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Conference Report

Education in an Era of Decolonisation and Transformation

SAERA Conference

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Boardwalk Conference Centre, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

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Introduction

The South African Education Research Association (SAERA) 2017 Conference was held at Boardwalk Conference Centre, Port Elizabeth, from Monday, 23 October to Thursday, 26 October 2017.

Conference Theme: Education in an Era of Decolonisation and Transformation

The theme called for the exploration of ways of decolonising and transforming higher education in South Africa. It provided the conference delegates the space to discuss how the university structures, epistemologies, knowledge systems, and curriculum can be interrogated to ensure the elimination of intellectual domination in the teaching, learning, knowledge acquisition, and research. The conference engaged with the following concerns: teaching, learning, research and engagement in educational contexts; education for all; voice of the voiceless; resistance, re-envisioning and renewal; pathways to decolonisation; and decolonising research in education. It had 276 paper presentations, 35 panel sessions, eight special interest group (SIG) presentations, and nine posters. The conference themes were:

- Leadership and learners' voice development.
- Reading as learning in the intermediate phase.
- Promoting science and mathematics learning in early years through activity centres.
- An exploration of leadership development in a learner representative structure in a secondary school, Oshana region, Namibia.
- Our stories: Issues affecting rural secondary school learners in the Eastern Cape.

- The impact of teacher professional conduct on learner experiences and performance in poor school communities in South Africa.
- This is how you take a selfie: The digitised stories of two Grade 3 Soweto boys.
- Strategies used by stakeholders to manage contemporary dynamic socio-educational issues in secondary school.
- Perceptions about small business development support in rural Eastern Cape.

Keynote Speakers

There were three keynote speakers drawn from three different areas of academic specialisation. The keynote speeches were of high quality.

Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni

The opening keynote speech was delivered by Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Head of the Archie Mafeje Research Institute at UNISA. He underscored the significance of decolonising the being, knowledge, and power against the dominating legacy of Westernisation and Eurocentrism. He advocated for education that challenges the students to think outside the box of colonial domination. Students have to be empowered to fight all forms of injustice (social, economic, historical, intellectual) and inhumanity brought by colonialism. He argued that people would be able to think and imagine possible worlds and knowledges only when they understood their subjectivity. In this regard, he emphasised: “I think from where I am.”

Linda Tuhiwai Smith

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Professor of Education and Māori Development, Pro-Vice Chancellor Māori, explained how research can either colonise or decolonise people. She further illustrated how indigenous researchers can design projects of dignity and equity through her Māori project. Her speech reminded the conference delegates to incessantly embark on research ethically at all the various stages—bearing in mind that their positionality as researchers impacts the participants in the project either positively or negatively.

João Paraskeva

João Paraskeva, Director Centre for Portuguese Studies and Culture & Professor of Educational Leadership, University of Massachusetts, advocated for a socially just curriculum, free from Western knowledge domination—a curriculum that does not privilege Western knowledge and silence or overlook other forms of knowledge.

Impressions of Some Paper Presentations

Most of the sessions that I managed to attend were very interesting and interactive. The presenters received good feedback. Some of the interesting debates that I listened to highlighted the difficulties of decolonising education when people still maintain a Westernisation/Eurocentric understanding of education.

Some conference presenters suggested that all universities have to decolonise their academic curriculum and ensure that the epistemology of the universities’ programmes reflect the African context. Another presenter outlined the need for a decolonised curriculum that advocates for social

justice and addresses the epistemic violence of colonial knowledge and colonial thought. One presenter highlighted the need to distinguish Africanising and decolonising literature.

Some of the participants, during their presentations, contended that to ensure decolonisation of research methodologies, research must be rooted in the indigenous people's perspectives, cultural values, and languages. Furthermore, some highlighted the significance of researchers to interrupt the colonial forms of research by actively engaging the Africans in research—accommodating their thoughts and experiences.

Organisation

XL Millennium Conference & Event Management's organisation of the 2017 conference was superb. They sourced alternative accommodation for conference delegates that was slightly cheaper than the Boardwalk Hotel, venue of the conference. They also organised shuttle services for the conference delegates from the airport to their hotels or lodges. I personally experienced the efficient services of the shuttle company. The 6:00 a.m. plane that I was supposed to board was overbooked, meaning that I had to wait for the 10:00 a.m. flight. The shuttle services department called me to enquire my whereabouts. Furthermore, XL Millennium arranged with the management of the various hotels and lodges further away from the conference venue to provide conference attendees with shuttles to ferry them to the conference venue in the morning and back to their places of abode in the evening. This was very convenient for the delegates because it enabled them to attend evening events.

Food

The conference provided dinner for the three evenings unlike the previous SAERA conferences (which only provided the gala dinner). This was exceptionally good. I felt this accommodated, especially, the students and others who were not funded by their institutions. I hope this will be done in future SAERA conferences.

Entertainment

The entertainment was good. The young traditional dancers were very confident and displayed great zeal and interest in their songs and dance.

Areas for Reconsideration

I felt the second and third keynote speakers were not given enough time to attend to participants' questions. I also felt the Skyped keynote speeches would have had more impact had the speakers been physically present. This would have afforded more time for engagement with the participants during the course of the conference.

It was noted with great concern by some conference delegates that a few of the papers presented had nothing to do with decolonisation. One presenter was asked to explain how her presentation linked to the theme of the conference and she could not explain. During, one of the tea breaks, some colleagues expressed their dismay over the abstract selection process. They indicated that the abstract selection committee should not simply accept abstracts to get more conference attendees and money, but should embark on rigorous selection to promote quality.

Whilst it is the norm that participants may choose the sessions they want to attend, and to move from one session to another, it should not be overlooked that this practice may disadvantage some—

especially the novice presenters. In some sessions, after a renowned presenter from a university had presented, all the colleagues from that university would leave the room. In a few extreme cases, only the session chair and remaining presenters remained. One such presenter indicated that he was not sure whether it would be worthwhile to attend future conferences because he was always unfortunate in that his presentations were scheduled after 4:00 p.m., when people do not attend.

As a possible solution, all presenters in a session should be encouraged to remain in the room for the duration of the entire session and learn from each other. As well, if possible, a free afternoon could be scheduled on the conference programme to enable people to tour the city or nearby areas of the conference venue to minimise the number of so-called “graveyard sessions” in the afternoons.

Above all, the conference was a good space for networking and learning from others.