Report

Education 01? In Search of a New Operating System: Making Education More Relevant, Responsive and Authentic
SAERA Conference, 22–24 October 2018, Saint George Hotel, Pretoria, South Africa

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The South African Education Research Association (SAERA) 6th Annual Conference was held at Saint George Hotel and Conference Centre, Pretoria, from Monday, 22 October to Wednesday, 24 October 2018.
Conference Theme: Education 01? In Search of a New Operating System: Making Education More Relevant, Responsive and Authentic

Forms of communication have expanded and radically changed in the 21st century. Hence, in the fast changing society we are living in, innovation is prime in many sectors and professions: construction, telecommunications, travel, business, and many more. However, education is one sector that has not fully embraced innovation to suit these changes we are experiencing. South African basic and higher education are still largely operating under a system that was designed for, and relevant to, the 19th century (Badat, 2016; Heleta, 2016; Motala & Pampallis, 2018; Spaull, 2015). The two centuries (19th and 21st) are deeply separated by the fast advancements of the 21st century as technology is being infiltrated into almost all sectors of society. Even though more and more research advocates for transformation in basic and higher education, implementation thereof remains a challenge within the sector (Shay, 2015). The primary question that encapsulated the theme of this SAERA conference was: "What is the relevance of education and educational research in changing times such as these?" And the conference was focused on finding ways, through research, to make education more relevant to all stakeholders involved.

The conference theme presented a point of entry into the conversation of making education more relevant—opening the discussion that education and educational research have not been as rapid in transformation and innovation as other sectors in the country. The call for papers had addressed, in the various sectors of education, the need for transformation in areas such as teaching and learning, research, educational systems and policies, leadership, professional development, educational frameworks, pedagogies, policy and practice, and supervision. As one of the major contributors in the development of citizens, education plays a significant role in society and has the power to influence the multitude of people who are a part of education every year. Therefore, the conference aimed to converse about the ways in which education can be made more relevant for the 21st century.

SAERA 2018 was attended by 300 delegates and offered an array of over 200 presentations. These delegates, therefore, had plenty of stimulus—from enriching plenary discussions with esteemed panel members who explored different contexts in our education system and possibilities for change, to the buzzing conversations that sparked during tea and lunch times. Delegates engaged in the conversation of making education more relevant—positive indication of their immersion in the important conversation the SAERA conference made possible.

In attending the conference, I got an opportunity to present my research work. My presentation focused on a section of my doctoral study dealing with playful pedagogy in creative arts teacher education. I outlined some reasons why pre-service teachers might not be eager to use playful pedagogy in the creative arts classroom during their school-based teaching practice experience. My presentation highlighted the importance of playful pedagogy in teacher education, and how my research was working on exposing and introducing pre-service teachers to the pedagogy.

I also attended various presentations on current research in schools, tertiary institutions, and communities. One I found interesting, and relevant to social change, was by Ansurie Pillay, lecturer in English education at University of KwaZulu-Natal, who presented a paper titled, "Seeking to Make Education Relevant, Authentic and Just Within an Unjust World: Using Action Research in a Postgraduate Education Lecture Room." Pillay unpacked her journey in using participatory action research (PAR) in a Bachelor of Education honours classroom with novice teachers just starting out at various primary and high schools. In her presentation, Pillay took us through the steps of how she used PAR to enable these language teachers to interrogate their level of engagement with issues of social justice, especially in the contexts they are working in. She argued that, if teachers are not empowered and involved in matters of social justice, then they may not be able to bring about positive change in the contexts they work in, which may result in an atrocious, callous cycle that further disadvantages the learner.

Another interesting presentation was by Marguerite Müller, lecturer in education studies at University of the Free State. Müller's presentation was titled, "Being, Belonging, and Becoming: The Unfolding of Identity and Memory During a First-Year Module on Social Justice." Here, we were taken through the experiences of lecturers teaching a first-year module that focused on social justice and identity. Using their memories, the lecturers were able to understand their past, and how it influenced their current teaching—particularly on issues of social justice. Furthermore, the study noted that the lecturers' memories were not just a way for them to look at their past but also a way to look into their current experiences and at possible future conceptualisations of being, belonging, and becoming as they continue in their professions. By using memories, the researchers hope to further explore ways in which they can make the education they offer more relevant, authentic, and meaningful to their students. I really enjoyed this presentation because it was engaging and gave the audience members an opportunity to understand the context in which the participants teach, and also gave some context to the memories through answers to the questions asked after the presentation. With an understanding of the lecturers' contexts, it soon became clear (and broadened understanding) why this study was necessary to them and the context they are teaching in.

Overall, this year's conference managed to bring forth conversations that really sparked interest, and gave various delegates an opportunity to share their current work in relation to relevance and authenticity in education. It also gave delegates some food for thought—new ideas and perspectives they could take away with them. Being in a space where people have ideas they can share with other academics truly promotes scholarship. As your research is pondered by various other academic delegates, they offer robust and constructive feedback on that research, which may enable you to expand and develop it at a deeper level than before. Also, having the opportunity to listen to other

scholars, and have the privilege to give constructive opinion, is something I appreciated about attending this conference. Such conferences are necessary for early career academics and doctoral researchers because they offer opportunities to share your work in a safe space and receive feedback that may strengthen your research. Given that the conference call had made mention of the slow progress that education is making, and with talks of the 4th industrial revolution happening soon, it is important that we educational researchers and educators find ways to become innovative and technologically ready for the changes that we are faced with in our workspaces. From schools, tertiary institutions, departments of education and all other stakeholders, as influencers and partakers in education, we need to take a stance and get to a leading position so that the education of this country can also be at the forefront of social change and development.

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