

■ Editorial notes

This special issue is organised around the theme of the 2015 South African Education Research Association (SAERA) conference, namely ‘Strengthening Educational Research for Sustainable Futures’, and focuses on how goals of economic development, environmental sustainability and social inclusivity are understood differently and integrated into quality education debates in the Southern African region, as well as in different institutional settings. The editors who oversaw the special issue were Prof. Sechaba Mahlomaholo, Dr Lynette Jacobs and Dr Milton Nkoane.

Their overriding view is that if quality education policies are to be embedded in the region beyond 2015 then the concept of ‘sustainable educational ecologies’ needs to be better historicised and theorised in terms of its original intent, purpose, objectives and nature. Furthermore, it needs to be understood in relation to how different ecologies affect and shape the ways in which students, teachers, departmental heads, curriculum planners, principals, school management teams, school governing bodies, parent communities, policy-makers and state and civil society experience and respond to new educational demands in quite different contexts.

Notably, quality education debates need to be anchored in the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that were agreed upon in September 2015. These goals arguably set the scene for a renewed and ambitious development framework in the Global North and South in the context of ever-widening inequalities within and between countries, overall global economic crises, sustained violent conflicts and deep concerns about climate change. They also seek to lay the foundation for the ambitious plans of the UN to tackle poverty and inequality, promote social and economic inclusion, address the universal challenge of climate change and focus attention on issues of equity and providing access to quality education the world over.

In that respect, many countries and organisations have struggled to comprehensively define what is required with regard to each of the SDG goals, aimed for by 2030 – especially *the recommended shift from access to quality education*. They have struggled to define what is meant by equitable and inclusive quality education for all, and how educational research pertaining to quality can be strengthened for sustainable futures. UNESCO (2014) estimates that some 250 million children across the world are still ‘not learning even basic literacy and numeracy skills, let alone the further skills they need to get decent work and lead fulfilling and sustainable lives’. This is compounded by approaches to quality that mirror growing income inequalities across the world – where children are given access to education, but its quality is too often directly shaped by their economic status and what they can afford to pay (for education). As such, ‘the well-off tend to attend good schools and universities, mostly

privately funded, and the poor attend inadequate, mostly publicly funded facilities' (United Nations Development Programme 2013). This suggests, moving forward towards 2030, that the central driver in transforming human development prospects in most countries needs to be continued access to educational opportunities complemented by greater attention to 'high-quality education'.

Crucially, in the Southern African region, however, debates about quality education geared towards inclusivity continue to be steeped in deeper concerns about exclusion, injustice, inequality and deep-rooted patterns of violence and conflict stemming from institutionalised dispossession and marginalisation. On the one hand, the quest for quality education has been firmly driven by larger historical developments and dilemmas, with attention given to continuities and discontinuities that have been entrenched within diverse historical settings across the region and a greater analytic and historical focus on the ways in which systemic inequalities emerged in the region and the kinds of approaches or mechanisms that have been tried thus far to reduce such inequalities. On the other hand, there is a keen awareness of the immense value of quality teaching and learning, and an innate understanding that the ambitious policy intentions of the SDGs are unlikely to be realised if issues of social inclusivity and social justice are not addressed in overt and creative ways in diverse settings. Many argue that equitable access and the completion of a good-quality education can contribute to greater inclusive and sustainable futures if they instil within people a trust in state and societal functions founded on principles of social justice.

In terms of the focus on sustainable educational ecologies, as this special edition set out to show, the concerns above are crucial given that most educational dilemmas and impasses within current political environments are inevitably addressed using prevailing neo-liberal austerity and adjustment solutions.

In that regard, the eight articles and one book review that make up the special issue give serious consideration to different contexts, environments and ecologies of education provision premised on providing quality education in different settings within the Southern African landscape, while also contemplating what sustainability may mean in these different contexts.

The first article by Sechaba Mahlomaholo historicises changes in teacher education since the advent of a democratic dispensation in South Africa and traces some efforts made to create sustainable teacher education ecologies (STEEs) since 1994. Mahlomaholo argues that the concept of People's Education for People's Power (PEPP) could have helped enhance and sustain quality teacher education after 1994 had teacher education been better theorised to include critical, humanising and conducive intra- and inter-personal enablers within different programmes. Mahlomaholo asserts that PEPP, with its focus on people's lived experiences and the ways that it dealt with issues of power and inequality in and through education, could have served as the abiding compass for an evolving teacher education system after 1994, both in the higher education system and within schools.

The next article, by Petronella van Niekerk, takes issue with a decontextualised and reductionist higher education system in South Africa rooted within neo-liberal discourses of performativity and entrepreneurship. Van Niekerk asserts that current manifestations of performativity within South African universities are not only contextually inappropriate, but instantiate impoverished discourses of knowledge, education processes and what it means to be human. Arguing that this undermines the very essence of higher education, she suggests that the quality of current higher curriculum offerings would be enhanced if universities sought rather to capture and exemplify the full complexity and totality of the human experience. Van Niekerk positions the ecological university in opposition to the entrepreneurial university, noting that a focus on building human networks and forms of human interconnectedness is a necessary part of current quality education agendas aimed at ensuring sustainable futures.

This is taken further by George Fomunyam's article, which focuses on what university students perceive as quality university education. He argues that the insertion of student voices and views could add significantly to the quality and sustainability of higher education curricula, and that involving students in curriculum design would help higher education institutions fulfil their objectives of transformation, poverty alleviation and national development. Such an ecological approach, argues Fomunyam, would provide a welcome riposte to current responses on paper only to the challenge of improving university provision and providing quality and sustainable higher education for all.

Louise Schmidt next provides an analysis of alternative approaches to education provision in a fast-changing and complex world. She asserts that the distance education sector could serve as a useful vehicle for ensuring the sustainability of a quality education agenda given the kinds of opportunities within distance learning to create learning environments more suitable to dealing with the needs of diverse and contextually different student populations. Schmidt suggests that distance education is better able to contextualise learning in different local contexts and within the lives and understandings of students experiencing different educational settings, and that this could provide deeper and more sustainable ecological connections and systems of learning moving forward.

In relation to the school sector, Jonas Kabi's article argues that quality education can only really be assured and advanced in the interests of the collective if resources across the schooling system are more equally distributed. Kabi acknowledges the many gains made in funding across the schooling system since 1994 and the progress achieved in relation to redress. However, he also reminds us that many of the disparities and marginalisation processes based on race that originally informed the preferential resourcing of schools in South Africa have not been adequately addressed or reversed. These continued disparities, argues Kabi, pose serious challenges for sustainable educational ecologies in South Africa.

The articles by Khau and Mampane extend this idea by exploring different dimensions within the schooling sector that curb sustainable educational ecologies. Focusing on sexuality education in schools, Mathabo Khau observes that education ‘as a vaccine against the spread of HIV/AIDS and curbing new infections among young people’ has been largely unsuccessful in Lesotho owing to a variety of contextual factors as well as the different ways in which sexuality education has been conservatively understood and conceptualised at different times. Noting key contestations within the sexuality education curriculum and how these have shaped the structuring and delivery of sexuality education in Lesotho schools, Khau provides a variety of insights on the prospective educational futures of Basotho students and the provision of quality and sustainable education.

In the same vein, Ruth Mampane argues that current distinctions between inclusive and special education in South Africa have been unhelpful in building up or ensuring resilience among vulnerable students, and have likewise not provided mechanisms to ensure the educational futures of students. Mampane notes that although inclusive and special education are both meant to provide a continuum of education support that contributes towards achieving EFA goals and giving access to quality education for all, the overall system in South Africa has been slow to back inclusivity goals within mainstream schools and also quite unwilling to support a well-established but poorly-funded special education system. This holds dire implications for the educational futures of students across the inclusive education sector.

The last article, by Simon Mosia, closes the special issue on a more positive note. Mosia makes a compelling case for broadening the mathematics education curriculum within schools to include more than just theoretical and abstract calculations. He asserts that quality education and sustainable educational ecologies are achievable if students are exposed to forms of knowledge (in subjects like mathematics) that are firmly located in their everyday experiences, fears and aspirations, as well as those of their different communities. Conceding that this poses a number of challenges for teaching pedagogies and learning strategies within classrooms, Mosia theoretically engages with the different knowledge forms that are produced when teaching mathematics and discusses the different ways that pedagogies need to be multi-layered, multi-methodological and multi-perspectival if they are to constitute quality education.

The special issue concludes with a book review by Judy Harris of Elana Michelson’s *Gender, Experience, and Knowledge in Adult Learning: Alisoun’s Daughters*. Harris explores in her review some of the theoretical boundaries of APEL (accreditation of prior experiential learning) as a site of educational practice and discusses key challenges to its sustainability given how particular understandings of experience, reflection and knowledge have been embedded and naturalised in most education systems and practices.

All in all, the different contributions to the special issue, in engaging with sustainable educational ecologies in the Southern African region, cover a range of diverse contexts,

institutional settings and learning areas, including higher education, distance education, mainstream schools, inclusive education and sexuality education, with the key aim being to show the different challenges and debates to sustainable educational ecologies in different contexts.

Several of the articles highlight how ambitious policy intentions with regard to quality education are difficult to realise in practice owing to a variety of historical factors and key decisions made at decisive historical moments. They also highlight the need for better theorisation and capacitation for the implementation and monitoring of policy goals, if different constituencies are to be held accountable. All the articles in the special issue throw into sharp relief the need for a form of education provision that directly confronts key drivers of inequity within society, especially those that thwart policies and efforts to provide sustainable quality education. An abiding view is that in most contexts the provision of good quality and sustainable education is contingent on teachers, higher education institutions and schools actively promoting forms of knowledge making and identity construction, as well as on the development of sustainable teaching and learning practices.

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