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Conference Report

Education(al) Foundations, Education(al) Futures

10th SAERA Conference

East London, South Africa

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The 10th SAERA (South African Education Research Association) conference, hosted by Rhodes University from 30 October to 3 November 2023, was held at the Premier Hotel Regent in East London. The theme of the conference, *Education(al) Foundations, Education(al) Futures*, which was open to multiple interpretations, focused on engaging in the movement between what we do in education (at a foundational level) and our vision (for the future). The conference was well attended by over 300 delegates from across the spectrum of higher education institutions in South Africa and from a few international universities as well, notably from Sweden. A noteworthy feature of the conference was that it offered a rich, diverse programme that included plenary presentations by renowned educational researchers, workshops, parallel sessions, book launches, poster presentations, and ample opportunities for networking during the conference.

The pre-conference programme, which was held at the Blue Lagoon Hotel, East London on 30 October 2023, afforded delegates opportunities to participate in workshops focusing on support to doctoral students, and the challenges of assessment in higher education institutions. The keynote presented by Mthobisi Ndaba entitled “The Public Good of a Doctoral Qualification,” served as an excellent precursor to these workshops as well as to the main conference, which commenced on 31 October.

In her opening address, the President of SAERA, Maureen Robinson, highlighted the importance of creating an archive of SAERA’s history since its inception in 2013 so that a record could be kept of critical events and significant achievements over the 10-year period. She also explained the significance of consolidating the trajectory established by SAERA, and the importance of strengthening the quality and contribution of current research activities. Her address was followed with messages of welcome and support by Eureka Rosenberg, the local chair of the organising committee and executive dean of the Faculty of Education at Rhodes University.

The conference plenaries on 31 October included a panel chaired and moderated by Anil Kanjee, which presented an insightful review of a major research project entitled, “From Diagnosis to Understanding: A National View on Teacher Pedagogy.” This presentation provided insights into the project (supported by the National Education Collaboration Trust, Department of Basic Education, and involving nine other higher education institutions) on how teachers transact pedagogy in South African classrooms. The

panellists, Godwin Khosa, Cina Mosito, and Tinti Enoch Rabotapi imparted significant insights into the policy implications and macro cross-provincial findings emerging from the study.

The third plenary presentation on 31 October was by Salim Vally who introduced, *Against Racial Capitalism: Selected Writings, Neville Alexander*, edited by him and Enver Motala (2023). In the collation of this book, a tribute to Neville Alexander and his work, the editors reviewed volumes of his writing to elicit key issues that captured the essence of racial capitalism, especially in view of its continued perpetuation in the current world in which we find ourselves.

Day 2's plenary presentation was Saleem Badat's Mandela Lecture. The SAERA Mandela Lecture invites the presenter to reflect on the work of Nelson Mandela—his resilience, his presence, and what his inspiration signifies for education in South Africa and beyond its borders. In his lecture, aptly entitled "Commodification, Corporatization, Complicity and Crisis: The University in Contemporary South Africa," Badat decried the ways in which South African universities, like those globally, have embraced neoliberal policies with a focus on economic growth as opposed to advancing the freedom of people and liberating students' minds. In his interrogation of the ways in which South African universities have become complicit in promoting a market-driven economy, he proposed a different future characterised by a sense of agency on the part of individuals and social groups dedicated to a new struggle following a different logic than the neoliberal one. In reflecting on what this means for the South African higher education scenario within our own contexts and experiences, he identified challenges, such as the erosion of cooperative governance structures due to corporatisation, political problems and protests, underfunding, persistent inequities, and organisational weakness as some key areas of concern that required immediate attention. In presenting his vision aligned to Mandela's legacy, Badat advocated for universities to embrace values and approaches based on quality, academic freedom, community engagement, social justice, and equity as they focus on working towards a more transformative and inclusive higher education system.

During the book launch that evening, delegates were invited to engage with the authors of the books. The books launched during the conference were: *Against Racial Capitalism: Selected Writings, Neville Alexander* edited by Salim Vally and Enver Motala (2023), *Transitioning Vocational Education and Training in Africa: A Social Skills Ecosystem Perspective* (part of the VET Africa collection by Simon McGrath et al., 2023), *Sankofa: Appreciating the Past in Planning the Future of Early Childhood Education and Development in Africa* edited by Alan Pence and colleagues (2023), and *Transforming Postgraduate Education in Africa* edited by Michael Samuel and Hyleen Mariaye (2023). These books were well received by a very appreciative and engaged audience.

The plenary sessions on Day 3 of the conference opened with Hasina Ebrahim's keynote, "Education Foundations: Troubling Early Childhood Foundations for Better Futures." This was followed by a panel dialogue entitled "Educational Foundations: Moderated Panel Response and Thoughts on the Conference Theme From Diverse Research Perspectives," presented by Nhlanhla Mpofu, Mlamuli Hlatswayo, and Michael Samuel.

The keynote presented by Lesley le Grange on Day 4 provided food for thought as he critically engaged with performativity from multiple vantage points in his paper, "Educational Futures: The Many Sides of Performativity." The day's second plenary was a panel session entitled "Educational Futures: Moderated Panel Response to This Aspect of the Conference Theme From Diverse Research Perspectives," in which Presha Ramsarup, Injairu Kulundu-Bolus, Nuraan Davids, and Mpho-Entle Modise shared insights into their engagement with the theme from various perspectives by focusing on how the theme of the conference spoke to their individual concerns, experiences, and visions for the future.

On the final day of the conference, there were opportunities for the SAERA SIGS (special interest groups) to share insights into their experiences and future research initiatives, and for the delegates to engage with them on a personal level to discuss future endeavours and the way forward in their particular focus areas.

The parallel sessions and workshops presented by academics across the spectrum of universities in South Africa and internationally over the 4-day programme, focused on an interrogation of issues, challenges, and perspectives across all phases of education ranging from primary and secondary education, to higher education, and the TVET sector. Many of the presentations imparted novel insights into how academics across the institutions have grappled with the nexus between theory and practice, and the creative projects that they have embarked on for the upliftment, development, and enrichment of their students and staff. A variety of presentations also used theory as a lens through which to examine education(al) foundations and education(al) futures so that the delegates could engage with issues affecting education from multiple perspectives and through multiple lenses. This led to enhanced understandings of what could be done differently to address some of the challenges confronting education at both national and global levels.

In the conference closure on the final day, the panellists stressed the importance of being aware of the power of neoliberal approaches to capture our minds, and the implications thereof for the future of academic freedom at higher education institutions. There was a sense among the delegates that as much as the conference had created opportunities to share frustrations in higher education, there were also golden opportunities to share positive experiences, to dream about future research initiatives, and to be inspired by the work of colleagues—some of whom work under trying circumstances. There was also a focus on the importance of contributing to the public good, working towards action, and confronting tensions rather than shying away from them. In the way forward, the panellists emphasised the importance of focusing on how research could be used to achieve common goals, and a closer examination of what knowledge universities require in the era in which we find ourselves.

There was consensus amongst the delegates that the conference had served to shed light on important issues affecting education at large, and contributed positively to their ongoing personal, professional, and academic development within the contexts of the higher education institutions in which they find themselves. The sense of sharing common issues, challenges, and concerns in a collaborative, collegial, and supportive space—especially for novice and emerging academics—signifies hope for the next generation of academics.

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