

## SAJCE begins its journey

In this first issue of the *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, there is encouraging evidence that researchers inquire into the issues that are of serious concern to the broad educational community. Not surprisingly, language as tool of learning and teaching has emerged as the major topic of concern, with four of the eight articles in this issue reporting on its role in education. Judging from the submitted manuscripts, some of which will be published in future issues, researchers in the field of childhood education are not only concerned, but also alarmed and distressed, as they witness how this foundation for learning is becoming increasingly vulnerable in the face of strong societal forces.

Soares De Sousa and Broom show how different sound systems of languages challenge young readers in different ways, and they demystify the processes of learning to read with detailed analyses. Their findings also remind us what a great challenge all teachers of initial reading face when they help young children to move from sounds of language to written symbols. They furthermore remind us that knowledge of a language is important for learning to read that language.

Mashiya takes the reader to rural schools in KwaZulu-Natal and touches on one of the most sensitive issues in childhood education: what to do with young children's home language when teachers themselves opt for a language mix, in which English features at the outset. This author utilises a psychological theory that explains, almost sympathetically, why the teachers introduce English, even if some of them may struggle to use the language competently themselves: they wish for the children to be successful in the long term and they see English as currency to assure that. What is, however, alarming about the findings of this research, is teachers' self-esteem and its relation to the use of the children's home language, which in many instances is also their own. The research also shows that policy directives are overridden easily when competing with social forces.

The article by Muthivhi takes classical Vygotskian theory, specifically the work of Luria, to schools in Venda. In an intricate and systematic analysis he explores how language, as sign, features in tool mediation, and how young children learn to abstract, that is, learn theoretically, at a young age incrementally. Research like this flies straight in the face of the 'concrete' teaching tradition that has been considered the cement of pedagogy for the young. He lures the reader into the world of radical Vygotskian theory and steers clear of the superficialised versions of this work, some of which has been smothering the literature on sociocultural and cultural historical theory.

Msila takes up the theme of language choice and does so in a preschool context, once again showing how much social capital is nested in English. He also examines the complexities of multilingualism and verges on giving strong judgement (which I would invite him and other researchers to do, based on data) on the issue of language and conceptual development, in addition to, language and identity of preschool children.

In another article by Lenyai the theme of language in education on the topic of learning English as a first additional language in the foundation phase is taken up, while keeping in mind that it will become the medium of teaching and learning in Grade 4. Lenyai argues from her research findings that, “The methods that teachers used to teach English as the first additional language did not develop children’s comprehension and communication skills” and that “if teachers do not use methods that encourage children to communicate in English, the children might not acquire the competence needed to use English as the language for learning in Grade 4.” Seen in conjunction with the five articles mentioned thus far, the role of language, and specifically also English, is emphasised. Lenyai’s conclusion is no less than a call to action, “Measures must be put in place to continuously assist and monitor teachers in their effort to promote English literacy and to prepare children to use it as a LoLT in Grade 4.” She argues for children’s readiness to learn through English at the right time.

The readiness of children to enter formal education and the pitfalls of perceptions of school ‘readiness’ are the focus of Van Zyl’s article. She shows, systematically, how an integrated view on development and ‘readiness’ is essential for researchers, practitioners, and families to understand children’s entry into the world of, not only, formal learning, but also, their entry into an expanded social world, in which they will have to learn to manage their contact with peers and adults. The article invites research about the liminal period of school entry and the rite of passage of young children. My own sense is that the psychological, especially cognitive, development of children has been emphasised too much in research, at the expense of an understanding of the social and (school) cultural transition of young children. It may well be that performance in the crucial stage of Grade 4 may be better if the initial (school cultural) transition is better understood by teachers and caregivers.

One part of this transition is the move from a caring home to a more ‘hostile’ school environment, where individual attention for a child is less. For young children who have been affected by death and parental illness, an understanding teacher is essential. Yet, teachers cannot replace pedagogy with social work at the expense of school learning. Therefore, what Van Laren researches is one of the options for a caring pedagogy in the extreme social conditions that some schools face. She suggests a teacher preparation programme that integrates social issues with school subjects, thus not only raising awareness among pre-service teachers, but also invoking skills for the classroom.

And it is in pre-service education of new teachers where much of our hope for the future lies. The disturbing facts that Green *et al.* share in their article of foundation phase teacher preparation in this country is sobering. What stands out in this article is that the stakes are high and that we need teachers more than we need talk. But the status of foundation phase teachers needs to be just as high.

This first issue of the SAJCE leaves us with more questions, on the burning issues in the education of our young, than answers. But one wish, I am sure we all have, is that the teachers who come out of our university programmes will be some of our smartest young professionals, and that they will take the lead. In the second issue of the journal we hope to publish articles that will discuss the research on teacher education, and