Editorial

Wayne Hugo and Carol Bertram

The founding of the South African Education Research Association exemplifies the breaking away from false necessities. False necessity theory (Unger, 2004) rejects the notion that societies must be organised in a particular way and argues that structures can be dissolved and remade. The institutional order of South African education research organisations is not set in stone. It can change and will change, not because of some necessary logic of development but because individuals have the negative capability to imagine things differently, to revise and transcend their context, as well as the commitment to solidify the vision institutionally. This edition of the *Journal of Education* publishes research that was presented at the SAERA conference that took place in Durban in August 2014. It is the first time that JoE is publishing a Special Edition emanating from a SAERA conference, as it is now the official journal of SAERA. It was a milestone for the new organisation as the constitution for the new association was ratified, and the conference provided a great momentum to push the association forward. It was the second official conference hosted by SAERA, which was established at a launch conference at Bela Bela in the Limpopo Province at the end of January 2013. The theme of the 2014 conference was *Researching Education: Future directions*. There were 210 papers and panel sessions at the 2014 conference which either presented new empirical research or engaged with methodological and/or theoretical concerns.

A new tradition was established at the 2014 conference in the form of the Nelson Mandela Legacy lecture. This was delivered by Prof. Crain Soudien (University of Cape Town) who entitled his talk 'The provocation of Nelson Mandela' and asked the question 'How, to put it more starkly, does one make Mandela a catalyst for the surfacing of contradiction in one's and in our general thinking rather than the tranquilising balm for which he is used?' We have to hold to how Mandela challenged the false necessities of the past with a deep negative capability that could imagine a different world and practically pursue its institutionalisation. We have to do this again, now, in different circumstances and changing conditions, but with the same commitment to hard justice that innovates and resists within confining contexts.

Prof Michael Samuel from the University of KwaZulu-Natal was the chair of the Local Organising Committee. He set the scene for the three days of dialogue and engagement with his opening remarks, which are published in the last section of this volume. Prof. Shireen Motala's (University of Johannesburg) Presidential address, which was a review of the current state of Basic education regarding equity, access and quality, is also included here. The publication of the SAERA President's address at the annual conference will become a hallmark of the Special conference edition as it is important to capture and archive the development and growth of the association.

The six peer-reviewed articles that appear in this Special conference edition all engage in some way with the tensioned concepts of false necessity and negative capability mentioned in the introductory sections of this editorial. Roberto Unger has given the best modern formulation of these concepts, articulated in previous generations by Marx and Keats. In his magnum opus – *False Necessity – Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy* (2004) Unger defines negative capability as the "denial of whatever in our contexts delivers us over to a fixed scheme of division and hierarchy and to an enforced choice between routine and rebellion." Negative capability breaks with false necessity and shows that the organisation of society can be remade. We have made the world we live in, and we can struggle to remake it. In the first two articles in this volume both Carrim and Postma engage with these issues of critical agency from a macro perspective. Carrim focuses on remaking society through social movements, while Postma argues that the individual subject must find freedom and control within the self to resist the long arm of neoliberalism.

Nazir Carrim reminds us that during apartheid, critical agency implied being critical of the ways in which schools reproduced, maintained and legitimised capitalism and racism, but that the meaning of the concept 'critical agency' has shifted in South Africa after 1994, partly because there is no obvious 'enemy'. He argues that in the 1970s and 1980s, Marxism and critical theory connected critical thinking with critical agency in order to change the material relations and bases of capitalist orders. The social movements that were anti - apartheid education could be categorised as 'critical struggles' movements to use Touraine's terminology. In the post-apartheid situation it is evident that 'positive struggles' predominate, where the emphasis is on engaging with existing institutions, organisations and orders rather than being fundamentally opposed to them. Carrim's challenge is that as education researchers we need

to engage more robustly with what critical agency means for us now, where there is no clearly defined 'enemy to destroy'.

Critical agency is also the subject of Dirk Postma's article. He would argue that the enemy is clear, that it is neo-liberalism. He engages with the issue from a Foucauldian stance on neo-liberalism and argues that 'A Foucauldian notion of critical agency provides a closer account of how subjectivity could be reclaimed through its resistance against and transcendence of the neoliberal order'. This article is a meditation on how neo-liberal governmentality creates subjugation, and that in order to challenge the reach of these processes, the individual subject has to appeal to a centre of control within him or herself. Thus, he argues that the subject in particular is the terrain where freedom could be practiced and control asserted.

If Carrim and Postma provide a macro focus on critical agency, then Jenni Case, Callie Grant and Ansurie Pillay provide a micro focus, reporting on data gathered through their own university teaching work.

For fifteen years, Jenni Case has focused her research on engineering teaching and learning. Here she reflects first on her own practice as an education researcher of a second year engineering course, and second, on her practice as a teacher of this same course some years later. Her purpose is to engage with the kind of knowledge that university teachers draw on to improve their practice and what knowledge outputs may be exemplified as SOTL (the scholarship of teaching and learning) as opposed to education research (and does it actually make a difference?) Indirectly she engages with what it means to be an education researcher and a university teacher who is interested in 'doing social justice' in the most micro circle of influence, the classroom, through supporting students' enduring conceptual learning. The assumption is that what good university teachers do in their classroom in terms of teaching and assessment makes a difference to how students learn, and that the choices that a university teacher makes are more often informed to the contextual challenges of a particular situation, rather than generalised findings from SOTL.

Pillay's study also focuses on the space of her own university classroom, which is where BEd students learn to teach English literature in schools. Her assumption is also that her choices as university teacher will make a difference to her students, both in the realm of their commitment to be 'agents of change' and in developing their own deep conceptual understanding of the

subject matter at hand (English literature). She describes a participatory action research project (PAR) where student teachers are framed as people who need to take agency to address social inequalities and to make a difference in their learners' lives. Her focus is on the methodology of PAR and how this enables student teachers to recognise their agency over 'who they are and how they teach'.

Callie Grant has been teaching and researching in the field of leadership and management for many years, with a particular focus on teacher leadership. In this article, she turns the focus to leadership clubs for learners in schools. The data were collected by teachers in South Africa and Namibia who are also BEd Hons students enrolled for a service learning module. These teachers needed to initiate learners' leadership clubs in their schools, and as a starting point had to listen to the learners' voices as they articulated what issues mattered to them at school. The ultimate purpose was that learners would develop leadership skills by adopting a particular project goal for the year, but this phase is not reported in this article. The assumption is that learners' should take up agency in their own schools to address the matters that concern them most, a clear example of re-imagining the ways in which schools are organised, which mostly exclude learners' voices. However, there are cultural, structural and organisational barriers to learners becoming agents of change in their school that would need to be addressed.

The final article by Meyer and Abel engages with the key question of what teachers actually learn from professional development activities, using a hierarchy of outcomes to describe how these activities influence teachers' practice. In South Africa, we have an infuriating tendency to address shortfalls in teacher professional development with 'one-size-fits-all' workshops and short courses. No matter how much research comes out pointing to the need for sustained engagement through professional communities of practice and classroom mentoring and support, the quick and cheap fix is continuously reverted to, with the same result – the cheapest solution is not the most cost effective. Precious resources of time, goodwill and money are tossed down the drain, along with the reports that chronicle the wastage. If ever there was a competition for 'best' form of false neccessity in education then workshops would be right up there. What other false necessities exist in education we leave for discussion at the 2015 SAERA conference in Bloemfontein at the end of October, where, in the words of Mao, we hope a thousand flowers bloom.

References

Unger, R. 2004. *False necessity: anti-necessitarian social theory in the service of radical democracy*, (Revised Edition). London: Verso.

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