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### REPORT

## Researching Education: Future Directions—SAERA Annual Conference, 2014

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The South African Education Research Association (SAERA) 2014 Conference took place at the Southern Sun Elangeni Hotel, Durban, South Africa from Wednesday, 13 August to Friday, 15 August 2014. The pre-conference workshops for research development took place on Tuesday, 12 August.

### Conference Theme

#### Researching education: Future directions

The theme intended to explore the current state of education research in South Africa, and looked forward to the future directions that research may take. The conference was an attempt to provide a space to reflect on the nature, the purpose, and the role of education research at present, and to look forward to new theoretical and methodological directions in the field. The conference engaged with all contexts of research—higher education, further education and training, informal education, adult education, as well as schooling.

The pre-conference workshops intended to drive development and dialogue on issues in educational research. These workshops aimed to provide a platform for novice researchers, developing researchers, and mentor researchers. The workshops included the following:

- Making sense of Foucault—Bert Oliver;
- Making sense of Deleuze—Lesley le Grange;
- Discourses in case study methodology—Peter Rule;
- Debating thesis supervision—Aslam Fataar; and
- Theories and theoretical framework—Elizabeth Henning.

These were followed by a pre-conference cocktail where the SAERA conference proceedings of 2013 was launched.

The welcome message was given by the chair of the local conference organising and planning committee, Professor Michael Anthony Samuel, who set the tone for the meeting. To quote Samuel:

*I think it is opportune for us within our immediate South African context, to focus our concerns about the shaping of educational directions in the wider global context. . . . Whilst this is indeed a conference of our newly formed South African Education Research Association (SAERA), our development of epistemologies, methodologies, and presentations of our context cannot be confined simply to resolving operational pragmatic considerations on the local scene. . . . The need for drawing in all levels of education research is our intention in this conference: at the levels of pre-primary, primary and secondary schooling; at the levels of adult, vocational and technical education; at the levels of an examination of higher education.*

The keynote speakers at the second SAERA conference included:

Felice J. Levine, who is Executive Director of the American Educational Research Association and Secretary General of the World Education Research Association (WERA). Levine's work focuses on research and science policy issues, research ethics, data access and sharing, the scientific and academic workforce, and higher education.

Servaas van der Berg, who is Professor of Economics at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, and holds the National Research Chair in the Economics of Social Policy. The Research on Socio-Economic Policy (ReSEP) research programme that he leads at the University of Stellenbosch focuses on poverty, inequality, labour markets, and social policies, including policies in the fields of education, health, and social grants.

Elizabeth Henning, who is currently working in a part-time capacity, is a professor of Educational Linguistics and the founding Director of the Centre for Education Practice Research (CEPR) at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Her research focus is teacher development and literacy education.

Professor Sechaba Mahlomaholo, who is a graduate of the Universities of the North, South Africa, and Harvard, USA. He is a National Research Foundation (NRF)-rated Research Professor of Education and Head of the School of Mathematics, Natural Sciences, and Technology Education at the University of the Free State, South Africa.

Associate Professor Peliwe Lolwana, who is Director of the Centre for Researching Education and Labour (REAL) at the University of Witwatersrand, in South Africa. She has worked at all levels of education in South Africa and the United States of America. She has served in many commissions tasked with the transformation of education in the country. She chairs and serves in a number of associations, boards, foundations and councils in education and training in South Africa, in the continent, and the Commonwealth.

Professor Crain Soudien from the University of Cape Town, South Africa, who in the Presidential Panel, spoke about the Mandela legacy. The aim is to have an annual Mandela legacy address by a reputable academic.

The highlight of the conference was the delivering of papers by the various academics and scholars throughout the eighteen sessions. The topics and presenters of the papers are all available on <http://www:saera2014.ukzn.ac.za>

Some quotes from academic scholars who attended the conference:

*Delegate 1*

*The SAERA conference has become the prime space for educational discourse and research in South Africa. The conference provided a platform for researchers to exchange ideas and debate pertinent issues in the educational domain.*

*It was well attended and provided many opportunities for networking across South African universities. It also provides a platform to get conference proceedings published. Amongst the highlights of the conference were the elections of the SAERA leadership. Aslam Fataar has been elected President of SAERA and Lesley Wood of North West Potchefstroom University was elected as the vice-president of this newly founded organisation.*

*Delegate 2*

*The sessions that I attended were very insightful and I would attend this conference again. What was extremely useful was the meeting with the various chief editors of the South African higher education journals.*

*Delegate 3*

*My experiences of the conference were positive in many ways. On a logistic and technical side the meeting was well organised, the administration tight, and the venue and all the logistics of refreshments and technical preparedness were very well done. The programme was clearly presented and again excellently organised. Keynote speakers were well chosen and seemed to have provided useful input and added value to the discussions and deliberations. The conference local organising committee members were always on hand to assist and clarify any issues. The feel of the conference was that it was one of a high standard and certainly comparable to international conferences.*

The atmosphere in general was positive and had an air of optimism. The meeting provided a platform for established and younger (in the academic sense) researchers to present and make their research public. Discussions were critical and often challenged presenters. However, the discussions were generative and opened up new possibilities for research in education in most cases. The conference also provided a space for researchers to learn about similar projects to their own, become aware of research they did not know about and also to pick up on research projects of an extended nature (longitudinal research) that they were aware of but not necessarily aware that it was still in progress.

Also important are the opportunities provided for extending and renewing networks with colleagues, institutions and publishers. The nature of the conference certainly facilitated this aspect of our activities as well.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The overall impression and feeling was that it was a conference of high quality—well organised, and providing access to national research in education in South Africa. It certainly augurs well for the establishment of SAERA, the fledgling national research association for education in South Africa. It was a good follow up to the first conference in 2013 and has, in my opinion, set a standard for future meetings of this kind to follow and improve on.

Finally, attending, a conference such as SAERA is a professionally rewarding experience. In addition to socialising with colleagues from other institutions, and a trip to a possibly exotic locale such as Bele-Bele or Durban's Waterfront, the two main reasons to attend a conference are to hear presentations and to meet with other researchers who share the same values or different values and social commitments to transform and make the world we live in, a better place.