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Conference Report

The Future of Education Research in African Contexts

3rd CERM-ESA Conference - 2–4 October 2023
Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya

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The 3rd East and South African Centre of Excellence in Educational Research Methodologies and Management (CERM-ESA) conference served as celebration of 10 years since the project had begun. It was a celebration of the successes of the four key programmes within the project, namely, Research Programme, Academic Programme, Capacity Building Programme, and Teacher Professional Development Programme. The theme *The Future of Educational Research in African Contexts* sought to explore and bring into discussion the challenges, opportunities, and potential future directions of educational research in African contexts. The conference brought together scholars, researchers, educators, policy makers, and other stakeholders who shared their experiences, knowledge, and insights on the current state of educational research in Africa, and identified ways to enhance its quality and relevance.

The conference kicked off with welcoming remarks and introductions, led by the CERM-ESA steering committee and was a huge success with over 200 participants attending. Through keynote speeches, panel discussions, and paper presentations, the conference examined a wide range of issues. Additionally, it sought to promote collaboration and knowledge sharing among stakeholders in the field of educational research, and to contribute to the development of evidence-based policies and practices that could improve educational outcomes in African contexts.

The conference was officially opened by Isaac Kosgey, vice-chancellor of Moi University. He emphasised the significance of credibility in research as being a key factor that steers good academic research. He further added that research in Africa needs to redirect its focus towards real problems affecting Africans by using contextually relevant African theories, as well as Western theories, to produce socially impactful research. He promised that the university would continue supporting the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and collaborating with the sponsors.

Key celebrant of the conference was Abraham Waithima, Director of Daystar Leadership and Professional Development Institute, Daystar University, Kenya. His keynote was on "Research in Education: Pushing the Boundaries" in which he placed great emphasis on the importance of engaging in multidisciplinary research to allow researchers to become experts who can carry out research even in areas that they have not specialised in, through collaborative research. Waithima asserted that the academic world is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. It is volatile in the sense that the environment demands us to react quickly to ongoing changes that are unpredictable. In this case, uncertainty in the world presents a challenge for educators to act on the demands of the environment. He added that the complexity of the academic field is its dynamism and it has many interdependencies that require educators to work within and outside their field. Lastly, he argued that the ambiguity of the world we live in refers to its unfamiliarity, outside of our experiences. Waithima finished his speech with a quote from Albert Einstein: "Everything that counts, does not really count.''

There were three other keynote addresses, which brought out exciting discussions for the conference participants. In "Transforming Postgraduate Education in Africa," Michael Samuel argued that African education systems need a thorough theoretical policy review, including their modes of delivery. According to him, this would detach them from overreliance on Eurocentric theories in research and education. Samuel is a global scholar who has deeply invested in the disruption of higher education policy and curriculum to reflect Indigenous knowledge in African contexts.

Birgit Brock-Utne addressed on "Knowledge, Language, and Culture," in which she presented a powerful concept on what it really means to understand African languages, Indigenous knowledge systems, and culture in the context of research. She argued that Africa has its own unique system that must be understood and used in conducting research so that research can become impactful. Adapting foreign ideas, theories, and concepts to conducting research in the African context does not bear relevant fruits for the people with whom the research is carried out.

And Catherine Odora Hoppers from University of South Africa, and Gulu University, Uganda, addressed on "The Intellectual Journey of an African Child" as a challenging, life-threatening path worth taking. She narrowed her presentation down to a discussion of "transforming postgraduate research through

Indigenous knowledge and African theories." Odora Hoppers proposed a humanist philosophy which, she pointed out, enhances human creativity and freedom. The solution to structural problems that exist in the research field is not pointing away to the horizon for some system hanging out there but rather, a deep interrogation of the systems in which we belong.

A good number of presentations were done under various session themes. Under the "Indigenous Knowledge, Culture, and Art" theme, led by Simiyu Catherine, much was discussed about Africa's unique art systems, which can communicate meaningful ideas to researchers. This brought up aspects of creativity, unity, and culture. In the "Cross-Cutting Issues" theme chaired by Sammy Chumba, there arose discussions on Eurocentric theories, and it was agreed that there is no need for a total disconnect from Western theories, but priority should be placed on what is most relevant to African people. Lastly, on the theme of "Digitalisation and Digital Literacy," chaired by George Kegode, there arose robust discussions on what digitalisation and digital literacy means to researchers and the African education system. Due to the 21st century demands and the Sustainable Development Goals, there is a need to align African education systems to fit into the digital era and produce relevant products for the job market and economic imperative. The conference rapporteur Esther Kiaritha wrapped up the conference with the quote: "A mind that is open to new ideas never returns to its original states."

The conference concluded with fun events such as traditional songs and performances to entertain and acknowledge participants and sponsors of the conference. Gifts were exchanged in celebration of long-standing partnerships and the continuation into CERM-ESA III. Of importance, was the presence of the first CERM-ESA Project leader, Julius Tanui, who regaled the audience with powerful nostalgic memories of the initial stages of the project, which has now achieved tremendous success. The climax of the conference was the tree planting ceremony at the CERM-ESA site, Moi University, where all the conference keynote speakers, facilitators, presenters, guests, and master's and doctoral students each planted a tree. Various indigenous tree species were planted as a result. The conference gala dinner provided the right note on which to end the conference. The dinner was held at the Noble Hotel in Eldoret, where all participants had a chance to let their hair down and have fun together. During this event, participation certificates were awarded to all the conference participants. The final fun event took place at Tiret Resort and Retreat, also in Eldoret, where participants engaged in zip lining, horse riding, eating, dancing, and even archery.

Based on the formal and informal discussions by participants throughout the conference days, we believe that the conference provided a timely space for education practitioners to address the future of education and research in Africa. From where we are standing, the African education landscape looks promising.