful for this type of work.

In a previous issue of the journal, Caroline Fitzpatrick argued the importance of executive functions as indicators of readiness to learn in school. She expands on her earlier work in the second volume of *SAJCE* in an article that emphasises the need to focus on the socioeconomic status of young children when designing interventions to promote executive functions in preparation for formal education.

Dixon and co-authors investigated teachers' experiences of professional development, unpacking the "implications of teachers constructing themselves as 'workshopped' and its relation to workshops as vehicles through which knowledge is acquired". The article echoes what many teacher educators and teachers may be saying about this conventional way of bringing new ideas to the profession.

In the article by Rousseau the reader is invited to grapple with the author on how the different knowledge forms for a grade R teacher qualification can be integrated. She intimates an epistemological struggle, which is also what the last two authors, Du Plooy and Zilindile, tackle in a different context – namely the philosophical search of a great South African educationist, Wally Morrow. Morrow wrestled with the notion of "epistemological access" in education. The authors apply this notion to initial access to school and leave the reader wondering about the revolving door syndrome: How many of the young children who have access to formal education have full access to its resources, which can open real doors to their future as citizens in a competitive country? How many of them will be fulfilled adults, earning a liveable income, and recall their early years of schooling as the real foundation phase of their education?

Editorial regards
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Johannesburg
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