

Conference Theme

Education(al) Foundations

Currently there is much emphasis, and rightly so, on the foundations for future learning and life chances, laid in Early Childhood Education and Foundation Phase schooling. Researchers are building knowledge around literacy and numeracy development, the languages of teaching and learning and other aspects of educating young children. Given how disappointing the outcomes of early years education have been in many respects, it is vital that we share our studies and insights, theoretical and empirical advances in this critical arena of education, including improvements in teaching and learning. We look forward to this being a strong strand in the conference.

But the nature of education is such that it is *always* laying foundations, for application in the world of work, for example, and for further learning, and open-ended futures. Thus foundations of various kinds are being laid in intermediate and senior phase schooling; in vocational education and training; in community, workplace-based and work-integrated learning, and in higher education, in the first year of arriving at university, and as post-graduates lay their particular foundations for educational leadership. What are the break-through insights into how better to build learners' capacities through programmes across schooling, higher education, vocational training, organisational and wider development contexts? What are the barriers that thwart learners, educators and leaders? And above all, how do we see our practices, challenges and successes, in relation to the future?

Education(al) Futures

Many researchers are giving thought to what the future for which education prepares learners and students may look like. In South Africa the post-apartheid education and training landscape sought to do just that. And, old and current exclusions remain a strong focus of contemporary educational research in search of new futures. This occurs in a context of new technologies including artificial intelligence; climate crises and dwindling natural resources; increased displacements and migrations; economic failures and jobless growth, all of which present some of the likely features of the near future, as they are already part of the present. The *Futures of Education Commission* (UNESCO, 2021) led by the President of

Ethiopia, Her Eminence Sahle-Work Zewde, raises the possibility and potential of Africa's young people, asking us to radically rethink how we offer education, training and development for regenerative African futures. Their report calls for a new social contract for education, to *Re-Imagine the Future Together*, to urgently move beyond the confines of the colonial and human capital traditions of education, in search of education(s) that give attention to human well-being and planetary well-being and the connections between these. It is a clarion call for researchers involved in re-imagining (at times *with* others) not only what educational future(s) might look like, but how such aspirations can be 'birthed' through our current praxis and research.

New technology and online learning, for example, have significant implications for curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment, research and theory building, but as a growing field of research in the region has shown, in themselves they do not guarantee inclusive, or more justly transgressive or transformative futures for Africa's young people. We have also learned hard lessons of over-idealising educational future(s) in South Africa. Other policy visions such as the African Union's *'Vision 2063: The Africa We Want'* have been guiding contextualised engagement with the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and tools such as the *African Framework of Standards and Competencies for Teacher Education* (AU 2015), which reframe the meaning(s) of what quality education for all might look like, and invite re-imagining how to provide it. Are we engaged with such future(s) visioning, and with what implications for policy, pedagogy, curriculum and assessment? And, what can we learn from comparative studies with the rest of Africa, and beyond?

Dialectics and Movements – Traversing Temporalities: Past–Present–Futures

The past exists in all of its multi-temporally and layered complexities, some of which remain hidden from view. The present likewise exists in its own forms of complexity and struggle. The future exists via aspirations and potential knowledge(s) and is in motion, in its tensed relation with past and futures. It thus holds both challenges and possibilities. How do our current and proposed policies, curricula and teaching practices align with the future we want? How are sector education and training authorities, policy makers, qualification developers and other planners preparing for it?

One of the ways of engaging with questions of past–present–future complexities and non-linearities is via engaging with situated dialectics that take materiality and sociality into account in relational and emergent tensions. Situated dialectics is one way of thinking movement(s) between past–present–future. There are also more confluent and assemblage

based educational theories, and more complex temporal vantage points that both challenge and add new perspective to dialectical thought.

Along with the practical dimensions, the conference theme also opens up more theoretical discussions as we consider education(al) foundations in relation to education(al) futures. At the macro-level, the relationships between education, economy and work remain a vital area for research, to be informed by developments such as those outlined earlier, but also the age-old and always relevant question: *what is education for?* Higher and vocational education, training and community engagement need to respond to societal needs and livelihood opportunities; can they also expand these opportunities? What exactly is education's role in *shaping* economies and livelihoods?

At the meso-level, government plans to introduce vocational and technical streaming in schools, with new subjects such as Coding mooted for the Foundation Phase, as an additional 'symbolic language' articulated as a gateway into the world of ICT. At the same time the country continues to struggle to effectively resource its educational institutions. Universities tasked with producing the teachers we will need in 10 years' time, for example, face a plethora of training requirements and contested projections of the quantum of teachers needed, what they should be able to teach, in what languages; and how their tuition should be funded. We hope to explore evidence and guidance for what is likely to be difficult decision-making in this space. Across the board, there is an urgent need to examine the foundations of our visions for the future as captured in policies and implementation strategies. And again, insights gained from comparative studies and international experience could be valuable.