SUSTAINING SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the impact of effective communication towards sustaining school-community partnerships. Motivating the study is the argument that studies on school-community partnerships within a South African context have been limited to parental involvement only. Moreover, those who have broadened this concept have seldom focused on the role of effective communication. The results revealed a direct relationship between success in sustaining school-community partnerships and effective communication. Two partnerships were studied and the results revealed a lack of effective communication. This has negatively affected the partners' commitment in the partnerships' activities, empowerment of partners, mapping of assets and perceptions of partners about partnerships. However, in some instances effective communication was identified and it contributed positively in ensuring support for teams and individuals in the partnerships. It is concluded that effective communication is the pillar in ensuring that different partners' interests and capabilities are understood and utilised in these partnerships. The study further recommends strategies to improve communication in school-community partnerships.

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INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, pressure is being placed on the staff members of South African schools to improve the quality of education provided to learners. However, in their attempts to improve the quality of education, schools have to address a number of challenges towards attainment of quality education. These challenges include, but are not limited to, poverty-related odds such as dropouts, crime, shortage of educational resources, violence, as well as alcohol and drug abuse (Kamper 2009: 1; Myende 2011: 2). Different strategies have been developed to enhance schools' ability to achieve quality education in the midst of the above-mentioned challenges. School-community partnerships form one of these strategies (Dobson-Blake 2010: 106).

In the context of South Africa and other countries such as the USA and Australia, literature on school-community partnerships remains limited within the scope of parental involvement. For example, Ndahayo and Gaikwad (2004: 59-68) provide us with a picture of school-community partnerships drawing from Epstein's model of parental involvement. What these researchers have not captured well is that school-community partnerships constitute more components than only parental involvement. The definitions of school-community partnerships provided by different researchers can be used to gain a broader understanding of what school-community partnerships are. Moore-Thomas and Day-Vines (2010: 53) assert that school-community partnerships are relationships through which school staff members partner with families and other community members to help children succeed in schools. What remains unpacked in Moore-Thomas and Day-Vines' definitions is the meaning of "other communities". Sanders and Harvey (2002: 39) extend this definition by arguing that school-community partnerships are the connections between schools and individuals, organisations and businesses that are forged to promote directly learners' social, emotional, physical and intellectual development.

The definition by Sanders and Harvey justifies this author's argument that school-community partnerships are not limited to parental involvement. This article is not aimed at interrogating contesting views on what school-community partnerships are and what not. However, through the contestations shown above the limited scope of our understanding of school-community partnerships is exposed. In this article it is posited that this leaves a huge gap in the literature that addresses school-community partnerships. Furthermore, this article pays special attention to effective communication within the broader scope of school-community partnerships transcending parental involvement.

Using an interpretive and qualitative study, the aim of this article is to investigate the contribution of effective communication in sustaining school-community partnerships. Secondly, the study makes recommendations on how communication

can be enhanced in school-community partnerships. Motivating the study is the argument that studies on school-community partnerships within the South African context have been limited to parental involvement. Moreover, those that have broadened this concept have seldom focused on the contribution of effective communication within the broader scope of school-community partnerships. In answering the questions underlying this article, the author draws from existing literature on the background of school-community partnerships with an aim to justify the argument for the sustainability of school-community partnerships. The literature review includes a brief review of effective communication in education.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Mapping the need for school-community partnerships

Within the South African context, school-community partnerships have gained advocacy due to a number of constraints. Firstly, it is important to indicate that motivation for such partnerships is rooted in policy and other factors and demands by the state from schools. In a nutshell, the South African Schools' Act no. 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa 1996) states that the education of a child should be the joint responsibility of the school, parents and other community members. The notion behind this extended participation has been the argument that schools stand a better chance at being productive if they draw support from other external stakeholders (Sanders & Lewis 2005: 1).

In section 34, the South African Schools' Act further advocates for extended involvement of all stakeholders on the basis that the government does not fund schools sufficiently in order to obtain all resources they need. Section 36 of the South African Schools' Act indicates that School Governing Bodies (SGBs) must take all reasonable measures within their means to supplement the resources provided by the government. School-community partnerships have been a potent strategy for SGBs to fulfil this role. Aside from the fact that school-community partnerships are also supported by policy, the policy itself identifies several constraints that schools can address through school-community partnerships. These include the need for extra resources and a need for improved quality of education. Sanders and Lewis (2005: 3) identify the same constraints in their study. However, these researchers further contend that school-community partnerships are not only crucial for the benefits of the school. Drawing from the basic understanding of the term "partnership", which is a relationship characterised by shared goals and strengths for all those who are involved, Sanders and Lewis (2005: 3) state that partnerships also benefit the community.

The need for additional resources

Resources may be defined as the supporting aids that schools or communities utilise to perform their activities. These resources can be divided into human, financial and natural resources (Myende 2011: 15). The impact of the lack of resources in education cannot be overstated. Kamper (2009: 1) argues that in the process of providing quality education many schools first have to deal with issues such as poverty, gangsterism, illiteracy, hunger, homelessness and a fatalistic mind-set. This article argues that dealing with these issues will require a focused concentration of limited resources across these two areas (education and social ills) which influence each other.

Earlier in this article it was argued that the state does not provide schools with sufficient resources. Sanders and Harvey (2002: 37) concur with this argument as they state that schools may not possess all the resources they need, but this does not mean that these resources cannot be found. They point out that resources not available in schools may possibly be housed in the schools' external community. In supporting Sanders and Harvey, Anderson-Butcher, Stetler and Midle (2006: 155) posit that:

> [s]chools in many communities are in the midst of potential resource bank agency, familial corporation and faith-based support. Yet many schools are uninformed regarding neighbourhood assets, often struggling with how to serve students with multiple needs and issues.

The question is how schools can be informed of and how they can tap into these resources if these are crucial for providing in multiple needs. School-community partnerships continue to be one of the ways to bridge the gap between individuals and organisations and schools. Thus, through partnerships with their communities, schools can be informed of and tap into community resources. This justifies the need for the creation and sustaining of school-community partnerships.

Community development and renewal

The school is the most important public institution in a community and also represents the economic lifeblood of the economy (Hlalele 2012: 115). This indicates that although there is a notion that only schools benefit from their communities, schools also present calculated opportunities to their communities. In a study conducted by Myende (2011) in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, which was aimed at investigating the possibilities of an asset-based approach in school-community partnerships, it was found that the community benefited greatly from the resources that the school possessed. The findings of this study indicated that the school received a donation of computers from a partnering university and the same school had initiated several projects that involved community members. The

skills that have been gained from the project capacitated community members. This indicates that school-community partnerships are crucial for community development and renewal. The same partnership also developed learners in peer counselling. The findings showed that the community was also benefiting from the skills of learners who had been trained in peer counselling. Other researchers such as Bojuwoye (2009) and Mncube and Harber (2010) share these sentiments. Although these studies focused on parental involvement, they are in agreement that community involvement results in community empowerment. Mncube and Harber (2010: 620) found that members of the community who were involved in the running of the school possessed a strong understanding of educational policies. In a study conducted by the HSRC for the Nelson Mandela Foundation (2005) it was also found that when schools work with their communities, it is not only the schools that benefit. Community development is therefore one of the end results in school-community partnerships.

Improved learner academic achievement and social development

Schools exist mainly for the purpose of educating children. The concern for quality education in South Africa has been debated since 1994. Several strategies have been devised to deal with the matter. For example, the Total Quality Management System (IQMS) was introduced to increase accountability of teachers and also to ensure teacher performance appraisal with an aim to improve the quality of education (Weber 2005: 65). The need for quality education in a country that has a large number of communities who are faced by poverty is an endless debate as poverty and quality education are connected (Kamper 2009: 1; Botha 2010: 122). It is therefore a potent move to strengthen those strategies that have been associated with the attainment of quality results by learners.

In a case study conducted by Sanders and Lewis (2005) in three k-12 schools (secondary schools) in the USA on the factors that drove principals to form school-community partnerships it was reported that all school stakeholders agreed that school-community partnerships contributed in learners' academic success and personal development. In the study conducted by Myende (2011) mentioned earlier, teachers and university project leaders also indicated that partnerships contributed immensely to learners' academic performance and personal development. Teachers reported that due to assets acquired through the partnership, learners were able to search information within the school library and computer laboratory without travelling to cities in order to access information. They stated that this has changed the performance of the school, especially in matric results. Therefore the relevance of school-community partnerships in education cannot be doubted. With an aim to justify the need for communication in school-community partnerships, communication in general and in organisational life in particular is discussed next.

Effective communication

Communication plays a major role in creating effective organisations and individuals in the society and its role in school-community partnerships cannot be overlooked:

> Once a human being arrives on this earth, communication is the largest single factor determining what kinds of relationships an individual makes with others and what happens to each in the world. How we manage survival, how we develop intimacy, how productive we are, how we make sense, how we connect with our divinity – all depend on our communication skills (Swick 2003: 275).

According to Battilana *et al*. (2010: 424), effective communication is one of the important tools to pull organisations towards success. These authors postulate that leaders use communication to create a shared understanding of the vision and mission of an organisation. They further contend that the vision and mission are not only shared, but through effective communication the team's commitment in achieving the vision and mission can be attained. Hughes and Greenhough (2006: 472) concur with Battilana *et al.* (2010) as they argue that effective communication is at the core of school relationships with the external stakeholders.

Miller (2007: 239) further points out that partnerships need open communication in order to bring about social cohesion that results in the utilisation of individuals' and organisations' human and social capital that is at the disposal of each participant. In addition to the arguments above, it is argued that effective communication and empowerment of individuals within an organisation are connected and impossible to divorce (Mncube & Harber 2010: 620; Swick 2003: 275). It is further argued by Swick (2003: 277) that communication strengthens our way of dealing with cultural differences in such a way that they do not degrade our relationships. In this article, it is argued that it is not just any communication that is required to run organisations well, but rather effective communication. This article defines effective communication as the type of communication that leads to the achievement of anticipated goals. It is proposed that it is this type of communication that is required in school-community partnerships. The achievement of organisational goals may demand the buy-in from different stakeholders within and outside the organisation. Therefore understanding and knowledge of these goals becomes critical. However, this understanding and knowledge cannot be achieved unless they are communicated to individuals or groups within an organisation (Myende 2011: 25).

Effective communication requires communication to be a two-way process and reflects an equal partnership between different sources, in this case schools and other external stakeholders they are partnering with (Van Wyk & Lemmer 2004: 183; Hughes & Greenhough 2006: 472). These researchers further argue

that to promote effective communication with external stakeholders, schools should design a variety of communication strategies that are aimed at facilitating active involvement of different stakeholders. However, Van Wyk and Lemmer (2004: 184) acknowledge that communication in South African schools have turned out to be one-way rather than two-way. It is therefore important to explore what effective communication must be. The work of Swick (2003) provides clarification.

Effective communication, according to Swick (2003: 276), is communication that builds strong working partnerships between school stakeholders (teachers, management, learners, and non-teaching staff) and external stakeholders (parents, community organisations, businesses, higher education institutions, other individuals and members of the community). He further states that for communication to be effective it must engage all stakeholders actively in advancing and strengthening the growth and development of a child. Moreover, effective communication provides nurturance of all participants in the education of a child and in building and sustaining relationships.

Another important aspect that is noted by Swick (2003) is that effective communication is not only about passing on information from one source to another; it also occurs when different people work together to enhance the process of achieving goals. Sanders and Harvey (2002: 1364) postulate that effective communication determines the most suitable kinds of involvement and clarifies the responsibilities of each partner. Through effective communication, Sanders and Harvey (2002: 1365) further assert that goals can be shared and understood by every partner. Therefore this article focuses on how effective communication contributes to sustaining school-community partnerships.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The partnerships

This article is based on two school-university partnerships. The choice of using school-community partnerships to describe these partnerships is because universities, as indicated in Myende (2011: 13), form part of a school's community. School-community partnerships were also utilised instead of school-university partnerships because the partnerships that were studied did not only include schools and universities. The partnership called "Nothing about us without us", between a secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal and academic staff members of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), was studied in 2011. Another partnership, this one between staff members of the University of the Free State (QwaQwa campus), the schools in the Dihlabeng Municipality (DLM), and the Dihlabeng

Municipality, was studied in 2012. A brief description of the two partnerships is provided below.

'Nothing about us without us'

The project "Nothing about us without us" was initiated by academic staff members from UKZN. The project was a new project founded after a series of projects that the UKZN staff members have initiated in the Vulindlela District since 2004. The time-frame for this project was scheduled to be three years, starting in 2011 and ending in 2013. Thirty-eight schools were targeted. The central aim of the project was to use participatory approaches to teacher development and community wellness to enhance teaching and learning in rural schools. The project aims were two-fold: Firstly, it was aimed at intervention and also in generating niche research areas in the identified issues. In addition to teacher development and community wellness, the project's aim was to deal with challenges faced by schools such as HIV/Aids, gender-based violence, etc. Project leaders in the partnership were drawn from UKZN and one project leader was a principal in a secondary school that formed part of the research. The aim of the project was not only to work with schools as other community representatives also formed part of the participants in the projects.

UFS (QwaQwa campus), Dihlabeng secondary schools and DLM

This partnership commenced in 2011 with the main focus being the improvement of matric results of secondary schools in the Dihlabeng Municipality. The partnership is sponsored by the Community Engagement and Staff Wellness Office of the UFS (QwaQwa campus) and the Dihlabeng Municipality. The university mainly deals with the coordination of the partnership activities while the municipality mainly deals with the logistics aspect of the partnership, such as catering for learners and ensuring that they have transport to and from the university to attend extra classes. Nine schools are involved in the partnership and close to 620 learners from these schools participate in the partnership. These schools consist of both well-resourced and under-resourced schools. Some of these schools have better matric results, while some perform below 50%. This article only reports on some of the 2012 activities for this partnership.

Research design

The partnerships that were studied took place in a natural setting. In deciding on the research design for this study it was considered which design is suitable for studies conducted within a natural setting. According to Babbie and Mouton (2001: 270), qualitative research is suitable to studies that aim to understand behaviour and attitudes as it emerge from a natural setting. Due to the nature

of this study, qualitative research became the preferred design. Central to this study was also an aim to understand and interpret the actors' views regarding their partnerships. Interpretive qualitative research was utilised in this regard as it is argued that within an interpretive paradigm researchers are concerned with understanding insiders' viewpoints (Henning 2004: 20). The meaning as to how effective communication can contribute to sustaining school-community partnerships can only be understood from the meaning given by the actors in these partnerships. Johnson and Christensen (2008: 48) postulate that qualitative researchers within an interpretive paradigm attempt to understand how one or more individuals experience a phenomenon.

Methodology

To elicit the in-depth views of participants in this study, semi-structured individual interviews, unstructured observations and a reflective journal were utilised. In the "Nothing about us without us" partnership, five teachers (a principal, deputy principal, head of department and two post level one teachers) were interviewed, as well as two project leaders from UKZN. The interviews each took between 30 and 45 minutes, apart from one project leader who was interviewed for 25 minutes as the data during the interview reached saturation. These interviews were a potent technique as it allowed the researcher to probe for further information from the participants, when necessary. Utilising individual interviews limited this study in generating the collective views of the participants in these partnerships. However, as explained in the data analysis, data was analysed continuously to identify the emerging views and use these in the next interviews to verify and also to ensure that what each participant was saying could be confirmed with other participants. This also increased the trustworthiness and confirmability of the data that were collected.

Unstructured interviews were used to study the partnership between staff members from the UFS (QwaQwa campus), Dihlabeng secondary schools and the Dihlabeng Municipality. The researcher forms part of the partnership, therefore there were complexities in observing meetings that took place before all partnership activities. Two meeting were observed and notes were taken to record the experiences of participants as drawn from their voices during meetings. The area of effective communication emerged during observations. The author also utilised a reflective journal that was used on a daily basis while visiting schools where Easter classes were taking place. In the reflective journal all the concerns that were raised by principals, as well as the researcher's own experiences, were recorded.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis is an ongoing, emerging and non-linear process (Henning 2004: 127). To ensure that important information was gathered during semi-structured individual interviews, analysis was done as the data collection took place. The analysis of data included the identification of categories as they emerged from the data. The analysis also followed the higher-order synthesis in a form of a descriptive picture that resulted in the identification of themes (Henning 2004: 128). Five themes were identified in the analysis process. These are presented and discussed in the results and discussion section.

Ethical considerations

Data in this study includes data that the author collected in 2011 for research as part of his Master's degree. Permission was sought from UKZN and the Department of Basic Education in KwaZulu-Natal. Furthermore, informed consent was arranged with each participant in the study. Secondly, permission to use data from the second partnership between the UFS (QwaQwa), Dihlabeng secondary schools and DLM was sought from the UFS Office of Community Engagement and Staff Wellness. Participants in this partnership signed contracts and as part of these contracts they agreed that information of the partnership can be disseminated in the form of reports or academic articles. The researcher also uses his reflections and observations without mentioning the real names of participants in the partnership, which helps in maintaining the confidentiality of participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed that school-community partnerships and effective communication are interconnected. The results also indicated that there was a lack of effective communication in both partnerships. To provide a picture of how effective communication could contribute to sustaining school-community partnerships, this article reports on how the lack of effective communication has impacted on the partnerships.

Partners' commitment to partnership activities

Myende (2011: 12) describes partnerships as a contractual relationship between two or more individuals or organisations who commit themselves in sharing "risks" and "profits". The partners jointly commit their skills to overcome risks and gain profit. In this sense the effective commitment of each partner to the partnership activities is important. The findings of the study from both partnerships indicate that effective communication is crucial for ensuring the commitment of all participants in the partnership activities.

In the partnership between the UFS (QwaQwa) and DLM schools, the study has found that for extra classes to commence all partners (teachers, coordinating staff from the university, principals, tutors and municipality employees) should be involved in a meeting that is organised to discuss how activities will unfold. Usually, teachers from schools are expected to be the ones who teach learners during Easter and winter holidays. However, in the meeting that was held for the Easter holidays, teachers were not involved in the meeting. Principals claimed that it was not communicated to them that they need to bring teachers along. Several principals agreed on this statement that was made by one of the principals:

> Our teachers are not prepared to teach in these holidays because all we knew is that the university will bring tutors that will teach during holidays. It was not communicated to us that same teachers from our schools will teach.

In the "Nothing about us without us" partnership the concern was also pointed out by several participants that were interviewed. During the interview, the principal who is also one of the project leaders, said:

> I think those, in terms of other outside parties, their participation is minimal because we have not invited them to participate meaningfully…

The deputy principal also commented on the issue of effective communication:

> I joined the school from the beginning of this year and have seen the student teachers from the university in our school but the principal and other teachers did not clearly communicate to me in terms of the whole activities of the partnership. Although I have noticed the relationship but I will say the information is not enough.

The comments above point to the fact that effective communication is necessary for several reasons. Commitment of all partners in the partnership activities is crucial for the success of school-community partnerships. However, what the study identified is the lack of effective communication that impacted on the participation of other participants. Earlier in this article it was argued that the major reason for initiating school-community partnerships is to ensure joint responsibility for the child's education. Failure to ensure effective communication has resulted in the minimal utilisation of other external parties that might have contributed meaningfully to the success of partnerships. Myende (2011: 12) postulates that collaboration is rooted in an understanding of interdependence among different people or organisations. Therefore, there is no doubt that such interdependence in the above partnerships is needed. However, this cannot be achieved if each partner is not committed to the activities. The commitment of participants has been affected by lack of communication. For example, teachers would have been part of the partnership between the UFS (QwaQwa campus) and the Dihlabeng

Municipality if this was effectively communicated to them. Moreover, it is assumed that outside participants in "Nothing about us without us' would have participated if there was communication between them and the school.

The above-mentioned does not only influence the commitment of each participant, but it is largely contributing to the sustainability of school-community partnerships. These partnerships' success is dependent on human capital. However, if these partnerships do not draw from all available human capital there is a risk of not generating sufficient assets. It is therefore argued here that communication that is not effective limits partnerships in drawing skills and knowledge from different participants. This was indicated by the results from the partnerships that were studied. In the first partnership, teachers did not form part of the partnership and this put pressure on the partnership organising team as they had to find more people willing to teach learners. Initially, tutors were not supposed to teach, but due to poor communication the tutors were forced to teach. This is what one participant said in the meeting:

> Tutors are not supposed to teach… now that we have no teachers we will see how we can utilise tutors in teaching some of the subjects where there is a shortage.

In the other partnership ("Nothing about us without us") it also came to light that there was minimal participation from outside parties. This is the human capital that both partnerships would have utilised if effective communication existed between different stakeholders. Literature has indicated the importance of ensuring that all partners contribute in partnerships. Gretz (2003: 34) asserts that:

> [m]anaging partnerships in which students, parents, business leaders and community members are involved requires a delicate balance of delegation and control that enables stakeholders to participate and share responsibility and yet clearly define and understand different roles that are involved in a successful partnership.

Whereas delegation will increase the commitment of all members, there is no doubt that what Gretz is proposing requires effective communication from all the people involved in the partnership. If leaders or those managing partnerships are to be able to delegate, it means those delegates should be able to communicate effectively in order to ensure that there is a sense of responsibility and accountability from all participants.

Empowerment of all partners

It was pointed out in the literature review that effective communication is characterised by the empowerment of participants in the partnerships (Swick 2003: 275). Sanders and Harvey (2002: 1365) have also stated the importance

of empowerment through two-way communication. The empowerment of participants is important in creating and sustaining school-community partnerships as participants are the ones who perform partnerships' activities. However, it was noticed in the partnerships that effective communication was not ensured in some instances. For example, in the "Nothing about us without us" project, it was clear that, as much as UKZN was involved in the partnerships, local communities played a vitally important role in ensuring that school were run smoothly. However, their roles can only be effective if they are empowered. The minimal involvement which was caused by the lack of effective communication with them could possibly lead to their disempowerment, which will in return contribute largely to the failure to sustain the partnerships.

External partners, such as universities, will normally work with schools until the identified problems are solved. These partners do not promise any lifetime involvement in developing one school but they disperse their focus in schools according to their needs at that particular time. Therefore the question is what happens when external partners such as universities are no longer involved? The empowerment of internal partners becomes a demand, rather than an option, otherwise achievements attained through partnerships will disappear. The lack of effective communication between the teachers from partnering schools, DLM and the UFS (QwaQwa) has resulted in the utilisation of other teachers and not those from partnering schools. The empowerment of these teachers has been sacrificed in this case, which questions the sustainability of partnership achievements. The findings in the "Nothing about us without us" partnerships have indicated that the principal was also sometimes not clear of what his role was as the principal and the leader in the partnerships. The principal identified lack of communication between him and the university's project leaders as a contributing factor in the lack of understanding of his roles.

In the "Nothing about us without us" project the same arguments can be applied. The interviews with two project leaders revealed that several workshops were held where community members, the Department of Education and teachers were invited to participate. These workshops were aimed at empowering all the participants. The project leaders indicated that on several occasions they arrived at the workshop only to realise that information was not disseminated to all stakeholders. This hindered the empowerment of participants who did not receive the information because of the lack of effective communication. Effective communication would have resulted in the participation of all partners which would then have led to their empowerment. Empowerment means that partners are aware of their roles and the roles of others in the partnerships. This creates partners who are able to do what has to been done in the partnership even if others are no longer part of the partnership.

Asset mapping and effective communication

It was stated earlier that the need for extra resources pushes for the development of school-community partnerships. It is therefore relevant that ways of tapping into available resources are developed. A challenge that hinders the success of school-community partnerships is not the unavailability of resources in the schools' communities, but rather the lack of abilities to identify those assets. In the literature review, Miller (2007: 239) identified social cohesion that results in the utilisation of both human and social capital for the benefit of partnerships. He argued that open communication is required for this to happen.

In the two partnerships that were studied instances were revealed where social cohesion resulted in the utilisation of assets from different partners. On the other hand, the findings revealed a lack of communication which amounted to the failure to identify and tap into other assets possessed by the partners that were not invited. In the partnership between the UFS (QwaQwa campus) and DLM secondary schools, the findings indicated that resources from the university, the schools and the municipality were utilised effectively. These partners contributed assets they possess for partnership activities. It is argued here that if it were not for the role of effective communication, these partners would not have been in a position to understand what each partner could contribute in the partnership. In other words, asset mapping is possible if there is effective communication.

However, in the "Nothing about us without us" project the principal admitted that he did not make attempts to communicate with possible partners besides the university:

> I think those, in terms of other outside parties, their participation is minimal because we have not invited them to participate meaningfully…

This prevents the partnerships from mapping other possible assets that could be of assistance in their activities. Furthermore, the project leaders from the university stated that they had communicated with the principal, but that he did not bring other invited people on board. According to these project leaders, this was degrading the partnership and it was contributing to the failure to sustain the partnership. Other teachers were reluctant to participate as there was a lack of social cohesion between the principal and the teachers resulting from the lack of effective communication. During the interview this is what project leaders said:

> Project leader 1: Well, one thing that came out quite clear is that there is a breakdown [of communication] between teachers and the principal because the teachers said they didn't know I was coming… they were very upset… I think the principal is a male, dominant; he played a very oppressive role to me, not communicating with me and the teachers. The teachers were feeling very

> powerless in this whole thing but they did say that they have rights and they will not listen to anything that I would say because they were not told about it.
>
> Project leader 2: [A]ctually, they [the teachers] have told us that they don't want to participate especially if the project is seen coming through the principal, which it did.

The problem of poor communication was also identified by the teachers who were interviewed. According to these teachers, participation and contribution of assets (skills and knowledge) by other teachers were limited by the principal's failure to communicate effectively. One teacher alluded to the fact that communication was a problem:

> The problem would be on the communication breakdown between the principal and the staff… I think people don't know about it [project] because when we started there were not a lot of us.

Although this teacher did not refer directly to a lack of effective communication, references from other participants alluded to the influence of a lack of effective communication. The study found that all partners were aware that the school is surrounded by a number of people with assets, however mapping these assets required that all people be invited to the partnerships. As this was not the case, the mapping of assets could not occur effectively. De Lange and Combrinck (2011: 238) contend that communities, especially in rural areas, have a plethora of assets that can be used for school-community partnership sustainability. According to these researchers, such assets include unemployed members of the community and community buildings as well as other organisations that are situated around schools. Sustaining school-community partnerships and failure to draw from existing assets have been seen to be interconnected. Effective communication with different structures has been identified as a potent way to avoid this challenge (Bojuwoye 2009: 471; Myende 2011: 26).

Participants' misconceptions and withdrawal

Participants in the "Nothing about us without us" project, especially teachers, stated that they were not satisfied with the partnership. Their perspective was that the university partners were interested in research and not in school development. On the other hand, others thought that the partnership was mainly for Life Orientation teachers who happen to deal with issue of HIV/Aids. These teachers showed no interest in participation as they were not Life Orientation teachers. The written messages that were sent to the principal indicated clearly that the invitation was not only for Life Orientation teachers. This indicated a communication break-

down between some teachers and the principal and it impacted on these teachers' withdrawal from the partnership activities.

Drawing from literature, it is stated that effective communication is crucial to obtain the buy-in of all stakeholders and to ensure that there is a common and shared understanding of the vision and the mission behind school-community partnerships (Battilana *et al*. 2010: 424). One may therefore argue here that effective communication would have contributed in building these teachers' understanding of their role and the vision and mission of the partnerships. This would have strengthened their ability to sustain partnerships, even when external partners are not central to all activities.

Supporting teams and individuals

Although the previous results indicate that effective communication was not ensured in both partnerships, other instances in both partnerships showed some application of effective communication. In these instances positive results were identified. After identifying challenges in the partnership between the UFS (QwaQwa) and DLM during the Easter vacation activities, different ways of communicating and organising the partnership were devised. Since then the correspondence between the schools, the university and the municipality has improved and activities of the partnership appears to be clear and understood by all the partners. For example, the organisation of the winter activities unfolded with no challenges and all partners have been empowered in terms of what is expected from them. Different teams dealing with different subjects in the partnership were supported in terms of their needs and this assisted in encouraging them to put effort in the partnership activities.

In the "Nothing about us without us" partnership three teachers have formed feeding schemes and learner wellness programmes. These teachers have indicated that effective communication between them and other teachers as well the principal was bolstering the ability of their team to achieve its goals. These teachers also indicated that other teachers who were not part of the team would effectively communicate with them if there is a learner who required support, either in terms of a school uniform, food or counselling. They further stated that the principal supported their team. From the teachers' voices, this can be accredited to effective communication. For example, one teacher said the following:

> [s]o when we tell the principal that we need this… he knows where to get it.
> ... what I can say is that our principal and other teachers are very supportive.

The supportive role that the principal and other teachers played in the above-mentioned case would not have been possible unless the team communicated with the teachers and the principal. These teachers further indicated that they were

receiving support for their team from the university. This would also not have been the case if they had not communicated with the university's project leaders about their projects. What is also important to note here is that these teachers were empowered through the partnership and they were therefore able to initiate a new project on their own.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article was aimed at investigated how the lack of effective communication impacts on sustaining school-community partnerships. The lack of effective communication weakened several factors that will usually build strong community partnerships. The commitment of all partners in the partnership activities, their empowerment, the mapping of available assets, positive conceptions about the partnerships and support for teams and individuals will normally create strong sustainable partnerships. However, due to the lack of effective communication partnerships could not receive commitment from all partnerships.

Secondly, empowerment of all participants was not realised as most of them did not participate actively or they withdrew completely from the partnerships. These partnerships could not tap into all available assets as other possible participants were not informed of the partnerships. The lack of effective communication also created misconceptions regarding the partnerships from other participants. The study recognised minimum instances of effective communication and these contributed in supporting teams and individuals in both partnerships. To ensure effective communication between different stakeholders in the partnerships, Chikoko (2011: 84) argues that effective leadership is crucial.

It is recommended that principals should be the ones ensuring that there is effective communication between schools and their partners. This does not mean that they have to hold all the power. However, it is suggested that they need to see to it that all partners understand the activities and their role in these activities. This can be achieved through delegating some of the roles. To ensure that communication is improved, it is also recommended that different communication strategies be utilised. It is further recommended that in order to form the correct understanding of partnerships through effective communication there is a need for those who initiate partnerships to meet with all possible participants and explain the need and goals of the partnerships rather than meeting with leaders in different organisations. This could also assist in avoiding the communication break-down that was identified in both partnerships.

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