

Creating functional and sustainable School–Community Partnerships: Lessons from three South African cases

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Abstract

Globally, there is agreement that school–community partnerships are one of the mechanisms to address challenges that schools cannot address alone. However, evidence suggests that where school–community partnerships have been initiated, their functionality and continuity is not always easy to achieve, and research locally and internationally has not sufficiently addressed this concern. To bridge this gap, guided by Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence, this paper examined what makes school–community partnerships functional and sustainable. The research used a qualitative case study and employed discursive oriented interviews (both individual and focus group), a researcher’s reflective journal, and document reviews to generate the data. Participants were principals, teachers, and academics from two universities. It was found that for partnerships to be functional and sustainable there is a need to ensure that there is collaborative planning and decision-making, effective two-way communication, eagerness to address power issues, and the creation of a culture that promotes participative leadership. From these findings, the paper concludes that principal’s leadership is only critical at the beginning stage of partnerships, and teacher leadership is central in the functionality and continuity of partnerships. In relation to the theoretical framework, it is further concluded that power is an important element to consider, which either brings partners together or pushes them apart.

Keywords [Discursive oriented interviews](#), [leadership](#), [school community](#), [school–community partnerships](#), [spheres of influence](#), [sustainable partnerships](#)

Introduction

Globally, there is an agreement that school–community partnerships constitute one of the mechanisms available to address challenges that schools cannot address alone ([Blank et al., 2012](#); [Mncube, 2009](#); [Myende, 2013](#); [Myende and Chikoko, 2014](#); [Naicker, 2011](#); [Okeke, 2014](#); [Prew, 2009](#)). These partnerships present prospects for community and school development. Moreover, evidence shows that it is imperative for schools and communities to engage in partnership as overlapping spheres ([Epstein, 2011](#)), because this will contribute to children’s growth, and to their ability to learn positively ([Eberly et al., 2007](#); [Prew, 2009](#)). Evidence further shows that while school–community partnerships are not a panacea for all school challenges, they offer access to additional assets that are relevant in combating learners’ social and educational challenges ([Myende, 2013](#); [Myende and Chikoko, 2014](#); [Naicker, 2011](#)). Many schools internationally and locally have thus forged partnerships to harness resources and support beyond the school boundaries ([Epstein, 2011](#); [Gonzalez and Thomas, 2011](#); [Sanders, 2007](#)). Ensuring the functionality and sustainability of these partnerships is not easy ([Bhengu and Myende, 2016](#)). This paper draws some lessons from three cases to understand what it takes to make a functional and sustainable school–

community partnership. It explores these three partnerships in order to explain what should or should not be done for school–community partnerships to function and be sustained.

The findings offer light on the difficulties in keeping such partnerships functional, a matter of global concern. They may further inform and guide the practices of leaders involved in school–community partnership initiatives. Given the dearth of literature in particular on local partnerships, the findings may assist in creating functional and sustainable partnerships.

School community and school–community partnerships

“Understanding the term ‘community’ is pertinent in conceptualising school–community partnerships” (Myende, 2018: 124). In South Africa, following desegregation, learners became free to enrol in a school where their families live, or alternatively in a school far away from their families. “Community” can be understood from two perspectives, namely geographical and relational communities (Gusfield, 1975). The former refers to the community as people residing in one location, and the latter sees community as centred on human relations, with no reference to location (Smith, 2016). In the second perspective, common cultural heritage, language, social interactions and shared interests and vision by individuals and organisations guide what the community is (Bhengu and Myende, 2015; Sanders, 2006). This latter conceptualisation is more suitable for understanding community in the context of the South African schooling system. This is because education policy landscape may bring confusion as to who forms the school community. For example, according to the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996, hereafter referred to as SASA, parents in South Africa may decide to enrol their children in any school, whether in their proximity or in places far away from where they reside, as long as the school has space for the children (Republic of South Africa, 1996). On the one hand, this means that parents, no matter how far the school is from where they stay, have a direct link (the child) with the school, and are part of the school community. On neighbourhood, despite the fact that their children are enrolled in other communities geographically. This makes them a community for that local school (Myende, 2018).

The foregoing account suggests that school community is complex and cannot only be understood using geographic or relational communities. However, the conception of community Smith (2016) presents, which I adopt in this article, attempts to resolve this complexity. He argues, “A community signifies a group or network of people who are connected to one another by relatively durable social relations” (Smith, 2016: 144). To extend this since it covers one element, I add that these groups or networks may be within or beyond the same geographical boundaries. I further make use of Bauch’s (2001: 205) as cited in Myende (2018) conceptualisation of school–community partnerships (SCPs), which sees SCPs “as the development of social relationships within and between the school and its local community that promotes action”. These relationships are built on social trust, and relationships that promote agency within a community for the development of the common good. In addition to families, schools may collaborate with government institutions, universities, businesses, other schools, non-governmental institutions, and other individuals (Bhengu and Myende, 2015; Myende and Chikoko, 2014). Owing to the interest that these organisations and individuals have in what schools are doing, they form part of the school community (Bosma, Seiving, Ericson, Russ et al., 2010). While the findings are based on teachers, principals, university stakeholders, and field notes that were taken during meetings, membership in the partnerships was not limited to the participants used to generate the

findings in this paper. The adoption of the concept of ‘school–community partnership’ is in line with the scope of the participants in the studied partnerships.

School and community as overlapping spheres

To understand the creation of working partnerships, this article draws from the theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2001). It is argued that spheres (Epstein, 2001) within which schools interact contain a plethora of assets (Myende, 2014). One of the most feasible ways to tap into these assets is through sustained partnerships. I further argue that schools exist within an ecology with a web of role players who may indirectly or directly influence the educational experiences of a child both in and outside the school environment. Due to this interest and influence, the role of these stakeholders continually shapes the education of a child. Premised within this argument, Epstein’s theory of *overlapping spheres of influence* (2001) deals with community individuals, organisations and businesses, and the way in which they interact in school–community partnership to improve learner achievement (Sanders, 2001). The theory claims that learners learn more when multiple stakeholders in the community recognise their shared goals and responsibilities for student learning, and collaborate with one another, rather than working in silos (Epstein, 2001). Epstein’s (2001) model, referring to family, school, and community as the contexts for the partnership, points to both separate and combined influences on learners, who are the main beneficiaries of school–community partnership. Naicker (2011) refers to the three spheres as three wheels (school, family, and community), and argues that school–community partnership will move more efficiently if the three wheels are synchronised and share the goal of developing positive and productive interactions within the said partnership. Taken on its own, each context may wield a positive influence on learner educational attainment. When a context intersects with another context, the combination may impact more strongly on learner achievement (Bhengu and Myende, 2015; Myende and Chikoko, 2014). The model shows how different spheres, by intersecting with one another, create areas of potential cooperation and enrichment with each other. The space where the three spheres intersect produces the greatest influence on learner performance (Naicker, 2011).

The growth of the partnership is depicted by the increased size of the area of influence (Epstein, 2011). The model advocates that the greater the interactions among the spheres, the more enhanced the learning among the learners will be (Epstein, 2001). The *external structure* of the model shows that these contexts may be pulled together or pushed apart by the philosophies, policies and selected activities that are operating in each context. The *internal structure* of the model identifies the interpersonal relationships and connections between and among parents, children, educators and others in the community that may affect student success in school (Epstein, 2001). The internal structure represents the ‘engine room’ (that is, the intersections of the various components) of school–community partnership, whereas the external structure illustrates the actual components and the manner in which they link as they work together (Epstein, 1995). Points of transition in the relationship between the *spheres of influence* allows for the flexibility and the constant change necessary for school–community partnership in motion (Chavkin, 2001). The overlap of and the movement of the components of the *spheres of influence* towards or away from one another are indicative of the degree of communication and collaboration within school–community partnership (Hohlfield et al., 2010). Though schools and communities are distinct entities, the boundaries between them are permeable, given that schools have moved from closed to open systems, thereby enhancing the possibility of exchange. The Epstein model (2001) has a long and successful history and is simple in design, and it also enjoys the empirical support of many

researchers ([Bojuwoye, 2009](#); [Bhengu and Myende, 2015](#); [Chavkin, 2001](#); [Sanders, 1996](#)). In the United States, this model has been adopted by the US Department of Education as a framework for its *No Child Left Behind* policy ([Epstein, 2011](#); [Naicker, 2011](#)). Several models explaining collaboration between schools exist. For example, the work of [Bryan and Holcomb-McCoy \(2004\)](#) is one such model. However, I found the work of Epstein to be more relevant. [Epstein \(1995\)](#) provides a clear and detailed example of how interaction between the different spheres can lead to the possibilities of sustaining school–community partnerships. To support this claim, [Naicker \(2011\)](#) reasons that this theory explains the interactions of spheres well, by showing what puts school–community partnership in motion; what happens when partnerships are actually in operation; how they are sustained, and the question of ‘who is doing what’ in all these processes. [Naicker \(2011\)](#) argues that the model provides insight into the complexity of the partnership and the movement of the contexts as they heighten interaction or pull away as the need arises.

However, an effective analysis on its own does not make partnerships easy to establish, manage and sustain. Guided by Epstein’s work, this paper hopes to provide a critical analysis of what makes partnerships thrive or fail. In short, I use Epstein’s model to analyse the emerging issues in the three case studies to understand how to run functional and sustainable partnerships.

Methodology

This paper reports on the findings of multiple qualitative case studies that were conducted in three different sites, viz. two districts¹ in KwaZulu-Natal (Vulindlela District and Umzumbe District) and one site in the Free State (Dihlabeng Municipality²). These sites were part of an ongoing research project on improving academic performance in schools. The partnerships focused on different smaller projects, but were all aimed at addressing the issue of academic performance in the schools involved. The project used multiple qualitative data generation methods, but the findings reported here are from discursive oriented interviews (DOI), document reviews, and my reflective journal. This has contributed to the trustworthiness of the data reported here, by looking at the data from different participants and different data generation methods. As a qualitative researcher, in all three sites I was concerned with the subjective meanings ([Silverman, 2013](#)) that the participants in the partnership gave to the actual happenings in all partnerships projects. Therefore, I studied the sites’ realities and interpreted them from the participants’ perspectives ([Creswell and Poth, 2017](#)). Although, I was part of the projects, I used member-checking to ensure that my own biases and power as a university employee do not contaminate the data. Member-checking involves the researcher confirming whether the transcribed data represents the views of the participants and not those of the researcher ([Ulin et al., 2005](#)).

The interpretive paradigm by which the entire project was guided regards truth as socially constructed, multifaceted and dependent on the context, time, culture and other experiences of the participants ([Bertram and Christiansen, 2014](#)). Therefore, the intention of each case was to make meaning from the participants’ experiences as members of the partnerships. Therefore, instead of narrowing meaning to a mere few categories, the study looked for a complexity of views as drawn from participants from these three different sites ([Cohen et al., 2011](#); [Creswell and Poth, 2017](#)). This diversity strengthens the trustworthiness of the study. While case studies cannot be generalised, the quality of the findings in this article can be found in the data emanating from three unique cases. Although the findings reported here would not be guaranteed to be relevant elsewhere, through thick descriptions of the research

sites, it may be easy for others to determine whether issues in these partnerships can be applied in their situations. where people are engaged in related partnerships.

The research sites and research procedure

As stated above, a case study approach was used to respond to the broad objectives of this study. Case studies are conducted in real contexts, and their intention is to investigate experiences bound by the context under which the studies are conducted. Case studies also provide rich insight into particular situations, events, organisations or even persons ([Rule and John, 2011](#)). The schools from the Dihlabeng Municipality in the Free State, the municipal officials and a university in the Free State engaged in a partnership, which was aimed at improving academic results of Grade 12 learners within the municipality. In the second case, three secondary schools from Vulindlela District in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Province, collaborated with academics and students from a university in KZN, and different local organisations and individuals from the community. The aim of this partnership was to address different social challenges with a belief that through addressing these challenges, the school and other partners could help improve academic performance of learners. In the third case, one secondary school had tried a number of partnerships with different organisations and individuals in the community, aimed at improving conditions in the school, with the broader aim of improving declining Grade 12 academic results. These three different sites provided common rich themes, which I believed were crucial in informing those involved in school–community partnership initiatives.

In the second (Vulindlela District case) and third (Umzumbe District case) partnerships, participants were selected purposively. This entailed intentional selection of individuals in each research site for the study guided by the principle of “fitness for purpose”. All the participants in the three sites were part of the partnerships, and were therefore relevant. From the Vulindlela District partnership, one school was used and the principal (Peace), deputy principal (Satinga), three teachers (Busisiwe, James, and Dumakude) and two academic staff members from the university (Palesa and Puleng) were interviewed. In the third partnership (Umzumbe District), data from members of the SMT (school principal [Muzi], two Heads of Department [Msizi]), and two teachers [Zwide, Heath]) were used. In total, this paper presents data from 11 participants, various documents reviewed, and the researcher’s reflective journal.

In the partnership between the Dihlabeng Municipality, secondary schools and members of the university from the Free State no use was made of interviews, but as one of the coordinators in the partnership, I was part of all meetings of the partnership. During these meetings, I used my diary to make notes that were then transferred to reflections in my reflective journal to document my experiences and observations of the issues that happened during the activities and meetings.

I was part of the partnership in Vulindlela from 2010-2012 and from 2012 February to October 2012 I was part of the partnerships in the Free State. From March 2013 – April 2014 I was part of the school in Umzumbe District for helping the school improve results and for my PhD research purposes. The duration of my involvement in these sites also enhances the quality and rigour in this article, in the sense that my involvement provided me with enough information to ask relevant questions from the participants during interviews. I was able to probe further in instances where participants presented information that was contrary to what I had seen on the research sites.

Discursively oriented interviews (DOIs) were utilised as a data generation method, using “talk as social action” (Henning et al., 2004: 57). The DOI method was suitable for the project because participants were social actors, who interacted with me and at the same time were involved in discursive practice and communicative action within the partnerships. This form of interview allowed participants to have an unrestricted conversation with me, and suited the broader aims of the three cases, where participants were able to voice their experiences as constructed from each case. An added advantage, as observed at each site, was that DOI also allowed participants to reflect on their discussions, and they were able to ask questions of me as the researcher, instead of merely one-way questions (researcher to participants). The flexibility of participants created a space in which participants openly talked to me with confidence, and this led to the generation of in-depth views about the incidences in the partnerships (Henning et al., 2004). The interviews were conducted with all participants in the KZN partnerships, and lasted for 45–65 minutes. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences regarding their participation in the partnerships and how they thought partnerships could be run to work and last longer. Based on their responses, probing questions (which I highlight in the findings section) were asked. Reflections and notes of the researcher were compiled from meetings that took place before and during the partnership activities of the Dhlalabeng Municipality and the university in the Free State. Further, document reviews were used to study the partnerships in Vulindlela District partnership. I reviewed the proposal document, reports, written communications between the school and the university partners, and a questionnaire sent to participating schools at the beginning of the partnerships by the university members. While all these methods were used, the article draws primarily from interviews.

Analysis of data

In order to make meaning of the data, I conducted qualitative data analysis using thematic content analysis. Firstly, I transcribed all the audiotaped interviews *verbatim* into written transcripts and then coded them. The process entailed creating codes of meanings from the data and organising those codes into themes (Henning et al., 2004). Before these codes were created, the main research and interview questions and the probing questions were used to guide the formulation of codes and themes. Furthermore, themes were generated from the literature and the framework guiding this study. Thus, the analysis was both inductive and deductive in nature (Creswell and Poth, 2017). The data from documents and my reflective journal were read after the analysis of interviews. Documents for the Vulindlela partnership were analysed separately. The analysis of these documents was guided by the themes that emerged in the analysis of the interviews. In other words, the data from documents serve to illuminate the very issues that emerged in the interviews. From the documents, issues that related to collaborative planning and decision-making were put under these theme, and the same procedure was used in the three other themes.

Consequently, the data from my reflections and notes taken during meeting in the Free State partnerships were read separately to understand the issues emerging from these notes and reflections. This process, unlike in other two cases, followed an inductive process only. In other words, I allowed the findings in this case to emerge from the frequent and dominant issues from the raw data. To fulfil the aim of this paper, which was to understand how to run functional and sustainable partnerships, I had to identify common themes across the three cases. Therefore, in addition to the analysis approach, I used a cross-case analysis in order to bring forth the comparisons among the three cases. This led to the construction of the four common themes and yielded into meaningful linkages across the cases (Khan and

[Vanwysberghe, 2008](#)). To ensure the quality and rigour of the findings reported here, the principles of trustworthiness set out by [Ulin, Robinson and Tolley \(2005\)](#) were used. Triangulation, member-checking and prolonged engagement were used to promote quality and rigour in the research process.

Ethical considerations

Conducting research, especially within a social science context, has an ethical-moral dimension that researchers are obliged to follow. I obtained ethical clearance from the university where I was employed for the partnership conducted in KwaZulu-Natal, the provincial Department of Education, and the schools in question. In the Free State partnership, the university team, of which I was a member, applied for ethical clearance in the university and the Free State Department of Education. In addition, informed consent was obtained from all participants in interviews, as well as those who were part of the meetings in the Free State. Considering that learners were minors, letters were written to their parents to obtain their consent in the language parents understood. All participants participated voluntarily and were informed of their freedom to withdraw from the study. To further respect the appropriate ethical standards, pseudonyms are used for all participants and institutions involved.

Findings and discussion

The findings show that there are four fundamentals for functional and sustainable school–community partnerships. It was found that *collaborative planning and decision-making* should characterise the initiation stage of any partnership. Through the voices of participants and the documents reviews, it was further found that ensuring *effective communication* is important in creating an understanding of and maintaining a sense of ownership of the partnership goals and objectives by the partners, and that this added to the functionality and sustainability of partnerships. The findings further show that power becomes a challenge in any partnership and *challenging superiority and inferiority complexes* is crucial for functionality and sustainability. Lastly, a *culture supportive of participative leadership* was found to be important in ensuring functionality and sustainability. These findings are discussed at length in the next section.

Collaborative planning and decision-making

The findings from the three different partnerships show that functional partnerships are achievable through the practice of collaborative planning and decision-making. As learnt from the participants, collaborative planning and decision-making meant that partners needed to plan together and collaborate in making decisions regarding the activities involved in the partnerships. In the first case, it emerged that the project leaders emphasised the importance of school stakeholders' involvement in planning and decision-making for the partnership. This was found in the responses of two partnership leaders (Puleng and Palesa) from one university when I asked them about their views on what could keep the partnership working:

...We believe that for us to create sustainable partnership there is a need to value and respect the views of all stakeholders...At the beginning of our project, we worked with school principals and we asked them to extend the invitation to all other teachers and parents to join us in planning for the partnership...(Puleng).

When we conceptualise our project, we understood that only the locals can understand their issues better and our work was centred on collaboration and commitment to mutual benefits...Although it was not an easy task, but [sic] we always tried to make decisions together with the school stakeholders...(Palesa).

The information extracted from the founding document of the first partnership corroborated what emerged from the voices of the project leaders. During the document review, the founding document and the proposal indicated that, as one of the principles for the partnership, the partners wanted to ensure collaborative planning in which all stakeholders are involved in deciding what the partnership needed to address.

In the second case, it also emerged that collaborative planning and decision-making was crucial in creating sustainable partnerships. In this partnership, the university from the Free State initiated partnerships with different schools from Dihlabeng Municipality, but decisions were taken and planning was done by the office of Community Engagement at the university level, and the school principals, without the teachers. At the time of implementing the activities of the partnership, several challenges were experienced in the process. Teacher participants and student participants from the university indicated that everyone needed to be part of planning and decision-making in order to avoid the challenges. During the meeting, which focussed on reflections (challenges) on the activities of the partnership, one teacher had this to say about their involvement:

Our principals and the university members are not involved in teaching; they have a very limited understanding of what are real issues in our classroom, and they should have ensured that we are represented in planning and decision-making (researchers' diary).

Another Head of Department (HoD), who was part of the meeting in the Free State partnership where challenges of the partnership were discussed, added that he and his teachers were aware of the issues that were problematic in their department. The HoD further stated that because they were not involved in planning, they were unsure as to whether or not what the university tutors would cover constituted relevant responses to the problems in their department.

As an HoD together with my teachers, I understand problematic issues in our department, but because we were not involved in planning and decision-making, I foresee a problem, where tutors are just helping learners without knowing whether what they are teaching is relevant and going to benefit learners in the end (Researcher's diary).

A number of activities in this partnership were not properly planned, and teachers from different schools during the meetings concurred that this was caused by lack of collaborative planning and decision-making. During the winter classes, some teachers withdrew their participation, and some were involved in activities, but hardly took ownership of the project. In a collaborative meeting between the university participants and teachers, it emerged that every participant wanted to be part of planning and decision-making processes.

In the third case, teachers indicated they had proposed many ideas, which had been instrumental in changing the school. They also indicated that they believed parents and other community members possessed strategic resources to change the school into a successful one. However, the issue of failure to include teachers and the community in the process of planning and decision-making appeared to present a bottleneck towards partnerships that are functional and sustainable. For the two teachers that participated from Umzumbe District,

creating partnerships that are sustainable was achievable if all members' ideas were considered, and this could only be achieved through collaborative planning and decision-making. If this is not ensured, according to one teacher, their commitment may be withdrawn and mere compliant and participation is possible. One teacher (Zwide) stated that:

I have come to a point where I am a spectator, because I have many ideas, but our school leaders rarely include us in their planning and decisions.

Echoing similar views, another teacher (Heath) added the issue that the community was also excluded from strategic decision-making processes, and were thus unenthusiastic participants. This is what the teacher said:

The community as well as teachers in the school are hardly included in decisions and planning of school activities, and it makes it hard to create lasting relations between these people.

The concept of partnership as articulated earlier encompasses mutual benefits, ensuring that everyone is an equal contributor, and schools or communities are not on the receiving end, but are nonetheless influential in what happens in the partnership ([Swaffield, 2005](#)). Although businesses have their own hierarchies, they are usually not confined by bureaucratic procedures and rules such as those confining the education system. This perspective shows that partnerships are not driven by an individual, but instead, they are driven by a group of people who commit to the sharing of risks and benefits encountered ([Du Toit, Erasmus and Strydom, 2010](#)). Collaborative work has been given credit in literature as it leads to a sense of belonging and commitment towards achieving organisational goals. It is therefore not surprising that it has been given high value in creating and sustaining school–community partnerships by participants. While collaborative planning appears important in all partnerships, there are two observations about it. Firstly, where project leaders (university project leaders and the principal from Vulindlela district) claimed that there was collaboration, the views from teachers show that collaboration was not based on genuine commitment. Teachers either participated as observers or participated for the sake of compliance.

The views of participants across all cases coincide with [Epstein's \(2001\)](#) theory of overlapping spheres of influence. The theory emphasises the strengthening of positive and productive interaction between those involved in the relationship. The lack of collaboration and inclusive decision-making process is a sign of the lack of these interactions. There is consensus that the intersection of the different spheres creates cooperation and enrichment, which not only benefits learners but enhances the chances for sustained relationships ([Myende and Chikoko, 2014](#)). The theory helps us in understanding why almost all teachers in the cases emphasized the need for their inclusion in planning and decision-making. Across the three cases, there was a belief that addressing issues of communication would help to deal with issues of collaboration and inclusion.

Effective communication

Effective communication is one of the most important factors that research has regarded as crucial for organisational success. Effective communication in the context of partnerships is verbal or written and needs to be of a nature that influences the recipient to buy-in and commit to the partnership ideas. Furthermore, communication spells out all the aims and

expectation of the partnership from all parties involved ([Battilana et al., 2010](#)). Through effective communication, organisations are able to create an understanding for shared vision and goals ([Myende, 2013](#)). The buy-in of all stakeholders into the organisational goals is achievable if goals are clear and communicated effectively to all.

Likewise, it emerged in the three cases that effective communication is a necessary characteristic of functional and sustainable school–community partnerships. During the discussion with the principal on what he thought could ensure that the partnership runs successfully, in the first case of this study, communication was seen to be crucial in ensuring full participation from all members. The school principal (Peace) accepted that, in the partnership, they faced a challenge of lack of participation owing to their failure in communicating with and inviting all interested parties to participate. The principal articulated this as follows:

We have not ensured that the message regarding the partnership with the university team is communicated to all members that were requested by university project leaders. In my understanding, we can strengthen this partnership by making sure that we communicate openly with everyone.

I further asked the principal what was meant by communicating openly with everyone. The response suggested that information at times was only given to a few within the school and, as much as the partners from the university wanted the external community to participate, we did not invite them.

The partnership with the university is not for us only but sometimes I only communicated with teachers in the school only.

I asked the deputy principal (Satinga) of the same school about what were his ideas on keeping the partnership running. His view confirmed concerns with communication. He indicated that that he joined the school when the partnership with the university already existed, but he had not been informed of the nature and purpose of the partnership and his role in it. This is what the deputy said:

I joined the school late in the year and I have continuously interacted with university students who are always placed here in our school every year. Sometimes I will just see academics from the university in our school without knowing why they are here. I have learnt that we have partnership with them, but no one has fully communicated with all of us [teachers] to make us aware what this relationship entailed and what our roles are.

When asked if this affected the participation in the partnership activities, the deputy's response shows that the participation and commitment was limited. This participation, judging from the response, is mere compliance, which may not contribute meaningfully to the growth of the partnership.

I hardly know what is going on so I only participate when I am asked to; but for me, effective communication is the problem in the school, and for that matter, I don't understand what is going on.

The value of effective communication was also emphasised by teachers in this same school. Three other teachers from Vulindlela (Busisiwe, James, Dumakude), who were interviewed through a focus group, indicated that they had not participated meaningfully, as they had an

impression that the projects were only for Life Orientation (LO) teachers. This perception was linked by these teachers to lack of communication, especially from leaders within the school. All teachers agreed with one teacher (Busisiwe) who said:

We [teachers] have not taken part in several activities taking place organised by the school and the university, because we were informed that LO teachers will be the ones running all activities...there is even a committee that communicates with the university and everyone in that committee is an LO teacher.

Although the teachers above shift the blame to the leaders of the partnership, communication has been argued to be a two-way process and therefore there is a possibility that it also is lacking from their side. This is further supported by their response when they say “we thought this was for LO teachers”.

It was not only in this case that the role of communication emerged strongly. In cases two and three it was also found that effective communication is an important ingredient in creating functional and sustainable school–community partnerships. In the second case, school principals were supposed to attend a meeting organised by the university in the Free State with the teachers for Accounting, Mathematics, Physics and English. Principals only came alone, except one who came with one teacher. When the partnership coordinator from the university asked why teachers were not present, it emerged that there was no clear communication from the university to schools (researchers’ diary). Similarly, when two teachers (Heath and Zwide) were interviewed in the third case about the possibilities of forging partnerships with their local community in order to improve academic performance, they both indicated that the flow of information between their principal and the community inhibited the possibilities of partnering. As a way to strengthen this communication, the teachers suggested that the principal must connect with the community through attending community events, and by inviting community members to attend school events. It was found that this approach would create a two-way communication. Literature ([Battilana et al., 2010](#); [Myende, 2013](#); [Myende and Chikoko, 2014](#)) argues that effective communication comes in a two-way process and that it is critical in creating social cohesion among people in these partnerships. Thus, while the school is blamed for lack of communication, this might also be a challenge from the side of university partners.

In agreement with the findings discussed above, in a conceptual discussion of spheres, [Hohlfeld et al. \(2010\)](#) argue that the overlap and movement of the components of the spheres towards or away from one another, indicates the nature and quality of communication that exists in the partnerships in question. Seen across all three cases, there was a gap in *communication that pushed members of each sphere apart*.

Challenging superiority and inferiority complexities

When schools work together with their communities, it is argued that the power that exists between different stakeholders due to schools’ hierarchies ([Coyle, 1997](#); [Tschannen-Moran, 2009](#)) has always limited the possibilities of creating benefiting partnerships ([Myende, 2014](#)). The same concern emerged in all the cases used in this article, where superiority and inferiority complexities were found to be at play between different members. The further concern was that there was a lack of commitment from participants to confront these complexities. The complexities were caused by many factors according to the analysis. The views of participants suggest that these complexities were caused by gender, the hierarchical

nature of the institutions where participants came from and the power of institutions from which some participants were affiliate.

Further to communication, the university project leaders noted power as a challenge. In their view, the principal could not fully accept and support decisions that they may make. When asked about some of the challenges in the partnerships, the university project leaders from the Vulindlela district indicated that the principal was from a traditional background, where men are seen as superior to women. Two university project leaders (Puleng and Palesa) respectively stated:

The school principal is very difficult at times. I think he is also gender stereotype [sic]. In my experience, he has not taken seriously ideas or communications from me and at times, I have felt that it is because I am a woman, because I have seen him responding with respect from other project leaders, who are men like him...

The school principal is a 'missing link' in our partnership. He does not take many decisions seriously. Sometimes I feel that because he is a male and I am a female he feels not bound to take my ideas or instruction from me...

While the two project leaders identified gender as a challenge, the same principal implicated above presented a diverging view. Responding to the question about what the challenges in the partnership were, the principal (Peace) indicated that the partnership would strive to greater heights if university partners will avoid using their education level to impose decisions on the school.

You know I run this school, but the university professors always think they know what is best for my school, simple [sic] because they are educated. At times, they just give us what to do or how to do things...for me the partnership will be sustained and functional if we will treat others as though we were equal...

It can be noted from the principal's view that his argument is more influenced by his position in the hierarchy of the school "*you know I run this school*". Thus, it can be argued that the issue is not the level of education of the university partners but the way the principal sees himself in relation to anyone who have no authority of running the school. On the other hand, researchers from universities may have power owing to their affiliation to these powerful institutions ([Mahlomaholo, 2009](#)); hence, they expect the principal to comply with their ways of doing things.

The issue of power also emerged strongly in the third case. From the school principal and one HoD, it was established that rural people had less knowledge and they were deemed educationally unfit to contribute towards improving the school. Confirming this, in one of the sessions with the principal of the school, I was asked by the principal why I thought the community was going to be able to play a role in the school, considering that they were "uneducated". A similar response came from the HoD (Msizi) from the second case study (Umzumbe District), showing that he had no confidence that rural people had the necessary capacity to contribute to the school. These responses are evidence of how teachers see themselves to be well positioned to improve the school due to their education, and how others are deemed less important, due to their inferior education level. To my shock, my conversation with the school principal (Muzi) from the third case (Umzumbe District), revealed that the principal also did not see any value in the members of the community. This

emerged when I indicated to him that the project would include community members. This can be seen in the principal's statement below:

You know that people in this community are not educated and they are useless. They do not come to meetings and even if they came, they will [sic] not contribute anything to our school.

The above shows how there were issues of inferiority and superiority between the school and the community. In the second case, although power was not a major factor, in the debates around involving all stakeholders in decision-making, it nonetheless emerged that teachers were of the view that they were not treated as equals to principals in the eyes of those involved from the university. To ensure their full participation, they argued for equal treatment.

There are a few observations that can be made in the occurrences above. Firstly, hierarchies constitute schools as organisations and power distribution is according to one's place in the hierarchy ([Coyle, 1997](#); [Tschannen-Moran, 2009](#)). It is thus possible that compliance to mandates and to hierarchical power relationships play an important role in any discussion between people at different hierarchical levels. Secondly, principals, no matter their gender, remain accountable and responsible for what happens in schools and, as a result, they will always want to ensure that they remain in control of what their schools are involved in. This has a possibility to be interpreted differently by university stakeholders who themselves think that they are powerful because of their university affiliations ([Mahlomaholo, 2009](#)).

As stated earlier, the issue of power in community collaborations is not new. One of the major challenges to strengthening partnerships that [Hyman \(2002\)](#) and [Myende \(2018\)](#) identify is power, and the failure to decide who should lead community initiatives, and who should be at the centre of decision-making. This was identified in this study to be a significant obstacle towards creating and sustaining functional school–community partnerships. The key to the success of interactions between the components of the spheres is shared goals, and a common understanding of what the partnership is all about ([Chavkin, 2001](#); [Naicker, 2011](#)). The issues of power undermine this sharing of goals, as demonstrated above, making a crucial argument for the importance of challenging issues of power.

Creation of a school culture that supports participative leadership

Principal leadership and support has always been regarded as important in ensuring successful partnerships ([Bush, 2005](#); [Coleman and Earley, 2005](#); [Chikoko, 2011](#)). However, [Myende and Chikoko \(2014\)](#) as well as [Sanders \(2007\)](#) argue that there is no need to overburden the school principals, where, instead, all stakeholders should be afforded an opportunity to lead partnership activities. On this note, in case one it emerged that the school principal created a culture that promotes participative leadership. However, in case two and three the views of other participants were that, although participative leadership was the key factor in creating functional school–community partnerships, their school principals did not always practise this. In case one, the school principal argued that he delegated leadership activities to the teachers and provided them with support to ensure that they were able to work effectively. This, according to this principal, did not only ensure democratic leadership, but also ensured that every member was empowered to lead partnership initiatives. Teachers interviewed in case one also confirmed the views of the principal and indicated that they had grouped themselves into teams dealing with different activities. There is an agreement that partnerships will be functional if principals support teachers who form teams to lead different

streams of school–community partnerships ([Sanders, 2007](#)). For [Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines and Holcomb-McCoy \(2011\)](#), leadership that is participative, and does not only empower all members of the school, but further influences them to contribute willingly to partnership activities. The teachers in case one stated:

Our principal gives opportunities to lead different aspects of the partnership between our school and the university. For me, this has added to my willingness to contribute to this partnership and other school activities...(James).

We have been offered an opportunity to lead the feeding scheme project as part of the partnership, and this has been very empowering. I have started to understand learners' issues more than I did before...(Busisiwe).

Contrary to the above, teachers and HoDs from case two (Dihlabeng Municipality) with whom I interacted during one of my visits to oversee student teachers in two schools, indicated that their principals were not participative in their leadership, and thus, they did not know what their roles were. Before checking how students were doing, I had a short conversation with two teachers and two HoDs and came out from this conversation that they felt left out and not involved. One teacher said *“you know we know that student teachers will come during holidays to assist but we do not know our roles because the leadership of the school has not involved us”* (researcher's diary). Similarly, the teachers from the third case (Umzumbe District) complained that their management did not create a culture where everyone could participate in leadership. Talking about their concerns in the partnership, two teachers stated:

I have a lot of ideas, but I keep them inside me, because the management of the school does not allow us to participate. The principal also does not let community members participate in what we do (Zwide).

In this school, we do not get involved in leadership matters. It is even worse if you are a woman, your ideas may be good, but they are not valued. I think that is why it is difficult to have working relationships with the school community (Heath).

While the above voices may only show the teachers' and HoDs' perceptions about leadership of principals in their schools, which may not reflect the reality, research has shown that empowering potential contributors is essential for the success of school activities ([Myende, 2014](#)). I also argue here that when all school members are given an opportunity to lead, leadership succession is made easier. This will allow principals to focus their attention on departmental administrative affairs, while teachers are addressing school–community partnership issues. In any community, collaborative activity and community building is essential ([Hyman, 2002](#)), and [Johns \(2003\)](#) makes it the task of school leaders (principals) to ensure that each individual in the team is empowered. [Johns \(2003\)](#) also regards participative leadership styles as empowering, assuring principals that work will be done in their absence. Supporting participative styles of leadership, [Kolzow \(2009\)](#) argues that effective leaders remain aware that their constituency requires trust from them, and that this will help create unity within stakeholders, which will in turn cause them to strive to sustain partnerships. This did not happen only in one case. Through document reviews (proposal document for the partnership), I realised that the school principal in the Vulindlela case was one of the project leaders, and that this opportunity had been afforded by university project leaders to ensure that the principal supported their initiative. For university project leaders, it was easy to

create and sustain relations where local people are also drivers of initiatives, and thus, it was admissible to have the school principal leading one stream of the partnership.

From the model of overlapping spheres of influence ([Epstein, 2001](#)), the importance of sharing leadership is emphasised. We are made aware that the stakeholders' ability to recognise the shared goals and responsibilities and their ability to collaborate, rather than 'working in silos', helps to achieve the partnership goals. Moreover, the theory further teaches us about the importance of trust, which has been linked with sharing leadership and creating a collaborative culture through treating schools as open systems. [Hands \(2010\)](#) informs us that making schools open systems where leadership is open to everyone increases the opportunities for the exchange of ideas.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore what it takes to ensure that school–community partnerships are functional and sustainable. Although the findings cannot be generalised, they suggest that leadership supersedes all other factors crucial in running a functional and sustainable school–community partnerships. The conclusions made here are related to leadership and the shortcomings or gaps in the theory I used to explain what makes partnerships work, and what makes them sustainable.

The findings from the three cases suggest two lessons about leadership and its role to creating sustainable and functional partnerships. The first lesson is that leadership in partnerships may fall on the initiators of partnerships, but once partnerships are in motion, leadership belongs to all those who are implicated in the outworking of the partnership. The second lesson – which stands in contradiction to the findings of many studies on school–community partnerships ([Myende and Chikoko, 2014](#); [Sanders and Harvey, 2002](#)) – is that the principals' leadership is central in making partnerships a success. The findings of this paper have suggested that teacher leadership is critical is the continuity of partnerships. While principals may be key during initiation, success and functionality depend on how others (teachers) are given space to take leadership roles in the partnerships. In all the cases, that teachers were not included (as seen in the themes of collaborative planning and decision-making, and effective communication) has led to minimal participation. This is undesirable, because research has shown that principals may not always be there due to competing responsibilities, and therefore, ought to empower teachers to lead. On the other hand, teachers are critical, and partnerships require their commitment to thrive. For collaboration to be authentic, it must be spontaneous, voluntary, development oriented, pervasive across time and space and unpredictable. The collaboration achieved in the absence of these criteria is likely to be contrived at most and leads to compliance. Teachers may comply, but it is always important to ensure that their compliance is genuine and not based on their position in the hierarchy. In all three cases, the uncertainty about the nature of teachers' consent has obstructed the partnerships.

With regard to the theory (overlapping spheres of influence), the findings of the study suggest that where schools work with their communities, imbalances in power are always in place. This is more likely to be the result of the way the public education system is organized as while there are differing status levels of authority and power there will always be an imbalance. Based on the findings, there is need for players to negotiate power so that the contributions of those who occupy the apex and those who occupy the bottom of the hierarchy are both valued. Through power, contrived collaboration may exist in the

partnership, and this type of collaboration is not productive and does not guarantee genuine commitment from all partners. Furthermore, the theory put emphasis on productive interactions. However, the theory is silent on a finding that emerges, that in reality hierarchies in our education system may force interactions. This will obviously lead to involvement but not commitment and ownership of partnership goals.

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Notes

1. The nine provinces of South Africa are divided into 53 districts. A district municipality is the designation for a class of municipalities found in several locations. They are the second level of administrative division, below the provinces, and responsible for executing the local government functions (*see footnote 2 below*) ([Republic of South Africa, 2000](#)).

2. The South African Government is divided into three spheres (national, provincial, and local) of government. A municipality is usually a single administrative (urban or rural) division having corporate status and powers of self-government or jurisdiction as granted by national state laws to which it is subordinate ([Republic of South Africa, 2000](#)).

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