

Editorial: Learn together and work together for a more reasonable, unbiased, acceptable, and morally righteous nation

Guest Editors:

Sechaba MG Mahlomaholo

(Faculty of Education, University of the Free State)

Dennis Francis

(Editor: *Perspectives in Education*)

For many in South Africa the goal of education is the creation of workers fit for a rapidly changing labour market. For some it is to encourage the love of knowledge and the creation of a peaceful society of socially well-adjusted individuals. For others it may be the promotion of critical thinking and social practices for communal and national development. What we all seem to yearn for, is a society characterised by choice and social justice, a society where we can work together, learn together and live together for a more reasonable, unbiased, acceptable and morally righteous nation.

This special issue contributes meaningfully to this on-going national and international conversation about education for social justice. As academics, policy makers, teachers, parents and community members in general, we are committed both to education for transformation and to the transformation of education. This special issue provides the platform for such reflection. This commitment and reflection require from us to engage critically on, amongst others, dominant social viewpoints. One such dominant view holds that some learners, particular categories of teachers, schools and communities are bound to perform poorly in all facets of life. According to the theory of reproduction of inequality, it is expected that when results relating to, for example, academic performance in school and at college and university are scrutinised, poor, underprivileged, socially disadvantaged, learners who have been socially shunted aside will almost always register at the bottom of any league table.

Research seems to confirm expectations such as these. Individuals, families and communities such as these are reportedly more prone to illness, disease, violence and crime; they constitute the majority of the unemployed and the prison population. This is, however, not the full story. Research also indicates that they are exploited and marginalised; they are under-paid, under-employed and even among the never-employed. They are often denied access to decent education, housing, health, jobs, skills and services. They are denied social justice: their legitimate share in the country.

This special issue of *SAJE* provides a forum for academics, educators and educational policy-makers to examine the relationships between social justice, communities and schooling. It aims at encouraging multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary explorations of the practices, theories, meanings and forms of *Education for Social Justice*. These draw on both formal schooling and informal learning environments. They include examples of “best practice”, including techniques and methods, or critical and theoretical reflections on policies and politics.

In pursuance of the above objectives, Dennis Francis and Adré le Roux, in the leading article of this issue, titled *Teaching for social justice education: the intersection between identity, critical agency and social justice education*, use in-depth interviewing to explore pre-service teachers’ emerging identities as teachers, to show how these identities are connected to notions of critical agency and a stance towards social justice. Then following is an article

by Sechaba Mahlomaholo titled *Gender differentials and sustainable learning environments*. This article, using lucid prose, makes a passionate plea for converting schools into sustainable learning environments, privileging girls' concerns. It argues further that this conversion will assist in resolving the problems of skewed gender differentials which in turn will lead to the achievement of a socially just life for all. Petro du Preez and Shan Simmonds' article on *Understanding how we understand girls' voices on cultural and religious practices: toward a curriculum for justice* reinforces the argument that for education to have social justice dimensions, the plight of 'Others', girls in this instance, has to be emphasised and highlighted above others because, through a levelling of difference, we may opaquely strengthen difference without an inclination to care deeply for those whose background differs from ours.

The debate on difference versus integration with regard to social justice is taken up seriously in Linda van Laren's article titled *Integrating HIV&AIDS education in pre-service Mathematics Education for social justice*. The author argues for the integration of HIV and AIDS education in Mathematics Education and for taking practical action on the basis thereof, as through this integration it is possible to develop strategies that directly enhance social justice. Elza Venter, through a tightly argued article *The effect of a latchkey situation on a child's educational success*, demonstrates that children being left alone after school for more than three hours often present with low self esteem, low academic efficacy and high levels of depression. They are often not well adjusted and sometimes present with behavioural problems. This is another argument in favour of integration as a way towards social justice in education since exclusion behind a 'latch-key' results in psychological problems among children.

Jabulani Ngcobo and Nithi Muthukrishna's article, *The geographies of inclusion of students with disabilities in an ordinary school*, while clearly on the side of integration/inclusivity, highlights the gap that exists between the good intentions of policy and the problems of implementation thereof. In their own words, their paper highlights how the everyday individual and cultural practices in the specific school spaces play out to reinforce dominant normalizing discourses of traditional forms of special education in spite of what inclusive education policy dictates. This, as argued in the paper, truncates the process of social justice in education. Yolisa Nompula on the other hand, through her article titled *Valorising the voice of the marginalised: exploring the value of African music in education*, suggests ways of circumventing these negative impacts of the dominant normalizing discourses. According to her the solution seems to lie in validating the voices, i.e. the *community cultural wealth* of all, especially the marginalised as a way of creating and accessing a socially just education.

To pursue the matter further Johannes L van der Walt, in his article on *Religion in education in South Africa: was social justice served?*, agrees with Nompula above in terms of recognising the plurality of voices and not insisting on undue homogeneity as the route towards social justice in education. According to him, by effectively banning confessional sectarian religion in public schools but allowing Religion Studies, the South African government was applying the tenets of secularism, value-plurality, pragmatic political expediency and *modus vivendi*. Ferdinand J Potgieter's article on *Morality as the substructure of social justice: religion in education as a case in point* concurs with the notion of plurality in the study of religion in education. According to him this plurality in religion is not accidental as it even permeates our understanding of social justice itself because it constitutes its moral substructure as well.

Merridy Wilson-Strydom, in her article titled *University access for social justice: a capabilities perspective*, is more emphatic in terms of recognising and capitalising on our different backgrounds as bases for creating a more socially just higher education. She points

out that increasing access, without increasing chances of success for students from poverty stricken backgrounds, is becoming a new form of social exclusion within higher education. Therefore she proposes that issues of access to higher education where students come from an uneven school background should be approached from a capabilities perspective, which provides a means of fostering access for social justice and countering access that leads to social exclusion. The same theme goes through Mdutshekelwa C Ndlovu's article titled *University-school partnerships for social justice in Mathematics and Science Education: the case of the SMILES project at IMSTUS*. Ndlovu contends that various schools are located in socio-economically different neighbourhoods and as such in need of diversified and appropriately customized continuing professional teacher development support programmes from the university, as an example. These have to be responsive to local needs by also bringing about collaborative teacher professional development. This, it is argued, could lead to reflective practice in professional learning communities and thus adding value to the quality of student achievement, especially in the gateway subjects of mathematics and science.

Leila Kajee's article titled *Literacy journeys: home and family literacy practices in immigrant households and their congruence with schooled literacy* on examining language and literacy skills of immigrant learners come to the conclusion that they have far greater language and literacy skills than presumed, and that schools need to recognize language and literacy practices that children engage in at home and in the community, and emphasizes that social justice for all requires such educational shifts. Connie Zulu in her article titled *Empowering first year undergraduate students in basic research skills: a strategy for education for social justice* concludes the conversation by suggesting that all students irrespective of their different backgrounds can perform equally well to the levels expected in higher education, only if appropriate support can be given to scaffold them gradually to the those required levels.

The articles in this issue are authored from very diverse theoretical positions, representing different understandings and interpretations of what education for social justice entails. However the recurring theme throughout them all is that education must address both the uniqueness and integrated-ness of curriculum, teachers, learners, parents, and communities for it to be socially just. The route to social justice is not linear or unproblematic. This complexity in our view is a fitting tribute to the theme of education for social justice which formed the basis for the deliberations at the *Third Education Research Colloquium*, held at the University of the Free State, 29–30 September 2010, and informed the theme for this special issue.

