Engaging the Community in Educational and Social Amelioration: Lessons and Prospects

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Abstract

A crucial element to ensure the success of a project is the community's engagement in it: in other words, the participation of individuals, community-based organisations and institutions that would be affected by the endeavour is vital to its success. Studies suggest that strong community participation during a programme's development and implementation is more likely to assure its long-term viability. There has been a proliferation of academic programmes that embrace community involvement, service-learning and volunteerism flowing from the understanding that community engagement constitutes one of the core functions in South African higher education. Universities attempt in their own ways to engage students in various projects and programmes to make them aware of the role that a university has to play in the social and economic development of the surrounding community. This paper reports on the lessons and prospects emanating from free attitude interviews (FAI) with five mathematics and science students, members of a non-governmental organisation (Pula) and a number of beneficiaries. Findings indicate that it is essential to craft a common purpose between the university, NGOs and beneficiaries. Youth educators also indicated that they derived a heightened sense of accomplishment when addressing challenges experienced by their peers.

Keywords: Free Attitude Interviews; Community Engagement; Social Capital; Participatory Action Research; Pre-service teachers

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Introduction

Universities regard community engagement (CE) as an integral, indispensable and pervasive facet of higher education in South Africa. Our universities' role, as set out in the Higher Education White Paper 3 (Council on Higher Education 1997) is that 'we are called on to demonstrate social responsibility and make available expertise and infrastructure for CE programmes and projects in the commitment towards common good'. It is also important to take cognisance of what is set out in the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (Republic of South Africa (RSA) Department of Higher Education & Training 2014:online): 'a post-school education and training system that is responsive to the needs of individual citizens …'. The paper proposes that higher education has an important role to play in social and economic development through community-service programmes. Given the inclusion of community engagement as a core function in South African higher education and the proliferation of academic programmes that include community engagement, we as academics are committed to engaging our students in various projects and programmes that will prepare them for the important role that they will play in society. Our approach is aimed at empowering and exposing our students to the realities of the social and human dynamics within our communities. One of the benefits that accrue is the enhancement of students' leadership skills. This article presents the lessons and prospects of engaging the community in order to improve educational and social conditions.

What is Community Engagement?

Whenever a group of practitioners gathers to discuss what engagement is, a debate about the diversity of language usually ensues. Depending on the situation in which one is working, 'engagement' can cover consultation, extension, communication, education, public participation, participative democracy or working in partnership (Benjamin 2011). In many instances, 'engagement' is used as a generic, inclusive term to describe the broad range of interactions between people. It can include a variety of approaches, such as one-way communication or information delivery, consultation, involvement and collaboration in decision-making, as well as empowered action in informal groups or in formal partnerships (Servaes 2008). According to

Brown and Schaff (2011), the term 'community' refers to a group of people with certain commonly held interests and attributes that help create a sense of shared identity. It implies a web of affective relationships that are qualitatively different from those that characterise other kinds of human groups. Being part of a community further implies long-term, continuous social interaction that contributes to the formation of personal, social and economic production and reproduction. As a result, members share a sense of belonging, of 'we-ness'. Mothowamodimo (2011: 23) views a sense of community as 'sets of people who may identify themselves with a place in terms of notions of commonality, shared values or solidarity in particular contexts. These values could be informed by the spirit of *botho* which is itself a community value. Other values include, among others, service, charity, respect, togetherness, and hospitality.'

Community engagement is therefore a planned process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people (whether they are connected by geographic location, special interest, or affiliation) to identify and address issues affecting their well-being. The linking of the term 'community' to 'engagement' serves to broaden the scope, thereby shifting the focus from the individual to the collective, with the associated implications for inclusiveness to ensure that consideration is taken of the diversity that exists within any community.

Social Capital as a Framework for Understanding Community Engagement

The term 'social capital' was coined by Bourdieu when he extended the notion of capital to include sociological and cultural theory. According to Bourdieu (1986: 249-250), the social world consists of an accumulated history. Thus, social capital is the:

> aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a credential which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.

For Bourdieu, an individual's position in society is determined by the relative amounts of social, economic, and cultural wealth they accrue. Bourdieu's conceptual framework of social capital (as cited in Portes 2000) addresses the interaction between financial capital, social capital, and cultural capital. Social capital of any significance can seldom be acquired without the investment of some material resources and the possession of some cultural capital (e.g. academic credentials), enabling the individual to establish relations with others. Within Bourdieu's framework, social capital is associated with an individual's networks, including those that he or she explicitly constructs for that purpose, while the effects of acquiring social capital are linked to an array of material and informational benefits (2000). Social capital therefore, in the context of this study, relies on people looking beyond themselves and engaging in supportive or helpful actions, not because they expect a reward or immediate reciprocal help, but because they believe it is a good thing to do (Gauntlett 2011).

Furthermore, Keeley (2007: 102) states that the concept of social capital can be traced to Lyda Hanifan's view which sees it as 'those tangible assets [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit'. Keeley further avers that originally, social capital was used to describe how neighbours could work together to oversee schools.

Social capital has been used extensively in the relevant literature to explain the power and control that individuals may possess to improve their position within their social space (Flint 2011; Uphoff, Pickett, Cabieses, Small & Wright 2013). Recently developed and somewhat contested, is the practice of using the notion of social capital to explain the influence that certain organisations may wield on the social and economic development of geographical communities, such as towns and cities. Underlying this notion of social capital is the idea that organisations or communities possess social capital (Putnam 1995; Putnam & Feldstein 2003). This idea of organisational social capital is a shift away from Bourdieu's ideas that social capital is reproduced by individuals, primarily through social conditioning and behaviour attributed to class structure, and often facilitated by education (Portes 2000). This research draws on guidance provided by the concepts that construct social capital. Social capital concepts used in this research are described below.

All perspectives on social capital refer to the dense interlocking **networks** of relationships between individuals and groups (Portes 2000; Putnam 1995; Putnam & Feldstein 2003; Woolcock 1998). Individuals engage with others through lateral associations which should be both voluntary and equal, because they represent an expression of 'freely formed mutuality' (Latham, as cited in Onyx & Bullen 2000). This means that individuals acting on their own, and in isolation, cannot generate social capital. In the context of our university's interaction with the community, we aimed at lateral interaction with the community. In other words, in as much as the community could learn from the university, we were of the opinion that the university community could also learn from the community. The process of networking would then be between students, learners, the community and the academics. Social capital depends on the capacity to form new associations and to cooperate within the terms of reference established by the members of the association (Fukuyama 1995). Portes (2000), on the basis of Bourdieu's work, argues that social capital is most firmly associated with an individual's networks. The effects of social capital are linked to an array of material and informational benefits derived from the individual's networks and affiliated institutional frameworks. Contrary to the nature of relationships between individuals, the nature of relationships between individuals and groups is more problematic. Putnam (1993) argues – and Coleman (1988) concurs – that social capital may be an asset of an organisation that benefits the individual members, and that individuals may engage groups through vertical relationships with organisations (Putnam 1995). Some researchers (Lin 2001; Portes 2000) disagree with the application of the concepts to organisations and contend that this form of vertical relationship requires a circular logic; for organisations to possess social capital, individuals should first bring that capital to the organisation. Yet, it is the organisation that facilitates the achievement of collective goals. Nevertheless, Latham (as cited in Onyx & Bullen 2000) observes that, when vertical relationships dominate, citizens forfeit some of their 'rights of participation and choice' to the 'authority and control' of the dominant group. It was not our intention to have a vertical relationship with the community, but a mutual and lateral one.

Reciprocity is the second common theme in the literature on social capital. It may be defined as a 'combination of short-term altruism and long-term self-interest' (Onyx & Bullen 2000: 3). Individuals may provide a service to others or perform acts of kindness with the expectation that this

kindness will be returned in the future when the need for assistance arises. We (the researchers) were engaged in a relationship with an NGO, Pula, which would yield mutual benefits: firstly, our students would learn from the experience of teaching in and interacting with the community; secondly, the grade 10 learners would be assisted in their academic work; thirdly, we, as researchers would benefit from documenting the process; and lastly, the university would benefit from expanding its community-engagement portfolio.

Other goals of CE are to build **trust**, enlist new resources and allies, create better communication, and improve overall outcomes as successful projects evolve into lasting collaborations (Benjamin 2011). According to Kemshall and Wilkinson (2011), trust entails a willingness to take risks in a social context. The risks are based on a sense of confidence that others will respond as expected and will act in mutually supportive ways. Fukuyama (1995) explains trust in terms of commonly shared norms; that is, codes of behaviour embedded in personal values about questions, such as the nature of God or justice. It was out of trust that Pula requested the university to assist their peer educators and grade 10 learners in mathematics and the sciences. We hoped that our positive response to Pula would create a sense of interdependence between us and them. We would expect Pula to create space for our students to grow. On the other hand, students would be interacting with peer educators and the grade 10 learners. Their interaction would result in growth for all parties involved, while also building trust amongst us.

Onyx and Bullen (2000) define **social norms** as informal social control that eliminates the necessity for more formally institutionalised legal sanctions. Furthermore, these authors argue that neighbourhoods with high levels of trust and common expectations for neighbourly (helping) behaviour may have relatively little crime, may require relatively low levels of policing, and may not require written codification of what constitutes socially acceptable behaviour. On the other hand, neighbourhoods with low trust levels and disparate expectations of neighbourly behaviour may require negotiated codified rules for behaviour that should be formally enforced and endorsed. For example, managers of rental housing where residents are transient, typically employ restrictive rules that limit the residents' activities and behaviour. Residents of middle-class neighbourhoods with predominantly owner-occupied housing may expect that caring for property and helping one another will be reciprocated. Our interaction with the

community had a relatively low level of policing. Our common aim of helping the grade 10 learners to pass the examinations, coupled with high levels of trust amongst us, made it unnecessary for us to have a relatively high level of policing. Our part as researchers was to ensure that student teachers received the content to be taught weekly.

One of the principles of CE, as indicated above, concerns itself with **empowerment**. In addition, guided by Bourdieu's theory of social capital, it would be expected that the engagement between the parties would lead to some empowerment. The concept of empowerment includes providing community members with the knowledge, tools, and resources they need to gain more control over their lives. Empowerment takes place at individual, group and community levels. At the individual level, empowerment increases a person's perceived capacity to influence social and political systems and builds his or her skills and knowledge to influence these systems and his or her own behaviour. At the group level, organisations can become empowered by building the capacity and confidence of the group's members. Empowered organisations can influence their community environment. Community level empowerment occurs when individuals and organisations gather critical information and evaluate it in order to reach consensus and make decisions that address problems.

Method and Design

Pula[1] (pseudonym) is an NGO led by a retired lecturer from a college of education. It consists of seven members. In 2012/2013, when the researchers met the directors of Pula, it had already been constituted. The NGO is situated in a former homeland in the Free State province of South Africa, and two secondary schools catering for grades 10 to 12 are in the vicinity. Pula wrote to the University of the Free State requesting assistance regarding methodological approaches to teaching because the University was involved in assisting learners using peer educators. Their two peer educators have

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[1] Pula is a registered as an NGO. It is an NGO in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District of the Free State province in South Africa. Pula, which is consists of seven members, established a Learner Support Programme involving unemployed matriculants and graduates in a village to assist school learners in grade 10 with their school subjects.

passed grade 12 and obtained post-school qualifications, but they are not qualified teachers. In response to Pula's request, the university invited other NGOs to help pave the way for a larger partnership. During the NGO's stakeholders' meeting, Pula requested the university to assist them in the teaching of grade 10 mathematics and physical science. A number of NGOs responded positively to the invitation. For the sake of this article, only Pula's interaction with the university is discussed.

In instigating this task, the university invited volunteers exclusively from the population of its student teachers. Two students studying mathematics education, as well as three students of physical science education volunteered to coach the peer educators at the NGO in these subjects. Of the five students, three were females while two were males. Initially, the students were expected to offer lessons during school holidays. Towards the end of the second term, Pula requested that the classes be offered on Saturdays. Through a consultative process, both academics and students endorsed the request. Each Saturday, students had two hours in which to teach mathematics and another two-hour session for physical science. In order to maintain and review progress, the university and Pula held fortnightly meetings at the offices of Pula. The meetings and various activities were tape-recorded.

For ethical considerations, we obtained permission to conduct the research from the Faculty of Education at the institution where the study was carried out. Ethical considerations are generally considered to deal with beliefs regarding what is morally good or bad, right or wrong, proper or improper (McMillan & Schumacher 2001; Opie 2004; Van Niekerk 2009; Tsotetsi 2013). All participants involved signed consent forms which had been translated into Sesotho. We made it clear on the consent forms that people were not being coerced to participate. They were all assured of anonymity with regard to the information they would supply and informed that they could withdraw at any stage of the study without giving reasons. Such withdrawal would not have any negative repercussions on them or their children. These steps are supported by Opie (2004) and McMillan and Schumacher (2001), according to whom the researcher should show respect and care when people are involved in the research process.

Our research design was Participatory Action Research (PAR). According to Jordan (2003), PAR originated in countries that were colonised in the early 1960s and was inspired by the anti-colonial struggle when

scholars began to focus on how to change and better people's lives of fighting for survival. The scholars' stance was to value the participants' knowledge. PAR is therefore an approach embedded in the social sciences and was developed as part of a shift away from traditional, positivist science to working towards recognising and addressing complex human and social issues (Eruera 2010). PAR has the potential for research and it addresses wider issues of social justice; in other words, the inclusion and empowerment of the minority and communities that are often marginalised. It links well with the concept of social capital, which advances the agenda for empowerment (Mahlomaholo 2009).

There are three themes which define the PAR approach (Jordan 2003). Firstly, it (PAR) rejects the systematic reproduction of unequal power relations between the researchers and the researched which occurs when conventional research methodologies are used (Netshandama & Mahlomaholo 2010), tending to align itself with a non-positivist approach to research. The PAR process creates a discursive space for critically discussing matters without fear and giving power to all participants, including the marginalised and oppressed (Dentith, Measor & O'Malley 2012; Eruera 2010). Participants are assisted to express their opinions on issues that affect them every day and which are of concern to them. They are an integral part of the whole research process from beginning to end. Secondly, it is openly political (Eruera 2010; Netshandama & Mahlomaholo 2010; Sanginga, Kamugisha & Martin 2010). The researchers work *with* (as opposed to *on*) participants. In this regard, working *with* resonates very well with social capital in that, in the latter, the researcher engages with others through lateral associations which should be both voluntary and equal (Latham, as cited in Onyx & Bullen 2000).The third theme that defines PAR is its alignment with non-positivist paradigms and the adoption of qualitative methodology (Jordan 2003). The three themes indicate that PAR is centred on a democratic, critical, and emancipatory impulse. The success of PAR relies on collective participation and action, the generation of indigenous knowledge, and education. The researcher and the participants assume positions of being co-inquirers who are collectively engaged in and transformed by the enquiry process (Dentith, Measor & O'Malley 2012; Eruera 2010; Mahlomaholo & Netshandama 2010; Sanginga *et al.* 2010).

PAR thus means engaging with the community in a collaborative relationship from the start on issues to which the community is committed to

resolving (Ebersöhn *et al*. 2007; Eruera 2010; Netshandama & Mahlomaholo 2010; Sanginga *et al*. 2010 & Strydom 2002). The community was involved in the initiative from the onset. Through fortnightly discussions, the community and the University were able to apply the principles of PAR. Each of the meetings served to reflect on progress made as well as to plan ahead. In this regard, we perceive PAR as an effective methodology. Moreover, according to Eruera (2010) and Kemmis (2006), PAR enables individuals to take responsibility for their own growth and history.

The free attitude interview (FAI) was used to generate data. Unlike cases in which people respond to questions that have already been formulated, in an FAI people talk as they would in a normal conversation (Buskens 2011). What is more, the researcher and the participants engage with only one question. The advantage is that people may say more than they would in responding to a closed questionnaire. The nature of a normal discussion promotes the free and open engagement of participants. The central research question used in this study was: What are the lessons and prospects derived from engaging as partners in educational and social amelioration?

An FAI may be conducted between two people or in a group (Buskens 2011). Participants are free to intervene and the researcher can respond in a flexible manner. For the purposes of this study, it was conducted in a group. We used an FAI as a person-to-person method of obtaining information from the participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition, learners' evaluation forms were also used to generate data about their perceptions of the peer educator's and student teachers' lessons. All learners were given the evaluation forms. Questions in the evaluation forms concerned aspects of the syllabus with which the learners had problems, perception about the initiative as well as suggestions for improvement.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data generated, we created a tolerant environment in the focus group. This encouraged participants to share their perceptions, points of view, experiences, wishes and concerns, without pressurising them to vote or reach consensus. Integrating theoretical perspectives provided us with multiple views (Bailey 2007) from which we could interpret the lessons and prospects derived from engaging one another as partners in social and educational amelioration. The trustworthiness depended upon numerous readings of the interview transcripts and reflected

our thoughts about the participants in the study and our role in the interview process. In addition, we cleaned the data by reading the transcripts one at a time in an attempt to obtain the underlying meaning. We used member checking and held fortnightly meetings with Pula to ensure the trustworthiness of the collected data.

Furthermore, in order to analyse the data, we used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a cross-discipline method which comprises the analysis of text and talk in all disciplines of the humanities and the social sciences (Bloor & Bloor 2007; Tsotetsi & Mahlomaholo 2013; Tsotetsi 2013). Van Dijk (1993) asserts that critical discourse analysts look at structures, strategies and other properties of text, talk and communication which tend to reproduce existing unequal power relations. These may be either top-down relationships of power or bottom-up relationships of resistance, compliance and acceptance. According to Van Dijk (1995), the aim with CDA is to enable the voices of the marginalized groups to be heard. In this study, 'marginalised groups' refers to the NGOs, peer educators and learners. We analysed the data, taking into account the two approaches from Van Dijk's work, namely the text and the societal base (context base) (Van Dijk 1995).

Discussion of Findings
Theme 1: Personal Growth and Learning
Findings from this study showed that the grade 10 learners who were engaged in this project had a better understanding of the subjects than before the intervention. Two of the learners said the following regarding the project:

> I've understood a couple of things that I didn't understand before.
> It helps me a lot because in some cases I was unable to solve problems.

The above comments suggest that the grade 10 learners' understanding of mathematical and scientific concepts might have improved. Indeed they might even have grown. According to the learners, they were now able to solve problems that they had not been able to solve previously. Moreover, it was not only the grade 10 learners who suggested that they might have

grown; the peer educators also indicated that they might have experienced some advancements. The peer educators appreciated the way in which student teachers spoke to the learners and served as role models. In one of the meetings, one of the peer educators and the chairperson of Pula commented as follows:

> Also, on my side I learnt a lot. The way they [the student teachers] speak to learners (Peer educator A).
> I can confirm that the (peer) educators learnt a lot that assists them in their [N5 Engineering and National Diploma: Accounting] studies (chairperson of Pula).

In South African society, children are often expected to obey their parents' commands (Dyer 2007). From the comments received, the peer educator learnt how to address learners by observing student teachers. The fact that he learnt a lot also implies that he learnt more than he could express in words. Through community engagement, the peer educator learnt how to address learners in ways that are different from how children are treated in many sectors of society. The decent and respectful way to speak to learners is the social capital brought by students through community engagement.

The university student teachers also improved their presentation skills. Commenting on Nthabiseng (pseudonym), one of the student teachers, the secretary of Pula said:

> No, we were critical ka Nthabiseng in the last meeting. But now I can safely say she was a team leader. On Saturday, she was very good.

The student-teacher's confidence improved from what it had been the previous week. She presented the lesson very well. Leadership skills were also revealed in how she managed herself; thus, the words 'she was a team-leader'.

Furthermore, in terms of growth, the university students also learnt from the grade 10 learners. While the assumption is that the school community learnt only from the university, the opposite also became possible. The fact that the student teachers also learnt from grade 10 learners is supported by the student-teacher who said:

Le rona jwale ka ma-student mokgwa ona o re thusitse haholo. Re kgona le ho bona mekgwa e meng ya ho solv-a di-problems. Ka dinako tse ding bana bana ba tla ka di-methods tse sebediswang ke matitjhere a bona which are different from how I would solve them. (And as students, we learnt a lot. We learnt other methods of solving problems. Sometimes learners would show different methods that they used from their teachers).

The students' comments above indicate that they learn from social spaces. Both the university student teachers and grade 10 learners learnt from one another. The comments above reveal that learners indicated that they used different methods to solve problems in mathematics and physical science. Consequently, the student teachers progressed. In line with the above discussion, a study by Smith and Lev-Ari (2005) that was also conducted in rural areas demonstrates that, by placing student teachers in such initiatives, they are enabled to grow as they link the theory learnt at university with the realities they encounter.

Theme 2: Networking

Our finding demonstrated that lateral networking was one of the aspects which were achieved through the interaction between the university and the school community. According Delport and Makaye (2009), networking generally operates on an informal and voluntary basis. The primary aim of networking is to exchange ideas and provide mutual support. This implies the use of the existing social capital. In terms of working together for professional development purposes, the two peer educators signified their willingness to network with the university for the betterment of their teaching skills. One of the peer educators said the following:

… mabapi le ho developuwa ha rona haholo. Nna ho ya ka nna, re tshwanetse re e considere siding la ka because time is running out. Nka thabela hore ke thuswethuswe ho feta mona.

> (In connection with our professional development, according to me,we need to consider it, as we are running out of time. I would be happy if I could be assisted in that regard).

In contrast to the usual expectation that the NGO's leadership would decide on her (the peer educator's) behalf, through community engagement and social capital, she could network with the university for further professional development. The spoken words show the initiative taken by the peer educator in asking for additional assistance. The project therefore had created links between the peer educators and the students and learners. In this regard, the peer educator intended to exchange ideas with the student teachers for their professional development. The links were also created between the university students and the learners.

What is more, learners also pointed out the benefits of linking with the university indirectly. They suggested that the network should extend even further to the grades 11s and 12s. Reading from their evaluation forms, the following sentiments were expressed by one of the learners:

> I suggest them to extend classes for grade 11 and 12; continue to come in September holidays for the exam in September [sic].

This learner's words display a willingness to even sacrifice his or her holiday in order to gain more knowledge. It may be less likely for a grade 10 learner to voluntarily suggest coming to school during a vacation period since most attention is directed at grade 12 learners' education. We were also inspired to hear them suggesting the extension of the additional support classes to grade 11s and 12s.

Shehu (2009) points out the pivotal role played by networking. Through networking, student teachers and learners form friendships. They find individuals with whom they can share problems in their respective subjects, thereby able to support and encourage one another. Other advantages of networking include enhancing schools' general performance as it builds strong communities of teachers, promoting decentralised decision-making as well as fostering relationships between previously isolated individuals and organisations (Muijs 2008; Mokhele 2011; Villegas-Reimers 2003).

Theme 3: Collaboration

When presenting classes and dealing with the activities given to learners, student teachers worked hand-in-hand with peer educators. One student-teacher would present the lesson while others commented on the lesson or constructively criticised him or her where and when necessary. Members of the NGO (Pula) would also be present to get a sense of what was taking place. As soon as the learners were given activities, student teachers and peer educators would jointly assist learners on an individual basis. Pula's secretary commented as follows when referring to the approach:

> Ke method o bitswang team teaching. Because ba ne ba le ba ngata, ba ne ba le four. So they were able to engage all at the same time. Ke hore ha e mong a qetile ho ruta, a ba file exercise, the whole team goes into the group and micro manage. And that works very well. Because ba kgona ho fa ngwana e mong le e mong attention.
> (This is the method called team-teaching. Because there were four, they were able to engage everyone at the same time. As soon as one of them had completed presenting the lesson, and gave them an activity, the whole team would regroup. And that works very well. They were able to give individual attention).

The above comments show an appreciation of the approach used by the student teachers and peer educators. The words, 'the whole team would regroup and micromanage. And that works very well' gives a deeper interpretation of how collaboration and working together can be used as social capital to empower the community.

Besides what is mentioned in the preceding paragraph, one of the peer educators showed a willingness to further collaborate with the student teachers and the university as a whole. She made the following comments:

> Ke re o a tseba ha nka thuswa mona … le hore next year ha re qala, ke tsebe hore I have improved from this … to … that?
> (Do you know whether I can be assisted here … so that at the beginning of the next year, I will know that I have improved from this … to … that?).

What the peer educator sought to express above is that she experienced some change even though it is neither clearly described nor articulated. We may assume that this represents a feeling of positive social change.

Her comments show that she felt that the collaboration could assist her even further. Instead of waiting for Pula to decide on her behalf, she felt the need to move ahead and to progress from her current status to the next level. The project is deemed to have provided space for her to realise her awakening ability to develop and be nurtured in leadership skills, to sustain commitment and expand her work.

The collaborative approach is recommended by Mokhele (2011) who encourages student teachers and teachers in general, to work collaboratively to achieve greater results. According to Villegas-Reimers (2003), collaboration improves the exchange and sharing of expertise as members learn to solve problems together. Furthermore, collaboration promotes collegiality. In this regard, student teachers and/or peer educators learn from one another and improve their self-confidence, content knowledge and pedagogical practices. Such collaboration filters down to the learners who then understand a particular concept from different perspectives.

Theme 4: Trust

The partnership between the University and Pula created a bond. The participants felt that the 'linkage' could go even further in the years ahead. The chairperson of Pula commented as follows, confirming the trust that had grown amongst participants:

> We are requesting the university to look for other funds so that when the 2-year funding from funders comes to an end, our collaboration still continues.

From the above-mentioned comment, Pula feels satisfied with the link between the university and themselves. Their satisfaction is clarified by the sentiments expressed and the request that the university to look for other sponsors. We feel that this bond has been one of the important benefits of a negotiated partnership where we and Pula were able to clarify our goals. The request for the university to assist with funding endeavours is indicative of

the element of trust that seems to have emerged from the interactions. The gesture may further be interpreted as a situation where communities view themselves as being in a win-win situation with the university. Learners also endorsed their trust in the partnership. One of the learners commented as follows:

> They (university students) are so good than [sic] my teachers at school because they help if I have problem until I can solve that problem.

From the above comment, we deduced that the learners' understanding of mathematical and scientific concepts had improved. The students' ability bred trust from the learners and thus, the above-mentioned learner's words '[t]hey are so good than [sic] my teachers …'. The individual attention by student teachers working together with peer educators helped the learner to feel that the presenters were even better than her teachers at school. The fact that learners held student teachers' knowledge in high regard further attests to the element of trust that emerged. In some cases learners were not impressed with the student teachers simply because, unlike their teachers, they did not have an official qualification.

Although the above views of participants testify to the success with which student teachers presented their lessons, another learner had mixed feelings:

> I think that they are easy to understand and their explanation is not difficult to understand. They mustn't be too strict; they should make some jokes for us to be a little bit relaxed during sessions.

The above words show that the student teachers presented and explained concepts in a way that benefited the learners. In addition, they tried to maintain a firm stance that enabled them to be in control of the class as was expected of them. However, the learner(s) felt that he or she needed interaction that was more relaxed. It is normal in our African society to have differences of opinions if people are not of the same age (intergenerational differences and expectations). According to Saba (2013) the different generations are said to have different values and expectations regarding work which are not easily compatible. Members of a generational cohort

experience particular historical or environmental events within the same timeframe and share a set of values, beliefs and expectations (Leiter, Price & Laschinger, 2010). A lack of awareness of generational differences may lead to conflict in some instances. Student teachers are assuming positions of guardianship – thus, their concern about controlling their classes. Learners, on the other hand, because of their youth, need a fun atmosphere. Peer educators also shared their feelings of satisfaction about how student teachers presented the lessons. One of them commented as follows:

> I was impressed the way the chapter was introduced. Ba entse hore bana ba be more active. Haholo ke ratile yah ore ba be le chance ya hore ba ba thuse individually. Ke yona ntho eo ke e ratileng. E ba open-a di-mind hore ho etswa tjena. A bone ngwana hore o … e tjena … e tjena …
> (I was impressed the way the chapter was introduced. They ensured that learners were more active. I liked being given individual attention. That is something I liked the most. It opened our minds to solving problems. The child is able to understand how problems should be tackled). (Peer educator B)

The above remarks show the skilful way in which the lesson chapter was introduced. The peer educator further appreciated the step-by-step method by which grade 10 learners were guided. A step-by-step method is a way of taking the learner by the hand. The student teachers' ability to do so also built trust amongst the participants. This is a good a way of tapping into social capital, which bears trust. Trust is something that a teacher earns through his or her confidence in delivering the content and using suitable pedagogical practices. The interaction and reflection of both teachers and student teachers serve to build trust with the rest of the school community (Murtaza 2010; Shafa, Karim & Alam 2011).

Lessons and Prospects

One important lesson to be learned from this community-engagement exercise is the fact that communities may be acutely aware of the challenges with which they are confronted and can therefore decide what intervention is

needed. In this study the NGO was aware that the need for support was in grade 10, and not in grades 11 and 12; this is the case in most instances. Interaction under such conditions is more likely to create fertile ground for building relationships and attitudes that allow them to work together effectively, irrespective of different points of view. This endeavour may have further sown the seeds for cultivating a sense of community spirit, shared gratification and the need to further support one another. There is also the fact that the NGO, as well as the university, may have made strides in seeing each other as equals; a situation that might have required that the latter descend from its ivory tower. We, the authors of this article, remain puzzled about how and why students, who by their nature as human beings belong to particular communities before they come to university, are seen in a different light when they go back to engage with those communities. In our view, they should not have been in a place of privileged isolation or separation from the practicalities of the real world in the first place.

Furthermore, this community-engagement exercise seems to have broadened the awareness of learning opportunities that are available to learners, student teachers and community members. This is evident in how the university and community (through the NGO) engaged with and sought to improve each other. The quality and depth of future relationships between the two entities may lead to further engagements which have the potential to harness social interaction, social networks and social support, as well as educational and social amelioration.

The study further indicated that it is possible for universities and communities to develop trust, reciprocity and social cohesion between themselves. Through community engagement, participation, social engagement and commitment are encouraged. Since there were clear calls for the community engagement project to continue, we wish to point out that our view of the concept 'project' also changed. We, the authors of this article and instigators of the project, wish to use the concept 'initiative' in future. Using the former may be hamstrung by the fact that it has time limits and may have to adopt a certain form to be prescribed and approved, whilst initiatives provide more scope and flexibility.

Conclusion

The study discussed the findings of one of the university's community Enga-

gement projects. Findings revealed the advantages of networking and collaboration, as peer educators were able to network with the university. The team-teaching approach not only benefitted the learners and peer educators, but the student teachers' self-esteem and confidence were also enhanced. Through networking, the university, student teachers and community members are able to communicate and share their ideas (Otieno & Coclclough 2009) and this results in a situation in which all three benefit. Whilst this appears to be an ideal outcome, it may however, not be realised to the satisfaction of all parties. The ideal outcome presupposes that, in engaging the communities, positive social and educational change will accrue to all who were involved. In this study, the benefits affected not only the student teachers but also the community. For example, the peer educators, who are members of the community, were in an improved position as they were introduced to the intricacies of teaching and learning, including the facilitation of learning experiences and assessments. Reciprocity was evident as student teachers further learnt other methods of solving problems from the community members. Lessons learnt include that fact that student teachers and the university were (tacitly) engaged in a problem already identified and conceptualised by the community. It is important to note that the NGO concerned indicated that the need is at grade 10. Therefore, the community may claim to have won with regard to the choice of the focus area where the efforts needed to be made. A very important lesson gained is that communities are aware of the problems with which they are confronted, even though they may not have the means to solve them. Personal growth and learning were clearly demonstrated, as one of the student teachers even emerged as a team leader (meaning that leadership roles can be organic in nature, i.e. they change hands as the project evolves) in the same project. Transitions in leadership roles do, in our view, create space for, amongst other benefits, dynamism and creativity. The project encouraged and boosted the confidence of the learners, peer educators and the leadership of the NGO to take responsibility for their own growth and success. Mokhele and Jita (2010) and Ono and Ferreira (2010) assert that through collaboration between universities and the community at large, a better understanding and solutions to educational and social matters can be reached. We are of the opinion that, if planned and managed in a manner that seeks to recognise the voices of all parties, community engagement has the potential to effect social change for the betterment of communities. The study provides an example of instances

where social capital may be tapped into for educational and social amelioration. This is consistent with the basic tenet of social capital which requires that communities bring about their own betterment by utilising the accrued assets and potential.

Acknowledgements

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Engaging the Community in Educational and Social Amelioration

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