



The contribution of the South African Education Research Association to strengthening education research in South Africa

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Abstract

The South African Education Research Association (SAERA) was established a decade ago to provide a national home for all education researchers and scholars and a forum in which the interests of South African education could be engaged with critically for the public good. Its central aim is to contribute to the intellectual and scholarly field of education research in South Africa. Using documentary analysis of primary sources and interviews with past SAERA presidents, we outline the establishment of this new national research association as well as the strategies undertaken to realise its goals. These strategies include partnering with the *Journal of Education*, holding annual conferences, setting up Special Interest Groups, and providing early career researcher support. We analyse these strategies critically in order to identify their successes and challenges to date and discuss some future considerations for the association.

Keywords: South African Education Research Association, history of research associations, early career researchers, Special Interest Groups

Introduction

In this article we look back at ten years of the South African Education Research Association (SAERA), since its inaugural conference, held in January 2013 at Bela Bela, in the North West province of South Africa, and reflect on how the association has contributed to strengthening education research in South Africa.

We outline the rationale of SAERA and note that the motivation behind its establishment was the desire of academics at different universities in South Africa to build a research association that would cut across history and contexts and bring together different organisations that had

their roots in universities previously divided by race, ideology, and language. Against the background of this strong political and strategic intention, we describe how the initial task of the association was to establish itself with organisational procedures, a constitution, and resources. Alongside these administrative requirements, different strategies were instituted to meet the goal of strengthening education research, specifically partnering with the *Journal of Education* as the official journal of SAERA, holding annual conferences, setting up Special Interest Groups (SIGs) to advance research in specific areas, and providing early career researcher support. We analyse these strategies critically to identify their successes and challenges to date and we discuss some future considerations for the association.

Methodology

In this paper, we use documentary research, drawing mainly on documents generated by the association over the past ten years. Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents (Bowen, 2009). Data sources include documents not in the public domain but held by the authors by dint of their involvement in the association, as well as documents in the public domain, formally produced by the association over the past ten years. These include documents written for various purposes and audiences such as conference programmes, the minutes of Annual General Meetings (AGMs), the SAERA constitution, presidents' reports presented at the AGMs, issues of the *Journal of Education*, as well as the report of the Academy of Science of South Africa (2020) on education journals in South Africa. We also invited the past presidents of SAERA¹ to reflect either verbally or in written form on their terms of office. We received two written responses and conducted one interview.²

Personal factors of the investigators concerned, such as interest, motivation, and historical curiosity often influence historical documentary research (Hill and Kerber, 1967, as cited in Cohen et al., 2007) In this vein, we acknowledge our position as insider researchers, with a keen personal and professional interest in the development of SAERA. Carol Bertram was a member of the SAERA executive from 2014 to 2020, while Maureen Robinson was part of the original steering committee, as well as part of the first executive committee of SAERA, and the president from 2021 to 2023. Thus, we are not disinterested researchers but bring to this paper our own experiences and knowledge of the establishment of SAERA, and corroborate this with documentary evidence wherever possible, to reduce the potential of bias. The strength of our insider position means that we had a lived first-hand experience of the establishment of SAERA and also have access to documents that are not in the public domain, such as notes taken at the plenary sessions of the first conference in 2013 and documents regarding the indexing and accreditation of the *Journal of Education*. We can also be sure of the authenticity of the documents. We engaged in content analysis and extracted recurring themes from our reading of the reports and the transcribed interviews. We reduced

1 Shireen Motala (2013–2014), Aslam Fataar (2014–2015), Sechaba Mahlomaholo (2015–2017), Lesley Wood (2017–2019), Labby Ramrathan (2019–2021), Maureen Robinson (2021–2023)

2 All three respondents have given their permission to be quoted.

and organised data from conference programmes and *Journal of Education* issues over the past 10 years to identify patterns.

While we had thought initially to focus only on the strategies that supported research, on reading the data it became clear that the processes of establishing the association were as important as these strategies. We therefore decided to structure the paper under the following sections: the formation of SAERA and the establishment of an infrastructure, followed by the strategies undertaken to support research development, namely, to maintain the *Journal of Education*, to hold annual conferences, to establish SIGs, and to support early career researchers (ECRs).

The formation of SAERA

The short period of SAERA's existence stands in contrast to some research associations in other countries. For example, the American Educational Research Association (AERA) was established in 1916, the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) in 1970, and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) in 1974. SAERA's evolution thus cannot be compared to the trajectories of these long-standing national research associations, a point to which we return later.

Prior to its launch in 2013, the establishment of SAERA was preceded by three years of discussions, workshops, and engagements with different education research associations, deans of Faculties of Education, and the national Department of Education. Although a wide range of research associations participated in the early discussions, it was soon realised that SAERA would most likely draw on those associations that focused on general educational issues, such as the Education Association of South Africa (EASA), the Kenton Education Association (KEA), the Southern African Comparative and History of Education Society (SACHES), and the South African Society for Education (SASE), rather than those that were characterised by particular disciplines or focus areas.

The nature and depth of these collaborative discussions can be gleaned from the account of a meeting held on February 22, 2012, at the University of South Africa (Unisa) in Pretoria. Representatives of 27 organisations gathered to discuss the establishment of SAERA as a united research body in South Africa, and to consider how this could be done without existing associations losing their unique identity.

Two key questions were raised at this meeting. The first was to ask what associations thought they could gain in terms of research by joining an umbrella organisation. The discussion was an enthusiastic one, with potential positive outcomes that included improved rigour, increased capacity-building, a sense of a bigger picture, the possibility for large-scale interdisciplinary research, building on the expertise of different member associations, collaborative research in which member associations' expertise is acknowledged, and an opportunity to get academics together.

The second key question was to decide on the most appropriate form for such an organisation, or what kinds of modalities would hold simultaneously the distinctive and the shared. Two broad approaches were suggested: an approach that would phase out differentiated associations to form one coherent body; or one based on a federal structure that could build on established strengths and enable conversations across disciplines. However, more support was garnered for a third model, namely, to establish a new association that would ensure maximum inclusivity and engagement since there would thus be no loss of independent associations in the short term and, possibly, not at all, although some associations might choose to merge with the new association. A steering committee was then established, and it was agreed to hold the first joint conference in January 2013. At this conference, the different associations would have the opportunity to engage directly with their members and decide whether they wished to disband and become part of SAERA.

The January 2013 conference was thus a watershed in the history of educational research in South Africa. In a plenary address at that conference, two members of the steering committee (Maureen Robinson and Ari Naidoo) presented the underlying values and principles of the proposed new association, the central principle being to advance scholarly inquiry in South Africa. Other values and principles included improving education and serving the public good, fostering collaboration, developing new epistemological traditions, creating developmental opportunities, and maintaining respect for differences in organisational histories, identities, and cultures.

In the same plenary session, robust discussion ensued on key questions about the future. These included how to ensure that SAERA would be more than the sum of its parts, what constitutes a shared (South African) scholarly identity, why existing associations and/or individuals would want to be part of SAERA, and what would be the glue that would hold the different organisations together.

In acknowledgement of the different identities of the various existing associations, the process of establishing SAERA was from the start designed to be inclusive and participatory. In the words of its first president, Shireen Motala, the aim involved “building the organisation, building an independent identity, building something entirely new, but acknowledging its antecedents and historical starting points.”³The intention of SAERA had been to work towards one unified education research association. However, it was only KEA that resolved at its AGM on August 12, 2014, to dissolve, with all other associations preferring to continue with their existing organisational identities. Even for Kenton, there remained a strong commitment to not losing its focus and identity; it noted that “[a]ll felt that it was important to ensure that the critical/social justice project for which Kenton had been known for so many years would continue under the banner of SAERA.”

Although organisations such the Association for Mathematics Education of South Africa (AMESA), the Southern African Association for Research into Mathematics, Science and Technology Education (SAARMSTE), and the Higher Education Learning and Teaching

3 Interview with Shireen Motala, 2023

Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) participated in the initial discussions, they chose not to become incorporated into SAERA given their specific focus.

Whether the continued existence of different research associations can be considered a weakness in the evolution of SAERA is still open for debate; what is clear, however, is that organisational loyalties run deep, and histories cannot be easily unravelled. Nevertheless, it was encouraging that the first SAERA executive, elected at the 2013 conference, included members from a range of universities and organisations, thus proving that affiliations could span different structures.

Table 1

Executive members elected in 2013

Name	Association Affiliation	University affiliation
President: Shireen Motala	KEA	Johannesburg
Deputy President: Aslam Fataar	SACHES, EASA, KEA	Stellenbosch
Secretary: Nazir Carrim	KEA	Wits
Deputy secretary: Vusi Mncube	SASE	Unisa
Treasurer: Volker Wedekind	SACHES, KEA	KwaZulu-Natal
Deputy treasurer: Pholoho Morojele		KwaZulu-Natal
Additional members		
Eldrie Gouws	EASA	Unisa
Wayne Hugo	KEA	KwaZulu-Natal
Maureen Robinson	KEA	Stellenbosch
QK Semuli	EASA	Unisa
Hamsa Venkat	EMASA, SAARMSTE	Wits
Charl Wolhuter	SACHES	North West
Lesley Wood	EASA	North West

Establishing an infrastructure

Hanks (1990) argued that a description of organisational life cycles is more than an identification of a set of stages; it represents a configuration of contextual, strategic, and structural characteristics that integrate both the content (stages) and process (dynamics) of the organisational life cycle. The early years of SAERA are a good example of this integration of content and process. While the overall vision was to advance scholarly inquiry in South Africa, much of the executive's time at the beginning was taken up building an infrastructure to run the day-to-day workings of the association. This included developing policies and

procedures, establishing a secretariat, and finalising the roles and responsibilities of the executive. The passion and commitment of those driving the activities can be seen in the fact that all this work was done voluntarily, with no seed funding, and with no permanent paid administrative support. As the first president's report noted,

The agendas for the executive meetings have been primarily about putting in place infrastructure and systems for SAERA and addressing various issues in order to fully constitute the organisation. The critical activities carried out by the executive during its tenure included: [f]inalising the SAERA constitution, setting up an archive, raising funds for SAERA, organisational linkages nationally, regionally, and internationally, publicity and communication, publications strategy, SIGs, membership drive.⁴

Subsequent presidents' reports add to the account of establishing this organisational infrastructure, providing details about incorporation procedures for the *Journal of Education*, criteria for the best doctoral thesis award and other honours awards, the Annual Nelson Mandela Legacy lecture, registration as a non-profit organisation, guidelines for conference hosts, coordination of social media outlets, and building the membership.

At the same time, the presidents' reports over the years show how strategic priorities remained at the forefront of the work of the executive committees. This included the building of SIGs as the organisation's research expertise and development engine, how to become community based and socially relevant, while still maintaining the accepted rigour of high education research standards, and the admission of SAERA to a Southern African research network, BOLESWANA.⁵ At the BOLESWANA conference in Namibia in 2018, SAERA was accepted as a member of this association, and it was re-named SAERN (the Southern African Educational Research Network). Affiliation was also sought and granted to the World Education Research Association (WERA). Dr Felice J. Levine (Executive Director of AERA and the Secretary General of WERA) was a keynote speaker at the 2014 SAERA conference. However, SAERA later withdrew from WERA since doubts were raised about the benefit of the high annual cost of such membership.⁶

As with all associations around the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic meant a thorough re-assessment of research activities. In the words of the then President, "The current context of COVID-19 has placed a lot of demands on individuals [in] the current workspaces, adapting to a new way of engaging with our work, our students and staff and our scholarship and other activities".⁷ The cancellation of the 2020 annual conference, the online version of the 2021 conference, and the hybrid arrangement of the 2022 conference are all examples of the challenge of adjusting to the times.

The pandemic and the fast introduction of digital platforms also significantly changed the mode of operating of the executive since most meetings moved online. Academics had

4 Shireen Motala, President's report, 2014

5 BOLESWANA is a research body composed of education research associations from Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland (now Eswatini), Namibia, and South Africa.

6 Lesley Wood, President's report, 2018

7 Labby Ramrathan, President's report, 2020

always used their own research funds to attend executive meetings, and often needed to travel by air to other cities. Meetings now became cheaper and more convenient but whether a lack of personal contact will diminish the collective spirit of executive members remains to be seen.

Key strategies to achieve the aims

The strategies adopted by SAERA are derived from the aims of the association, as cited in its Constitution.

- providing a national home for all education researchers and scholars and a forum where the interests of South African education are critically engaged with for the public good,
- setting up and running workshops and training for new educational researchers,
- providing platforms such as conferences, public lectures and journals for the dissemination of research into education,
- engaging with policymakers to promote the utilisation of research for policy development, and securing support and funding for education research and
- liaising with national and international bodies with similar objectives, with the aim to promote research in all fields of education globally. (SAERA Constitution, 2015)

Journal of Education

In this section, we engage with the question of how the *Journal of Education* has contributed to developing the intellectual and scholarly field of education research in South Africa. The *Journal of Education* began in 1969 as an in-house journal of the University of Natal's Faculty of Education. In 2004, it became the official journal of KEA and published a Kenton conference special issue each year (Harley et al., 2010). Members of the Faculty of Education at the University of Natal, now the University of Kwazulu-Natal (UKZN), made up the editorial board. At this stage hard copies of the *Journal of Education* were printed and mailed to members and to all libraries in the country, while pdf versions of articles have been freely available on the *Journal of Education* website⁸ since 2003.

The journal became the official journal of SAERA from Issue 60 in 2015 with Wayne Hugo as editor. Carol Bertram followed as editor from 2016–2021 with Labby Ramrathan taking over in 2022. A key focus was to raise the profile and status of the journal by getting accreditation beyond only the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). This issue was raised at the 2015 AGM, and it was agreed to pursue accreditation with the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) that is a bibliographic database, digital library, and cooperative electronic publishing model of open access journals that are focused on the needs of developing countries. A number of quality criteria for an accredited open access journal had to be met, such as including uninterrupted publication schedules on each article indicating the dates on which a paper was submitted, reviewed, and accepted; attaching

8 <https://journals.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/joe/issue/archive>

Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs) for each article; ensuring that 75% of contributions are beyond a single institution; and having clear journal guidelines for authors and reviewers as well as policies regarding plagiarism, errata, copyright etc. (Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), 2018).

The *Journal of Education* was indexed by SciELO in 2018, by the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) in 2019, and in 2021 by Scopus. Articles now have increased visibility and discoverability on the web, thereby increasing the profile of the published research. In addition, ASSAf (2020) reviewed 17 education journals published in South Africa and was generally positive about the *Journal of Education*. These indicators show that the journal is well-respected by the academic community and meets the quality criteria for an open access journal, thus providing an incentive for authors to submit their articles for consideration.

The *Journal of Education* publishes two general issues annually as well as a Conference special issue and one edited by a SIG. Table 2 represents the Conference special issues that were guest edited from 2015–2023. This practice aims to develop capacity among academics from a range of universities and to link ECRs with experienced academics so that they can learn the practices of journal editing. To support this process, a detailed guide to guest editing was written.

Table 2

Conference themes and guest editors of Conference Special Issues 2015–2023

2014 Conference Special Issue (2015, 61) <i>Researching Education: Future Directions</i> Wayne Hugo, Carol Bertram (University of KwaZulu-Natal)
2015 Conference Special Issue (2016, 65) <i>Strengthening Educational Research for Sustainable Futures</i> Dipane Hlalele, Andre Le Roux, June Palmer (University of the Free State)
2016 Conference Special Issue (2017, 69) <i>Reimagining Education: Poetics, Practices and Pedagogies</i> Aslam Fataar, Maureen Robinson, Doria Daniels (Stellenbosch University)
2017 Conference Special Issue (2018, 72) <i>Education in an Era of Decolonization and Transformation</i> Shervani K. Pillay, Sylvan Bignaut (Nelson Mandela University)
2018 Conference Special Issue (2019, 76) <i>Education 01? In Search of a New Operating System: Making Education More Relevant, Responsive and Authentic</i> Carolina Botha, Charl Wolhuter (North West University)
2019 Conference Special Issue (2020, 80) <i>Beyond Boundaries: Exploring Possibilities through Research and Innovation</i> Cynthia Carol Nonhlanhla Mthiyane, Mogale Maeko, Anita Hiralaal (Durban University of Technology)
Special Issue on <i>Interlocking Inequalities, Conflicts, and Crises: COVID-19 and Education in the</i>

<i>Global South</i> (2021, 84) Vaughn John, Adam Cooper, Yusuf Sayed (In place of the 2020 Conference Special Issue)
2021 Conference Special Issue (2022, 88) <i>Education for Inclusivity and Sustainability in Times of Increasing Inequalities</i> Nazir Carrim, Moeniera Moosa, Thokozani Mathebula (Wits)
2022 Conference Special Issue (2023, 92) <i>Education in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities</i> Karen Koopman, Colette February, Mokgadi Moletsane (University of the Western Cape)

The number of submissions to the Journal has increased tremendously over the past 10 years. This increase in demand is driven by the Department of Higher Education and Training's Research Outputs Policy (2015) that allocates funding to the publication of research, the pressure on academics and doctoral students to publish their work, as well as the increasing importance placed on research outputs when academics apply for promotion. Unfortunately, the huge expansion in the quantity of research published in South Africa has not necessarily been accompanied by quality (Mouton & Valentine, 2017). The greater number of submissions creates a challenge for the editorial committee given the workload of doing an initial appraisal to decide if an article should be peer-reviewed and has also led to many academics being overwhelmed with requests to review articles.

Mouton et al. (2019) reported that the so-called big five universities—University of Cape Town, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Unisa, Stellenbosch University, and the University of Pretoria—account for 55% of all education research papers published. In contrast, an overview of the affiliation of authors publishing in the *Journal of Education* indicates a more diverse, more national scholarly community than only these five universities. The authors of most articles are employed at universities and there are not many articles published by researchers working at educational NGOs or science councils. This may be because these researchers are not compelled to publish their research in academic journals.

Given that the scope of the *Journal of Education* is very broad, it is difficult to identify clear themes in the general issues. The original scope of the Journal was to publish only articles that were strongly theoretical and analytical in nature, but over time the scope has broadened in line with the general nature of the SAERA conferences. An overview of articles published in the general issues in the last three years (Table 3) shows that the most articles were published about schooling, then higher education, then teacher education, teachers, and teaching. Only two articles were published about technical and vocational education (TVET) and none about adult education.

Table 3

Focus of articles published in General issues of the *Journal of Education*, 2021–2023

Level of education	Issue 82, 2021	Issue 85, 2021	Issue 86, 2022	Issue 89, 2022	Issue 91, 2023	TOTAL articles
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Level of education	Issue 82, 2021	Issue 85, 2021	Issue 86, 2022	Issue 89, 2022	Issue 91, 2023	TOTAL articles
Teachers, teaching, teacher education	2	3	3	2	0	10
Higher education	4	2	2	4	5	17
Schooling	3	4	3	5	4	19
TVET	0	1	0	0	1	2
No level stipulated	0	0	1	0	0	1
TOTAL articles	9	10	9	11	9	48

Of the articles on higher education, four engaged with the question of decolonising the curriculum, two with academic freedoms, one with funding, one with supervision, two with the teaching of specific subjects, one with transforming leadership, one with unemployed graduates, and two with COVID-19. Of the articles on schooling, four focused on sexuality education, one on immigrants, one on armed conflicts, one on career decision-making, two on disabilities and inclusive education, two on the digital divide, four on the teaching of specific subjects, and three on school leadership. These descriptions are very broad and there is certainly a need for a more nuanced and detailed analysis of articles published in the Journal over the past ten years. A bibliometric review of the publications could investigate co-authorship, keywords, local and international authors, theoretical and methodological issues, and frequency of citations.

Annual conferences

The annual conference is a key activity of SAERA. The first conference was hosted by Unisa at Bela Bela in January 2013 and conferences have been held annually since then, except for 2020 because of the COVID-19 lockdown. To enhance participation and build experience across the sector, every year the conference is hosted by a different higher education institution (HEI) that constitutes a Local Organising Committee, and that also liaises with the SAERA executive. The Local Organising Committee is required to select the conference theme, draw up the Call for Papers, select from the abstracts that are submitted, design the programme, including the selection of keynote speakers, as well as organise the logistics of the venue. This means that each conference has a different feel, although a set of written guidelines has been developed in recent years. An executive portfolio position on conference planning supports the Local Organising Committee in its task.

The contribution of the conference to research promotion is evidenced in several ways. First, it is seen as a place that has increasingly welcomed ECRs. To quote the first president, “It’s a lot more representative of new groups of researchers . . . When I hear people . . . say, ‘This is the first conference I’m presenting at,’ you know we managed to fulfil that principle [of

encouraging and supporting] early career researchers.”⁹ Second, the number of presentations at the 2014 conference was 202; in 2015, this increased to 242 as well as 25 panels (that included three or four speakers each). In 2019, the number of conference delegates was 380.¹⁰ Third, in relation to the thematic areas, over the 10 years, the conference themes speak enduringly about re-imagining education for the future, and about innovation and transformation. In 2017, the theme focused specifically on decolonisation and in 2015 and 2021 the focus was on sustainability. Both international and local keynote speakers have been invited to address these themes. The need for decolonial education in South Africa is well-documented and is reflected in four consecutive SAERA conferences from 2015 (Fataar, 2022). International speakers such as Professor Carlos Torres at the 2015, Professor Achille Mbembe at the 2016, and Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Professor Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni at the 2017 conferences have provided a strong focus on decolonial education research practices.

The 2015 conference took place on the University of the Free State campus at the time of the first #FeesMustFall protests; this resulted in a plenary discussion on this issue and a statement issued by the SAERA executive. The student protests centred the voices of students more firmly in the association since they called for more resources to be used to support students and fewer to be spent on expensive conference venues that, in turn, resulted in high conference fees. Since 2018, there has been a practice of inviting South African keynote and panel discussants in an attempt to use limited resources more cost-effectively.

A significant recent development has been the strengthening of links with the regional network of educational research associations, with the 2024 conference being held in association with SAERN. This has promoted dialogue across the region and encouraged cross-border awareness of experiences and ideas.

Linked to the annual conference, the prestigious annual Nelson Mandela Legacy lecture was established as a “feature lecture that considers some of the inspiration arising out of Nelson Mandela—his endurance, his presence, his writings, and his being a South African and global icon—and what this inspiration would mean for education in South Africa and beyond.”¹¹ Highly respected South African researchers are invited to consider what might make Mandela’s life and achievements educational. In some years, this lecture was included in the conference programme. The speakers have engaged with education’s relationship with contemporary social issues such as enduring inequality (Professor Salim Vally), gender-based violence (Professor Relebohile Moletsane), as well as issues of policy reform in education (Professor Pam Christie), teacher professional development (Professor Jill Adler), epistemic justice in the academy (Dr Maria Torre and Professor Puleng Segalo), and a critique of the university in contemporary South Africa (Professor Saleem Badat).

Conference plenary topics across the years have considered issues such as globalisation, social and epistemic justice, inequality, decolonisation and transformation, planetary well-

9 Interview with Shireen Motala, 2023

10 Lesley Wood, President’s report, 2019

11 www.saera.co.za/mandela-education-legacy-lecture

being, education and work, as well as curriculum and knowledge. Interestingly, and not surprisingly, these concerns are mainly politically and sociologically oriented, and focused less directly on theoretical or research methodological issues.

Although each conference is billed against a particular theme, the papers often cover a wide range of topics. While this offers scope for participation, some concerns have been expressed. As Shireen Motala has noted, “You know, there doesn’t seem to be something that brings it all together, and I think that is both a strength and a weakness that in some ways we do . . . you know, we do represent a variety of intellectual traditions and disciplines.”¹² We return to this issue in the discussion section.

Special Interest Groups

Another key strategy of SAERA has been the promotion of SIGs. A SIG comprises a group of individuals whose specialised focus is on a particular topic, problem, or area in education. As indicated on the SAERA website, the purpose of SAERA SIGs is to advance research specialisation on topics of shared interest. These may include problematics and the theory and practice of education. SIGs are free to organize themselves as they see fit. The minimum requirements are that a SIG has five members all of whom belong to SAERA; that it represents more than one institution; and that its members and/or a representative must attend the SAERA conference.¹³

The minutes of the 2015 AGM note that 13 SIGs had been established by that time. The following SIGs had presentations on the 2015 programme: Action Research, System-Wide Educational Change, TVET and Vocational Education, Assessment, Emotions in Education, Human Rights Education Research, Self-Reflexive Methodologies, and Interaction Studies in Education. The 2015 conference programme also shows that there were discussions about the establishment of the Law and Education, and Curriculum SIGs.

In 2022/2023, the following SIGs were in existence: Action Research; Assessment and Testing; Curriculum Studies; Knowledge-Building in Educational Practices; Self-Reflexive Methodologies; Teacher Education; and TVET, Higher Education, and Work, with Inclusive Education and Education Technologies being added in late 2023. However, not all the SIGs have been able to maintain a sustained presence over the years. In the 2022 conference, only three SIG panels were on the programme, namely Self-Reflexive Methodologies, Assessment and Testing, and Teacher Education.

One opportunity for SIGs to create a more cohesive presence is through editing a special issue of the *Journal of Education*. In 2018, a call was put out for SIGs to present a proposal to the editor to guest edit such an issue. Table 4 below indicates the editors and themes of these SIG special issues from 2019–2023.

12 Interview, Shireen Motala, 2023

13 www.saera.co.za/sigs/

Table 4

Guest editors and themes of SIG Special Issues (2019–2023)

Special Issue on Curriculum Studies (2019, 74) Labby Ramrathan, Petro du Preez, Lesley le Grange
Special Issue on Methodological Inventiveness in Self-Reflexive Educational Research (2020, 78) <i>Memory and Pedagogy</i> Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan, Daisy Pillay, Inbanathan Naicker, Lungile Masinga
Special Issue on Knowledge-Building and Knowers in Educational Practices (2021, 83) Lee Rusznyak, Mlamuli Nkosingphile Hlatshwayo, Aslam Fataar, Margaret Blackie
Special Issue on Assessment in Education <i>Entrenching performativity or enhancing pedagogy: Addressing the challenge of assessment policy and practice</i> (2022, 87) Anil Kanjee, Nicky Roberts, Osman Sadeck, Jeanette Ramollo
Special Issue on Teacher Education <i>The complexities of learning to teach: Advancing the debates</i> (2023, 90) Lee Rusznyak, Maureen Robinson, Heloise Sathorar, Melanie Luckay

The focus of these special issues reflects in part the intellectual focus of each SIG. In 2019 the focus of the *Curriculum Studies* special issue was on decolonising, Africanising, indigenising, and internationalising curriculum studies since “exploring the nexus between and among these constructs could contribute to reimagining the field of curriculum studies in South Africa” (Ramrathan et al., 2019, p. 1). Of the articles published in this issue, three focus on indigenous knowledge in schooling, while one focuses on higher education. The SIG’s perspective on curriculum is as an autobiographical, lived, and storied practice, drawing on Pinar’s (2012) work (Bertram, 2022). In contrast to this, the SIG on *Knowledge-building in Educational Practices* argues that both the knower and knowledge are important when one is interrogating educational practices such as teaching, assessing, or designing curricula. The editorial of the *Knowledge-building and Knowers in Educational Practices* issue notes that “[i]t is our collective intention to promote research that makes knowledge-building in practices an object of study” (Rusznyak et al., 2021, p. 8).

The editorial in the special issue on *Self-Reflexive Methodologies* argues that the research process is as important as its products (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2020). The editors used the Japanese tankwa poem format to reflect the key ideas of each article, all of which engage with self-reflexive and inventive methodologies. The focus of the *Assessment* SIG (2022) was on the extent to which assessment in South Africa entrenches performativity or supports engaged learning. This editorial argues that key discussions over the years have engaged with the challenges of a system that focuses strongly on learner performance and measurement of test results rather than on the depth of learning (Kanjee et al., 2022). The most recent SIG special issue is from the *Teacher Education* SIG that focuses on the complexities of learning to teach.

Our concern is that what is often missing from the consideration of models and interventions for preparing teachers for the South African context is a deep

appreciation of the complexities of learning to teach, and an acknowledgement of the growing body of evidence-based research that supports quality teacher preparation (Rusznyak et al., 2023, p. 2).

The editors of all the special issues are from a range of HEIs and this reflects the collaboration across institutions, a central intention of SAERA. The editors tend to be well-established researchers and few ECRs have been included as editors; this needs attention. The inclusion of ECRs as co-editors has been more prevalent in the conference special issues.

Early career researchers (ECRs)

From its inception, a central goal of SAERA has been to build the next generation of scholars in South Africa. There are several reasons for this priority. First, the oppressive and racialised history of South Africa is characterised by extreme inequalities in educational opportunities, leading to a lack of race and gender diversity in universities, especially among senior academics. Govender et al. (2022), for example, have shown that there are not enough academics to replace the impending retirement of many senior ones and they pointed to the vast discrepancies in research outputs between historically advantaged and disadvantaged institutions. Second, Universities South Africa (USAF) noted that in 2019 just over a third of the teaching staff at universities were actively publishing, and 44% of senior lecturers and 82% of lecturers did not have a PhD (2023).¹⁴

Several strategies have been initiated over the years geared towards supporting ECRs. These include pre-conference workshops, seeking funding to subsidise the conference registration of postgraduate students and ECRs, online webinars, a dedicated Facebook page, and a YouTube channel for recorded webinars.

The pre-conference workshops in 2023 provide examples of the way in which topics speak to the needs and interests of emerging researchers. Workshops were offered on the following: Research design and methods—some recent trends; Academic writing and choosing a good journal; and Conceptualising your contribution to knowledge. The webinars that are presented throughout the year are converted into YouTube resources that are then openly available on the SAERA website. These webinars include topics such as Publishing from your Thesis; From a long PhD to a Short Article; and Choosing a Mentor.

While funding for in-person conference attendance remains a challenge, the networking and learning opportunities offered through these digital platforms have proved to be key strategies in extending and expanding the reach of activities. The success here can be gauged from the growth from 57 to 116 members of the Facebook page between April and September 2023, 140 responses to the August 2023 webinar on choosing a mentor, and 156 views of the recording of Converting a PhD to a Short Article. It is also encouraging to note that the webinars are sometimes attended by scholars from countries outside of South Africa, such as Malawi, Ghana, Lesotho, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Mauritius.

Although these activities have been taking place for some years, 2020 saw the creation of the formal position of an ECR representative on the SAERA executive. The first incumbent in this position was Mpho-entle Modise, then a lecturer at Unisa. This position has been instrumental in directly embedding the interests of new scholars into the thinking and planning of the association.

Modise and Robinson (2023) described how the formalisation of the ECR portfolio originated in a context of a student movement that demanded real change. As Thomas Salmon,¹⁵ a key driver of the inclusion of ECRs in the SAERA constitution, explained,

There was a lot going on in higher education, protests from students, campuses shutdowns, etc. One of the students' concerns was that year after year, conferences would be held at 5-star hotels with discussions around transformation, decolonisation and other pertinent issues without tangible change and impact on students' lives. The students put forward ideas to enhance access and participation at the conference, including providing financial support for students to attend conferences, and more support for workshops to support students in developing papers, especially for students from disadvantaged institutions.

The prioritisation of early career researchers was thus not only about capacity building, but also about democratising processes of research production. Other than dedicated funding for postgraduate students to attend the conferences, calls were made to promote dialogue and participation at the conference through including more roundtables. Funding applications for students are now a feature of conference planning, but budget cuts in national funding organisations have meant that such funds are far from adequate to meet the expanding interest of young scholars.

Within the ECR portfolio, SAERA has been particularly committed to promoting a culture of collaboration in a supportive research environment. This resonates with the principles advanced by Boud and Lee (2015), who emphasised the value of peer and networked learning through participation in a community of research practice and a research environment and culture that involves interaction with many parties.

Modise and Robinson's (2023) findings show how this approach is valued by ECRs, especially against a background of competition and performativity in higher education. Specifically, ECRs have indicated that they value the way in which the conference helps them to feel part of a broader community, they benefit from listening to and getting feedback on their conference presentations, and they enjoy engaging in dialogue with others about their work.

Discussion

Published literature on research associations around the globe is not readily available, thus reinforcing the argument that such histories are important to document. Comparisons are also informative. For example, it is interesting to note how the presidential addresses of some other associations engage more directly with concerns about research and scholarship than has been the custom with presidents' reports at SAERA. By way of illustration, Banks (2016) drew on the addresses of four AERA presidents of colour to illustrate how they have deepened equity and diversity in AERA by expanding its epistemological terrain, providing "counternarratives based on a transformative paradigm" (p. 154). In Australia, Lingard and Gale (2010) have analysed selected presidential addresses over 40 years, showing how each decade has foregrounded a different conceptual issue. The 1970s showed a dominance of educational psychology, the 1980s a rejection of the neutrality of educational research, the 1990s a postcolonial orientation and theorisation of practitioner research, and the early 2000s a new educational psychology grounded in sociocultural and constructivist theory, and an emphasis on the significance of theory for empirically based research.

The long history of these associations provides a trajectory over time to consider thematic, methodological, and political issues in educational research in these countries. With only a decade behind it, SAERA's presidents' reports have, by necessity, prioritised the organisational issues related to building the association, with key research and scholarship issues more identifiable in the keynote addresses and Nelson Mandela Legacy lectures. A similar thematic analysis over decades is not possible to track for SAERA at this stage, but it certainly needs to be done in the coming years.

At an organisational level, the hard work in the early stages of SAERA's existence to establish an infrastructure has been relatively successful. The building blocks of the organisation are in place, including a constitution, a website, executive portfolios, and a financial system, all of which took time to set up. An annual conference has taken place (except for 2020), with strong participation from across the country and with many new researchers attending each year. The conferences aim to create a welcoming and supportive environment along with being a space for critical, incisive debate and deep engagement with knowledge. This can be a difficult balance to strike.

One can argue, therefore, that a decade after its inception, SAERA has moved out of its infancy stage, and has taken its place as an established research association in South Africa. With this maturity comes the need to archive the association's history and documents more systematically, so that a record of the origins and activities are not lost, particularly since members of the executive and local organising committees rotate over the years.

Each strategy, in its own way, displays the growth and development in SAERA. The *Journal of Education* is attracting a diverse group of authors from a range of HEIs. The SIG special issues are providing an opportunity for SIGS to establish a coherent body of research and to speak to the broader discourses of education in the country. For example, a recent issue from the Assessment and Testing SIG has provided a critique of the excessive focus on testing in

schools, arguing against the “dominant performativity discourses impacting schools and universities” (Kanjee et al., 2022, p. 1).

The inclusion of an early career researcher portfolio on the executive has strengthened research capacity-building, with increasing numbers of participants in the different activities. Most encouragingly, many conference attendees are young academics from institutions across former historical and racial divides, many of whom are using the SAERA space to contribute to new knowledge, explore methodologies, and reflect on innovative (or constraining) practices in education. The hope is that this will bring new dynamic voices into the leadership and membership of the association and contribute to the building of the next generation of scholars.

Against these successes, several challenges and questions remain. We start with the main issue, namely SAERA’s intellectual contribution to national transformative discourses about education, followed by the work of the SIGs, and the pragmatic challenge of funding.

Although SAERA members are often called on in their individual and institutional capacities to provide comment in the media or to participate in national policy development, SAERA as an association has not been very vocal in contributing to educational debates or in resisting or advancing particular policies in the public domain. Active engagement included the statement about #FeesMustFall at the 2015 conference, and interaction with the National Research Foundation (NRF) about the cutting of funding to rated researchers. An example of how a research association can resist national policies is the support of the British Education Research Association (BERA) for a campaign in the United Kingdom called *More than a Score* that aims to counter the growing focus on high stakes testing throughout schooling (Santori & Holloway, 2023). BERA funded a research report that was written in an accessible way to mobilise intervention into the policy domain. In the United States, AERA has a defined advocacy function and regularly puts out public statements about national educational issues. As an example of a burning issue, SAERA could certainly speak out against the performativity regimes that are having a serious impact on the work of teachers and academics and changing the very nature of education.

A recent report (Mouton et al., 2019) provided a detailed insight into the state of South African research in relation to the National Research Foundation (NRF) funding allocated to different fields of scholarship and the numbers of papers published. Although there has been a 12.8% growth in research published in the Social Sciences between 2000 and 2016, this increase in quantity has not necessarily been accompanied by a growth in quality (Mouton & Valentine, 2017). Regarding a qualitative review of educational research, a large-scale review done on post-graduate research published between 1995 and 2004 showed that case study research is the most popular methodology (Rule et al., 2011). The focus on small-scale studies has also been noted in specific fields such as mathematics education research (Adler et al., 2017) and teacher leadership research (Grant, 2019). Similarly, most empirical articles published in the *Journal of Education* are small, qualitative studies that limits how this research can be applied in the field of policy and implementation.

To draw out key findings and illuminate patterns from small-scale studies, it is important to do meta-reviews. Recent overviews of educational research illuminate developments in various fields, such as a consolidation of research in early grade mathematics education (Venkat & Roberts, 2022) and early grade literacy in the country (Spaull & Pretorius, 2022). There have been ongoing discussions about SIGs doing literature reviews on the state of research in their field, but thus far, this has been done only by the Curriculum Studies SIG. This is a practice that can strengthen SAERA's contribution to research and transformation in the country.

SAERA could consider conducting an overview of the scholarship published in key South African journals over the last two or three decades to consolidate key findings and developments in the field. An example of this is BERA that has published five virtual special issues of the *British Education Research Journal (BERJ)* to map its first five decades from 1975 to the present day (*British Educational Research Journal, 2023*). The aim is to provide an overview of the scholarship that has been published by *BERJ* since its inception and to highlight trends and developments in the field over the past 50 years.

Another challenge for SAERA is the uneven development of the SIGs, together with their fluctuating membership. Thirteen SIGs were established in 2015; by 2023 this number had halved, and of these, not all were active. SIGs are intended to be the intellectual driving force of the association, working across institutions and in specific research focus areas. In discussion, SIG coordinators have noted that the challenge of sustaining the SIGs is hindered by the intensification of academics' work over the last ten years. Expanding student numbers, pressures to publish, regular student protests, and the impact of COVID, have all taken up time and energy, leaving little incentive for the additional work of the SIGs.

Despite these challenges, SIGs remain valuable spaces for research promotion since they offer a solid base for deepening theory, as well as opportunities for collaborative projects and public engagement. It is thus encouraging to note specific recent actions to promote the SIGs, such as information flyers, designated funding, and an induction guide for new SIG coordinators.

The last challenge, that is both practical and strategic, is the difficulty of accessing funding for novice researchers who may not have their own research funds that would enable them to attend the conferences. This is compounded by the NRF's having reduced incentive and rated researcher fund grants for established researchers (see Breetzke & Hedding, 2020) who would formerly have used such funds to help their postgraduate students attend the conference. Without opportunities for new researchers to present their work in person, the potential for engagement and feedback diminishes considerably. And while online platforms can be used, this does not contribute to networking, building a profile, or seeking research collaborations.

Conclusion

Our purpose in this article has been to reflect on how SAERA has contributed to strengthening education research in South Africa. This raises the question of what exactly needs to be strengthened. Is it the research methodologies? Is it coherence within fields and across HEIs? Is it the impact of research on policy and communities? Educational research is a disparate field of scholarship with regard to the phenomenon of study (such as learning, teachers, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, inclusive education and so on), the level of education (early childhood, primary school, secondary school, higher education, TVET colleges, adult learning), the disciplinary perspective (psychology, sociology, or philosophy), the school subject perspective (the learning and teaching of mathematics, language, science, history, for example) as well as the research paradigm that may be positivist, post-positivist, interpretivist, or critical (Soltis, 1984).

Given the wide reach of the field of educational research generally, it is a hard task for one research association to strengthen research at a national level, to contribute to transformative discourses, and to ensure coherence within the field. The general issues of the *Journal of Education* and the conference programmes show that the research focuses on a range of education levels and different phenomena, as alluded to by Soltis (1984) above. This is to be expected given the generalist nature of the association and the disparate nature of educational research and is thus unlikely to change.

So, what then can we say about SAERA's overall and specific contribution to strengthening educational research in South Africa? How is it working to meet its goals, as indicated on its website, to promote research and academic collaboration, link research policy, theory and practice, encourage the promotion of research quality, and help develop the next generation of researchers?

We argue that research and academic collaboration, and the promotion of research quality, have been strongly evident in the work of the association in the last decade. The key contribution of SAERA has been to create opportunities for greater participation among a wider and more diverse range of researchers than was the case before 2013, and to stimulate debate and conversations through its different strategies. The support for early career researchers remains a priority, not only for capacity-building, but also to develop a next generation of research leaders. Importantly, against the background of historical divides, the association has focused consistently on the slow process of building an inclusive organisation that is accessible and respected across the sector and that plays a key role in contemporary debates on education in South Africa.

In 2016, the then-President of SAERA, the late Sechaba Mahlomaholo, noted that planning was underway to promote the visibility of SAERA in the public sphere and to re-imagine the relationship between SAERA and the public-at-large. These goals remain as relevant now as they were then, and the challenge for the next decade is for the association to speak more incisively on the many education crises that we continue to face in our country.

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