



On the Makhanda Education Summit: A community convening for development

Sisesakhe Ntlabezo, Programme Manager: Makhanda Circle of Unity and **Ashley Westaway**, Manager of GADRA Education, Makhanda

Abstract

South Africa's education system was well-resourced and impressive for the minority and deeply unequal and inaccessible to the majority of the country during apartheid. Yet, decades into the democracy of South Africa, some of the inequalities experienced as a result of the apartheid education system still linger. In many parts of the country, the quality of basic education remains poor, classrooms are overcrowded, literacy rates are low, and there is a shortage of necessary educational resources. The challenges facing education in South Africa, be it basic or higher education, require a focused and nuanced strategic response. The 2024 Education Summit, a local transformative event, which unfolded in the Eastern Cape city of Makhanda, is one example of a response to the challenges of basic education in a given context. Over 350 local education stakeholders, including early childhood development centres, primary schools, high schools, non-governmental organisations, government, and Rhodes University, responded to the invitation from the university's Vice-Chancellor to participate in a city-wide Education Summit. A reason for the success of the Summit is that the university had spearheaded the implementation of a range of impactful interventions in the basic education sector for the preceding decade through partnerships. This paper describes the significant local transformation using the analytic tools of community engagement and social movement theory. As such, and against the backdrop of generally ineffectual community engagement in South Africa, the Rhodes/ Makhanda case may be seen as an exemplar of best practice with the potential of replication in other contexts.

Keywords: *Education Summit; community engagement; social movement; local development; partnerships; best practice*

Introduction

An oft quoted (and rightfully so) part of The Freedom Charter is its contemplation on education: *The doors of learning and culture shall be opened*. Indeed, one of the key focuses of the post-1994 dispensation in South Africa was to enable access to education for all South African citizens. The White Paper on Education and Training¹ (Department of Education [DoE], 1995) acknowledged that while South Africa's education system was well-resourced and impressive for the minority, it was deeply unequal and inaccessible to the majority of the country:

At the same time, millions of adult South Africans are functionally illiterate, and millions of South African children and youth are learning in school conditions which resemble those in the most impoverished states. In the large, poorly-resourced sectors for the majority of the population, a majority of students drop out prematurely or fail senior certificate, and a small minority win entrance to higher education (DoE, 1995, p. 18).

Yet, decades into the democracy of South Africa, some of the inequalities experienced as a result of the apartheid education system still linger. As Modisaotsile (2012) notes, in many parts of the country, the quality of basic education remains poor, classrooms are overcrowded, literacy rates are low, and there is a shortage of necessary educational resources. Reflecting on the *#FeesMustFall* across South African higher education institutions in 2015 and 2016, Badat (2016) acknowledges that while higher education has held the promise and prospect of better futures, this bold ambition has not been realized for many students. The challenges facing education in South Africa, be it basic or higher education, require a focused and nuanced strategic response.

The 2024 Makhanda Education Summit is one example of a response to the challenges of basic education in a given context. The Summit was a novel one-of-a-kind convening of the basic education sector in the city of Makhanda, South Africa, led by the Rhodes University Vice-Chancellor, Professor Sizwe Mabizela. It followed more than a decade of deliberate and collaborative intervention in various schools in the city to improve learner performance. It represented a co-created reflection point on the development of the education sector following its sustained upliftment through engaged partnerships. In addition, the Summit was a strategizing space used to collectively identify key goals to shape the future of education in Makhanda and map out the shared pathway towards building a city of education excellence. It demonstrated the necessity and potential of collaboration for the common good and the essential role of higher education institutions in driving community development.

¹ The White Paper on Education sets out the Developmental agenda of education in South Africa and was published eleven months after the first democratic elections in 1994. Until 2009, the Department of Education (DoE) in South Africa oversaw basic and higher education. The portfolio was split in the first administration of President Jacob Zuma in 2009 into the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

This paper provides an overview of the decade-long efforts to improve the education sector in Makhanda that culminated in the convening of the Summit. Furthermore, the paper reflects on the strategic approaches to mobilise support and build a common purpose within the city's stakeholder network. This paper assesses the Summit's local approach to convening school leaders and educators after several years of sustained and impactful engagement through the theoretical lens of Social Movement Theory. Equally, it will be demonstrated that the collaborative efforts and sustained community engagement in Makhanda reflect the characteristics of a social movement driven by a shared agenda. The paper is organized as follows: it begins with an overview of the post-1994 history and current status of community engagement in South Africa, describes the Summit journey, and then discusses the Makhanda Education Summit. The Social Movement Theory is explained as an analytical framework for the Summit, leading to the reflections and lessons learned from the Summit.

Positionality and Reflection

Before outlining the central thesis of this paper, it is important to render explicit the authors' relationship with the subject matter and its related context. The paper is, by its form, a reflective piece on an important demonstration of community engagement (CE) in action: the Makhanda Education Summit. The authors of the paper were the principal organisers of this Summit, and oversaw the coordination of this event, along with its general facilitation. In addition, in their respective professional capacities in the education sector of the city of Makhanda, the authors were involved in many of the lead-up processes that comprise the Journey to the Summit. As such, the authors are well-located to reflect meaningfully on the Summit and the opportunity for collective learning it provides.

Educators recognize reflection as integral to learning (Mann, 2016). Some of the specific benefits of reflection are detailed as follows: it entails focus on experience, thereby fostering insight; it enables one to make meaning of experience; and it enables the drawing out of lessons to inform future practice (Mann, 2016). Reflection is regarded as particularly important in community development, because it can assist with conceptualising, designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating community-based projects and interventions (Moreno et al., 2020). As Moreno et al. (2020, p.13) observe, reflection can be beneficial in improving practices and actions of social change. In providing this reflective piece, the authors hope to contribute to the growing literature on community engagement in educational development by detailing the success seen in one city through utilizing CE principles of collaboration, partnership and co-ownership of processes.

The Community Engagement Context

Formalised, policy-based CE is a recent phenomenon in higher education in South Africa (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2020). In the contemporary era, community engagement is closely associated with transformation, social responsiveness, and partnerships (CHE, 2020). Thus, it is hardly surprising that universities were not encouraged nor required to practice CE during the apartheid era. Soon after the transition from apartheid to electoral democracy in 1994, CE was positioned as the ‘third mission’ or core function of higher education (Maistry, 2023), along with teaching and learning, and research. More recently, a more integrated conceptualisation of CE has found its way into policy. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training underscores the significance of funding provision for community engagement initiatives “linked directly to the academic programme of universities [and] part of the teaching and research function of these institutions” (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013, p. 39). It should be noted that, to date, CE is not and has not been directly funded as a national mandate.

Although CE now enjoys a high formal status in higher education, many commentators have pointed out that this is largely superficial because it has little coherence or substance. According to Mohale (2023, p.115) “CE remains a peripheral concern of universities” based on an analysis of the findings of the first Higher Education Qualifications Committee (HEQC) CE audit, covering the period 2004-2012. She concludes: “The findings of the first audit cycle revealed an overwhelming deficiency” (Mohale, 2023, p.123). The problem is ongoing, to the extent that the CHE indicates that “community engagement as a function is increasingly being pushed to the periphery” in South African universities (CHE, 2020, p.7). Johnson affirms that one of the reasons for this is that CE is frequently an “unfunded mandate” in many universities (2020, p. 91). There are several other reasons that CE is failing to take its place as the country’s third mission of higher education institutions and consequently failing to make any meaningful impact in communities (CHE, 2020, p.5). These include conceptual confusion and incoherence, policy inadequacy, and a lack of institutional integration (Mohale, 2023, p.118). The conceptual challenges are foundational; there is no clarity on the meaning of ‘community’, ‘engagement’ or ‘community engagement’ (Bender, 2008, pp.86-87).

This brief overview of CE in South Africa provides a useful backdrop against which to sketch some of the key elements that underpinned the Makhanda Education Summit. Since 2015, the leadership at Rhodes University, as well as the Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) division, has been stable, enabling the development of a clear and consistent conception and practice of CE. The ‘community’ that Rhodes University works with is the community located in the city of Makhanda, where the university is based. More specifically, since Professor Mabizela’s inauguration in 2015, a specific portion of the local community has been prioritised: the basic education sector. ‘Engagement’ over the past decade has been characterised by mutuality, reciprocity, and responsiveness (Hornby &

Maistry, 2022). More generally, Rhodes University has recently implemented a participatory approach to CE, in which community partners input into conceptualising and framing initiatives, which is seen as the key to engagement and development. This approach can be contrasted with a charitable or philanthropic approach, which regards the university agent as the giver and the community member as the taker or beneficiary. The Rhodes expression of CE aligns with the policy framework laid down by the National Commission on Higher Education (NHCE) (1996); this framework foregrounded participation, responsiveness, cooperation, and partnerships as the key principles for transforming higher education (CHE, 2020). As Bobo and Akhurst (2019, p.91) remark, CE at Rhodes is underpinned by principles of joint learning and co-management of programmes with community partners. These principles strongly align with those articulated by the NCHES. Though community engagement at Rhodes predates Professor Mabizela's tenure, this paper's focus is limited to the recent period.

The Journey to the Summit: A decade of development

To fully appreciate the journey taken to the Summit, it is worthwhile to reflect on the city of Makhanda briefly. At times spoken of as a "tale of two cities" (Kalina et al., 2023, p.1), Makhanda contains some of the best and most prestigious schools (alongside Rhodes University) in the country in the city's "west". Simultaneously, the city visibly grapples with the echoes of exclusion and inequality enabled by apartheid in the city's "east", with a majority of students relying on no-fee and low-fee public schools for their education. It reflects a microcosm of the wider context of South Africa's education system (McCann et al., 2021, p. 50), if not the whole of South Africa. There are stark inequalities that exist between the city's "east" and "west"; many residents from the "east" face challenges with access to developmental opportunities and inconsistent service provision (Kalina et al., 2023, p.1). For years, no-fee and low-fee paying public schools in the city's "east" received poor results in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations.

The inequalities faced in Makhanda inform a negative perception that its residents have of the more affluent educational spaces. As McCann et al. (2021, p.5) note, for many of the most vulnerable residents of the city (and for a long time), Rhodes University has been viewed as an "unreachable ivory tower". It was seen as an institution of further development that many may never access because of their own circumstances, and, for some, an institution divorced from the residents' challenges. This socio-political background is important in appreciating the context under which the Summit was convened.

The Summit is usefully understood as a milestone reached after a journey spanning approximately a decade to develop the city's education sector. In this light, it is necessary to outline some of the experiences and accomplishments that *enabled the convening* of a Summit. The journey generated energy, commitment, and commonality of purpose among the city's stakeholders. For the purposes of this paper, it begins in 2013, when the

National Senior Certificate (NSC) results were released². The district of Makhanda (then Grahamstown) obtained a pass rate of 62.5 percent, making it the 10th worst-performing district in the country that year (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2014).

This jarring reality served as a wake-up call to education practitioners in the city and highlighted the urgent need for an intervention in the sector. Facilitating a meaningful impact, however, would require a multi-pronged approach driven by and inclusive of all key stakeholders, in particular Rhodes University. McCann et al., (2021) capture this best:

Combatting this injustice-and ensuring Rhodes University's relevance in the setting of Makhanda-requires action on the part of the university and other community stakeholders to change the education trajectory of the district (p.50).

So, a set of interventions were developed and implemented. In 2014, the first of these interventions began with the creation of the Principal's Forum. Initially created by Grahamstown Area Distress Relief Association (GADRA) Education, which was the oldest education non-profit organisation (NPO) in the city. This structure of school principals served as a vital point of engagement to enable collaboration and partnership and organically facilitate the development of a community of practice among school leaders in the city.

Two significant developments unfolded in 2015. Firstly, through funding from the Vestas Empowerment Trust, a multi-stakeholder consortium was created to manage a dynamic Primary Education Programme. This consortium, led by GADRA Education with partners such as the Lebone Centre, the South African Numeracy Chair Project and the Education Faculty at Rhodes University, focused on promoting literacy and numeracy in primary schools in Makhanda (O'Keeffe & Kay, 2022). Over the course of eight years, this consortium proceeded to develop numerous initiatives that were beneficial to the primary school sector, chief among them being the Whistle Stop School (a targeted literacy intervention focusing on improving reading skills) and the IsiXhosa Spelling Bee, a first of its kind in South Africa.

Secondly, Professor Sizwe Mabizela was appointed and inaugurated as the Vice-Chancellor of Rhodes University in 2015. Mabizela (2015), in his inaugural address as the Vice-Chancellor, identified a focus on education as being one of his three focus points in ensuring that Rhodes University contributes to building a vibrant and sustainable Makhanda (then called Grahamstown):

We must send a clear and unequivocal message that our University is not just in Grahamstown but is also of and for Grahamstown. We have a particular responsibility to contribute to the creation of a well-functioning, economically sustainable and prosperous Grahamstown (p. 16).

2 While the narrative focus of this paper begins in 2013, it is important to acknowledge that there were several efforts before this moment to build a community of practice in the education sector of Makhanda, led by various committed education activists and community engagement practitioners. Beginning the narrative in 2013 is not intended to erase nor minimize these efforts in any way.

Mabizela (2015), in outlining his vision, acknowledged the difficult context the schools functioned under and committed to working hand-in-hand with local stakeholders to improve the education outputs:

It is a matter of public record that the Eastern Cape Province is the worst performing province when it comes to public education...Every single year its matric pass rates have been way below the national pass rates... As an institution of higher learning, indeed, as a greater community that cares, we cannot sit and watch when young people amongst us are condemned to a life without hope; a life of despair because of the failure to provide them with the education they need and deserve. We need to work with our Education District Office, Subject Advisors, Principals and Educators to find ways of improving the quality of teaching and learning. I look forward to meeting all important role-players in the education sector to discuss how we might work together to make Grahamstown a true centre of academic excellence – from Early Childhood education to University, and a model for consideration more widely (p. 17).

This re-orientation of the university as a partner to the wider community was a pivotal shift in the relationship it had with Makhanda. With this deliberate commitment by the University to support education development, a call to action was laid out.

The first step in giving life to this vision in 2016 was the creation of the Vice-Chancellor's Initiative (VCI) committee. This committee included experts in the education sector from within and outside the university and served as the anchor structure to oversee collaborative interventions from Rhodes University. At its core, the VCI sought to facilitate systemic change in Makhanda's basic education sector. Among its flagship initiatives is the Nine Tenths Mentoring Initiative, which involves a mentorship relationship between a Rhodes University student volunteer and a Matric learner (a learner in their final year of high school) mentee through a series of guided and structured contact sessions. This programme is geared towards providing important support for matric learners in local schools in Makhanda with the intent of enabling them to manage the demands their final year in high school adequately and, in doing so, enabling them towards reaching their full potential (McCann et al., 2021, p. 51). Approximately one-quarter of all public sector matriculants now benefit from mentorship support. The Certificate in School Leadership is another noteworthy programme, one focused on developing the leadership capacity of the members of a school's management team, with specific focus on Principals, Deputy Principals and Heads of Departments.

In 2017, Rhodes University and GADRA piloted a Bridging Programme to improve access for local disadvantaged students to the University. Through this programme, students registered as *Occasional Students* while simultaneously studying two NSC subjects to increase their university admission points. 2018 was the first year when the first 'green shoots' of the various interventions were seen in Makhanda: in this year, the city's fee-exempt public schools produced over 100 Bachelor passes (university-entrance level) in the NSC examinations for the first time (DBE, 2019). The various expressions of community engagement and partnership interventions were starting to pay dividends.

With this positive development, 2019 was situated as a year to deepen the interventions and collaborative partnerships in Makhanda. The Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) division redesigned its Budding Q programme. Through this new approach, the programme sought to address the literacy crisis in South Africa through a play-based approach starting in Grade R while pre-literacy skills are being developed. Following a series of stakeholder imbizos held in the same year, the Makhanda Circle of Unity (MCoU) was born. This initiative aimed to foster collaborations and partnerships amongst stakeholders in Makhanda to facilitate positive-oriented projects in the city through a series of thematic clusters. One of these clusters is the Education Cluster, which brings together individuals and entities in the city interested in developing the education sector.

In 2020, further evidence of the impact of concentrated interventions through collaboration and partnerships in the education sector of the city was seen in that year's NSC results. Makhanda emerged as the *best-performing city* in the Eastern Cape NSC results (Krige, 2024), seven years after it was amongst the worst-performing districts in the province. Of course, COVID-19 resulted in lockdown-enforced school closures that impacted the quality of education outcomes across the country. Propelled by a commitment to continuing the impactful work they had been doing, local stakeholders adapted their services to be responsive to the contextual challenges.

Despite the year's challenges, the city's positive trajectory continued. In 2021, the city achieved a record 300 Bachelor passes for the first time in the NSC Matric examinations (DBE, 2022). In the same year, the Nine Tenths Mentoring Programme received the first prize in the 2021 MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship (Tailores Network of Engaged Universities, 2021), becoming the first (and to date, only) South African university to receive the first prize (Rhodes University, 2021). This prize was a testament to the effectiveness of the Nine Tenths Programme and its potential to institute systemic change. Following the success of the various interventions at primary and secondary school levels, the VCI committed financial and human resources to the ECD sector as the next target for improvement.

By 2022, the positive developments following the multiplicity of concerted efforts to develop the education sector imbued an energy into the city's schooling sector. For the second year in a row, more than 300 Bachelor passes were achieved in the final NSC examination results. In turn, the retention rate in the schooling system had improved from 45 percent to 65 percent (Westaway, 2023a). It may seem odd to have focused on ten years of gradual development to contextualise one event. However, this context not only sets the scene for 2023 to become the year when planning for the Summit began, but it also informs an understanding of why it was important to convene a *Summit*.

The Year Before: The Engagement Process

In early 2023, a record number of 160 disadvantaged local students registered for full-time first-year study at Rhodes University. In February 2023, representatives of GADRA Education presented the organisation's new strategic plan to the Vice-Chancellor. In terms of the plan, GADRA's primary objective for the next few years was to contribute to Makhanda emerging as South Africa's leading educational locality and to be recognised throughout the country. This vision was borne out of the advances made in the city over the past decade. Professor Mabizela supported this objective and proposed that the university convene a summit of all education stakeholders in Makhanda to mobilise the collective around the vision of taking the city to the apex of the basic education summit in South Africa. Moreover, it was agreed in that initial discussion that Professor Mabizela would be the most appropriate convenor of the Summit, given the extent to which he is respected across the education community in the city.

On 5 April 2023, the VCI committee had its first quarter meeting, wherein a commitment to organise a Summit was affirmed. At this discussion, it was suggested that the theme of the Summit should be '*celebrate, share, strategize*'. Given that collaboration and partnerships had been hallmarks of a decade of development, it was deemed appropriate that the Summit should give further impetus to the ethos and practice of sharing. It was further agreed that the Summit should be a gathering of local organisations and individuals who have contributed to and were part of the educational landscape in the city. What has been achieved in the city has been driven by local citizens. It had not come about through outside intervention. Thus, it was decided to give local citizens\communities of the city a platform and a voice.

The planning process for the Summit was overseen by a committee comprising representatives of key education stakeholders in the city, including representatives from the University (specifically, the Faculty of Education, RUCE division and the Centre for Social Development (a non-government organisation affiliated to Rhodes University, which focuses on early childhood education), GADRA Education, the MCoU, public schools and private schools in the basic education sector. It was deemed necessary to ensure that the Summit planning committee was inclusive and representative, as this would play a vital role in the mobilising efforts needed to convene it.

The framing for the Summit's planning was broad and required extensive work. It had to ensure the following:

- The Summit would be structured as a two-day event, with the first day focused on reflection and celebrating the development over a decade. The second day would focus on collectively strategizing the next steps for the city's education sector.
- The Summit would consist of both plenary and working group sessions to encourage as much engagement as possible. Working groups would be formed according to phases of basic education, namely ECD, primary education and secondary education.

- To inform the discussions in the respective working groups, considerable preparation would be required. Each working group would require a detailed, comprehensive situational analysis of the respective sectoral phase to prompt engagement.
- Thus, it was agreed to form sectoral phase specific sub-committees to conduct these situational analyses. Three subcommittees-on ECD, primary and secondary schooling, respectively-were formed for this exact purpose.

In the latter half of 2023, the primary focus was on developing situational analyses. For the primary and secondary phases, participatory SWOT analyses were conducted with the school principals to ensure that the situational analyses reflected the prevailing realities and perspectives of the schools. As an added benefit, this process would help mobilise significant support amongst the school principals and leaders. During this time, research conducted jointly by GADRA Education, and the Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education revealed that 40% of Grade 4 children in Makhanda could read for meaning – more than double the national average (Long, 2023). This generated significant interest in the demonstrated strength of Makhanda’s educational offering and the pending Summit.

Building on this work and energy was a sustained media and communication drive, with multiple newspaper articles published in local and regional newspapers (Westaway, 2023b). By January 2024, the focus shifted to ensuring that the key reports and inputs that would anchor and guide discussions for the Summit were appropriately finalized and reflected the collective insights of education leaders in Makhanda. The four key inputs were presentations on the three sectoral situational analyses and a consolidated overview of available data.

The Makhanda Education Summit

The Makhanda Education Summit took place at the Rhodes University campus on 27 and 28 January 2024 and was attended by over 350 local education stakeholders. The Summit marked a pivotal moment in the city’s commitment to advance education for local youth. Delegates from the ECD, primary, and secondary school sectors convened to build upon the success achieved in elevating the quality of education and access to resources within Makhanda. Importantly, the Summit was used to find partnership-driven solutions to the existing challenges. Two significant results of the Summit were: firstly, each sectoral summit working group resolved on key sectoral focus areas for development and growth over the next few years. A clarity of purpose was developed by developing these focus areas through collective engagement and discussion. A clear roadmap for improving the education sector of Makhanda was laid out, one that could be adopted and embraced by the sector as a whole.

Secondly, a clear vision was articulated at the end of the Summit to anchor the above priority focus areas and set a tangible goal for developing the city’s education sector. This vision is important because it represents the collective input of the delegates and because

its successful attainment hinges in many ways on the collective action of members of the city's education sector, from ECD to secondary school. The gist of the Summit vision statement is quoted below.

By 2028, Makhanda emerges as the leading academic educational centre and city in South Africa and is recognised as such, thereby affording all local children and young people the benefit of good quality and relevant education at pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary levels (quoted in Amner, 2024).

For CHE (2007), the milestone of a shared vision amongst a multiplicity of partners as an outcome indicates effective community engagement. Given the effectiveness of Rhodes University's CE work in the basic education sector from 2015 to 2023, it seems fitting that the Summit adopted a shared vision.

Social Movement Theory

The primary conceptual lens used so far in this paper has been CE. However, it is clear from the above that, whilst Rhodes University played the leading role in convening the Summit, many organisations and stakeholders have been involved in the drive to revitalise public basic education in Makhanda. The diversity of participation – including all types of schools (public and private), NGOs and community activists – is adequately wide-ranging to consider the applicability of Social Movement Theory in this case.

Much has been written about Social Movement Theory, a field of study that saw rapid development and discourse proliferation in the 1950s and 1960s (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p.1). At its core, this field of study seeks to understand what informs social mobilisation, how movements are organised and the various characteristics that help sustain them. The study of social movements was prompted by academic interest in collective behaviour (Weber & King, 2015, p.487). Della Porta and Diani (2006, p.13) point out that many insights that inform social movement theorists have been derived from studies into collective movements, defined as “meaningful acts, driving often necessary and beneficial social change”. At the heart of these movements is collective action underpinned by a collaborative approach to achieving a shared goal (Snow et al., 2004, p.6). The societal context is important, as Morris (2000, p.446) cogently acknowledges that movements likely emerge under favourable external contexts and shifts in societal and political contexts.

Social movement theory has four main schools of thought: collective behaviour, resource mobilisation, political process (commonly referred to as political opportunity) and new social movements (Tarrow, 2011, p.22). In reflecting on the Summit, two of these schools of thought, namely resource mobilisation and political opportunity, seem most applicable. The resource mobilisation approach emerged as sociologists from the United States of America were interested in how the resources necessary to enable successful collective action were mobilised (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p.14). Rootes (1990, p.7) suggests that resource mobilisation theory is underpinned by the recognition that movement participants create

strategies that utilize available resources as best as possible while reducing the need for unavailable resources to propel movements forward. Importantly, the resource mobilisation approach does not disregard the importance of the social context under which a movement operates-it also focuses on how movements connect to other groups and their reliance on the external context to enable success (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, p.1213).

The political opportunity approach mainly focuses on the relationship between social movements and the political context they function under, as well as the variety of factors that may impact the success of movements (Rootes, 1990, p.7). Like the resource mobilisation approach, the political opportunity approach focuses on rational participants making deliberate choices to advance their movements. Still, it acknowledges the impact of the political environment under which social movements function (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p.16). In essence, an enabling environment is important to create avenues for the emergence of movements.

Read together, the resource mobilisation approach and the political opportunity approach – while not interchangeable nor without limitations – offer useful analytic frameworks for the Summit. They acknowledge the necessity of people to drive the strategic steps needed to create social movements. As Morris (2000, p.445) puts it, “these approaches both recognise the importance of human agency in understanding social movements”. Importantly, these theoretical approaches do not locate social movements as functioning solely around national matters; they can function locally depending on their scope and target (Snow et al., 2004, p.4). They provide a useful lens through which to understand why an event such as the Summit might constitute the beginnings of an organic movement, one premised on the shared commitment to improve a city’s education sector.

Reflections and Lessons from the Summit

Much of the strength and impact of the Summit can be attributed to the processes taken to convening it and the various incremental steps taken over a decade of development. The convening of the Summit and its outputs are best understood through the lens of social movement theory. As Snow et al., (2004, p.3) argue, understanding how social movements function can inform an understanding of many developments in human history, and the Summit is no exception. Some key lessons that can be taken from the summit convening are discussed below.

Different co-ordinating structures coming together:

Over the past decade, several co-ordinating structures have emerged in the basic education sector. Three of the more important of these structures are the Vice-Chancellor’s Initiative, the Makhanda Circle of Unity (specifically its Education Cluster) and the Principals’ Forum. Each of these structures is collaborative, and each undertakes important work, as summarised below.

- *Vice-Chancellor's Initiative*: This is driven by a committee comprising representatives of various university entities and GADRA Education. It has been guided by Professor Mabizela consistently since its establishment in 2016. Essentially, it coordinates all initiatives in the basic education sector resourced by Rhodes University staff and students. It has been impactful and efficient, as evidenced by the Nine Tenths Mentoring Programme winning the international MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship in 2021.
- *Makhanda Circle of Unity (Education Cluster)*. This organisation is a growing and vibrant space that has brought together city school representatives and education advocates. It has been aimed at fostering a collective understanding of the sector-wide challenges faced and, where possible, identifying opportunities for collaborative solutions.
- *Makhanda School Principals' Forum*. GADRA Education established the forum, but since 2014, it has been convened, administered and sustained by the principals. It has provided principals with a supportive and collegial institutional space to share challenges and devise effective collective strategies to engage the DBE and other stakeholders.

What set the Summit apart from all previous interventions and processes is that it brought all these coordinating structures together. As Buechler (1993, p.229) argues, one of the most important parts of mobilisation is constructing a meaningful shared identity for participants. Bringing together these coordinating structures through the Summit created the opportunity to galvanise and mobilise a wide-ranging community of basic education stakeholders and activists in Makhanda.

Different parts of the education system coming together:

The Summit brought together the fee exempt, fee-paying, and private/independent portions of the basic education system in the city. In recent years, these portions tended to operate in silos, and there have also been inter-sectoral tensions relating to their different needs and interests. The resultant parochialism has militated against collaboration and solidarity.

The inclusive approach to the Summit preparation processes brought all these parts of the system together, for example, to formulate a joint situation analysis. Occasionally, this resulted in the aforementioned tensions surfacing. However, the difference is that the tensions were addressed rather than causing the parties to retreat into their respective laagers. This is in line with a vital purpose of social movements, which is to represent and provide solutions to challenges being faced (Hannigan, 1985, p.441)

The Summit has created an environment that is conducive to a set of possibilities that were not conceivable *without it happening*. Bridges across the different parts of the system are now being built; these linkages enable innovative collaborations. This is vital to the

continued efforts to mobilise support behind the shared vision. As Della Porta and Diani (2006, p.15) point out, effective mobilisation is informed by how movements can “organise discontent...utilise and create solidarity networks...[and] achieve external consensus”.

Where leaders rise:

Social movements are reflective of and formed by ordinary participants and reflect a collective will and commitment to a goal (Hannigan, 1985, p.441). Indeed, ordinary citizens have played a crucial role in developing Makhanda’s education sector. At the same time, Morris (2000, p.45) reflects on the importance of leadership in informing the origin and impact of movements. In the context of the journey taken to the Summit, the leadership of Professor Mabizela was essential in mobilising the Makhanda community behind the summit and enabling the adoption of a unifying vision to establish the city as the leading academic city in the country. What became apparent over the course of the planning process was the depth and breadth of leadership in the sector. All members of the Planning Committee took responsibility, invoked their networks and mobilised their constituencies. All those who facilitated and presented at the summit did so proficiently. It was a moment in Makhanda’s education journey that enabled many leaders to learn and rise.

It could only happen when it happened:

The political opportunity framing of social movement theory offers an important insight on the importance (and value) of the timing of a social movement emerging. Importantly, social movements can capture and maximise existing opportunities and “strategise to create opportunities in which to act” (Tarrow, 1994, as cited in Buechler, 2004, p.62). For the Summit to become the success it was, it could *only* have occurred following a decade-long investment in the city to mobilise energies, develop a shared passion, and ensure buy-in from all relevant stakeholders. The process leading up to the Summit clearly shows that establishing healthy, trusting partnerships take time and it is an ongoing process. During the period 2014 to 2023, hundreds of individuals and many organisations had benefitted tangibly from the interventions and offerings described above; there was abundant goodwill. As Della Porta and Diani (2006, p.13) note, social movements reflect the efforts of groups to change their current status quo. Without the key activities taking place as they did, it may not have appealed to the variety of stakeholders it did, nor have the wide-ranging impact it had. Rather, it became a space to revitalize energies amongst stakeholders and deepen their shared purpose for Makhanda’s betterment.

Conclusion

The array of interventions in the basic education sector in Makhanda, led by Rhodes University, offer a powerful example of effective and impactful CE in contemporary South Africa. Some of the hallmarks of Rhodes University’s approach have been an embrace of reciprocity and partnership, a sustained commitment to galvanising the agency of the

student body and academics towards the goal of transformation, and bold leadership by several people in positions of influence, especially the Vice-Chancellor of the university. It is hoped that other universities will learn from this example so that their considerable potential as change agencies might be realised.

In reflecting on this partnership-driven approach to the education sector development in Makhanda, this paper has sought to demonstrate the potential impact that can be derived through utilising collaborative community engagement principles and activating the role of higher education institutions in community development. The use and applicability of Social Movement Theory as an analytic and interpretative tool to make sense of unfolding developments in the city is not just informative but relevant. It offers a useful lens to fully appreciate the magnitude of the event, and its indelible impact on the future of Makhanda's basic education sector.

Notes on Contributors

Sisesakhe Ntlabezo

Programme Manager: Makhanda Circle of Unity

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3196-2512>

Dr Ashley Westaway

Manager of GADRA Education, Makhanda

ashley@gadraed.co.za

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7610-5800>

References

- Amner, R. (2024, January 29). Makhanda aims for the summit of SA education. *Grocott's Mail*. <https://grocotts.ru.ac.za/2024/01/29/makhanda-aims-for-the-summit-of-sa-education/>
- Badat, S. (2016). Deciphering the meanings and explaining the South African higher education student protests of 2015-16. *African Journal of Academic Freedom*, Nos 1&2, 2015, 71-106. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Francis-Nyamnjoh/publication/305999012_introduction_Academic_Freedom_in_African_Universities/links/57a9a44c08aeac64b10549ec/introduction-Academic-Freedom-in-African-Universities.pdf
- Bender, G. (2008). Exploring conceptual models for community engagement at higher education institutions in South Africa. *Perspectives in Education*, 26(1), 81-95.

- Bobo, B. & Akhurst, J. (2019). 'Most important, it's like the partner takes more interest in us': Using *ubuntu* as a fundamental ethic of community engagement (CE) partnerships at Rhodes university. *Alternation Special Edition*, 27, 88-110.
- Buechler, S. M. (1993). Beyond resource mobilisation? Emerging trends in social movement theory. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 34(2), 217-235. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4120699>
- Buechler, S. M. (2004). The strange career of strain and breakdown theories of collective action. In D.A. Snow, S.A. Soule & H. Kriesi. (Eds.). *The Blackwell companion to social movements*. Blackwell Publishing. pp. 47-67.
- Council on Higher Education (CHE). (2007). *Community engagement in higher education*. Proceedings of the community engagement in higher education conference. https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/HEQC_Conference_Community_Engagement_HE_2007.pdf.
- Council on Higher Education (CHE). (2020). Community engagement as one of the core functions of universities: Revisiting the idea of a university. *Briefly Speaking*, 11, 1-13. <https://www.che.ac.za/file/6460/download?token=u4o3pf69>
- Della Porta, D. & Diani, M. (2006). *Social movements: An introduction*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2014). 2013 National senior certificate examination school performance report. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education. <https://www.gov.za/documents/other/2013-national-senior-certificate-examination-school-performance-report-06-jan-2014>
- Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2019). *2018 National senior certificate examination school performance report*. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education. https://www.ecexams.co.za/2018_Nov_Exam_Results/NSC%202018%20School%20Performance%20Report%20WEB.pdf
- Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2022). *2021 National senior certificate examination school performance report*. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education. <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2021NSCReports/School%20Performance%20Report.pdf?ver=2022-01-31-130221-553>.
- Department of Education. (1995, March 15). White Paper on Education and Training (Notice 10). *Government Gazette*, 16312.
- Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). 2013. *White Paper for Post School Education and Training: Building an expanded, effective and integrated post-school system*, Pretoria: Department of Higher Education. <https://www.dhet.gov.za/SiteAssets/Latest%20News/White%20paper%20for%20post-school%20education%20and%20training.pdf>.
- Hannigan, J. A. (1985). Alain Touraine, Manuel Castells and social movement theory: A critical appraisal. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 26(4), 435-454. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4106097>

- Hornby, D. & Maistry, S. (2022). Developing relationships for community-based research at Rhodes university: Values, principles and challenges. In L. Wood, (Ed.). *Community-based research with vulnerable populations: Ethical, inclusive and sustainable frameworks for knowledge generation*, Springer Nature. (pp. 121-138).
- Johnson, B. (2020). Community engagement: Barriers and drivers in South African higher education. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 34(6), 87-105.
- Kalina, M., Makwetu, N. & Tilley, E. (2023). "The rich will always be able to dispose of their waste": A view from the frontlines of municipal failure in Makhanda, South Africa. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 26(7), 1-24. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370635789_The_rich_will_always_be_able_to_dispose_of_their_waste_a_view_from_the_frontlines_of_municipal_failure_in_Makhanda_South_Africa.
- Krige, J. (2024, January 26). Makhanda's education renaissance. *Mail and Guardian*. <https://mg.co.za/partner-content/2024-01-26-makhandas-education-renaissance/>
- Long, K. (2023). A quantitative study investigating the comprehension skills of grade 4 learners in public schools in Makhanda; Research report. GADRA Education and Rhodes University Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. <https://gadraeducation.co.za/media/1200/grade-4-research-report.pdf>
- Mabizela, S. (2015). *Higher education for a higher purpose: Rising to the challenge*. [Speech Transcript]. https://www.ru.ac.za/media/rhodesuniversity/content/vc/documents/Dr_Mabizela_Inaugural_address.docx
- Maistry, M. (2023). Editorial: Higher education community engagement. *African Journal of Higher Education Community Engagement*, 1(1), i-vi.
- Mann, K. V. (2016). Reflection's role in learning: increasing engagement and deepening participation. *Perspectives on Medical Education*, 5, 259-261.
- McCann, C, Talbot, A. L. P. & Westaway, A. (2021). Social capital for social change: Nine tenths mentoring programme, a solution for education (in)justice in South Africa? *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 16(1), 45-59. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1313134.pdf>
- McCarthy, J. D. & Zald, M. N. (1977). Resource mobilisation and social movements: A partial theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(6), 1212-1241. <https://users.ssc.wisc.edu/~oliver/SOC924/Articles/McCarthyZald1977.pdf>
- Modisaotsile, B. M. (2012). The failing standard of basic education in South Africa. *Africa Institute of South Africa, Policy Brief*, 72. <https://www.activateleadership.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/No.-72.The-Failing-Standard-of-Basic-Education-in-South-Africa1.pdf>
- Mohale, M. A. (2023). Community engagement in higher education: Developments after the first institutional audit cycle. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 37(1), 113-130.

- Moreno, J. M., Sanyal, K. A., Firoozmand, F., Rutter, P., & Harder, M. K. (2020). Reflective practices in community development: A grounded analysis. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 33, 501-525.
- Morris, A. (2000). Reflections on social movement theory: Criticism and proposals. *Contemporary Sociology*, 29(3), 445-454. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2653931>
- National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE). (1996). An overview of a new policy framework for higher education transformation. Report submitted to the Minister of Education on 22 August 1996. <https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/Chapter%201.pdf>
- O’Keeffe, L. & Kay, M. (2022). GADRA delivers: An organisational evaluation of GADRA education. https://gadraeducation.co.za/media/1168/gadra-education-organisational-evaluation_final_260422.pdf.
- Rhodes University. (2021). Nine tenths matric mentoring programme wins a global award, <https://www.ru.ac.za/rumep/latestnews/ninetenthsmatricmentoringprogrammewinsaglobalaward.html#:~:text=The%20prize%20is%20sponsored%20jointly,place%20for%20this%20prestigious%20prize!>
- Rootes, C. A. (1990). Theory of social movements: Theory for social movements? *Philosophy and Social Action*, 16(4), 5-7.
- Snow, D. A., Soule, S. A. & Kriesi, H. (2004). Mapping the terrain. In D.A. Snow, S.A. Soule & H. Kriesi. (Eds.) *The Blackwell companion to social movements*. Blackwell Publishing. pp. 3-17.
- Talloires Network of Engaged Universities. (2021). 2021 MacJannet prize winners. <https://talloiresnetwork.tufts.edu/about-the-macjannet-prize/2021-macjannet-prize-winners/>.
- Tarrow, S.G. (2011). *Power in movement: Social movement and contentious politics* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Weber, K. & King, B. (2014). Social movement theory and organization studies. In P Adler, P du Gay, G. Morgan & M. Reed (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of sociology, social theory, and organization studies: Contemporary currents*. Oxford University Press. pp. 487-510.
- Westaway, A. (2023a, January 22). The 2022 matric results: Opportunity beckons for Makhanda. *Grocott’s Mail*. [https://grocotts.ru.ac.za/2023/01/22/the-2022-matric-results-opportunity-beckons-for-makhanda/#:~:text=85%25%20\(2022\)andtext=The%202022%20total%20of%20305,case%20with%20the%20pass%20rate\)](https://grocotts.ru.ac.za/2023/01/22/the-2022-matric-results-opportunity-beckons-for-makhanda/#:~:text=85%25%20(2022)andtext=The%202022%20total%20of%20305,case%20with%20the%20pass%20rate)).
- Westaway, A. (2023b, November 9). A homage to our schools. *Grocott’s Mail*. <https://grocotts.ru.ac.za/2023/11/09/a-homage-to-our-schools/>