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## Management of Context-Specific Knowledge Creation and Application through Collective Social Responsibility in School–Community Partnerships

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**Abstract.** In knowledge-based institutions such as schools, productivity is associated with effective creation and application of operational knowledge. Using collective fingers theory, this qualitative case study explored how a considerably effective partnership between a South African township secondary school and a network of community organizations/structures, facilitated the creation and application of context-specific and socially responsive knowledge that led to improved internal school conditions, problem solving strategies, poverty alleviation, and extension of social support to vulnerable learners and their families. Based on the thematic analysis drawn from utterances of eight purposefully sampled participants, the study showed that the school's promotion of common purpose, mutual respect, collective decision making, care for others, collective social responsibility and democratic leadership practices contributed to the success of its mutually beneficial partnership with relevant community networks. It also emerged that by going an extra mile to lobby for multisectoral social support, the school richly benefited from the benevolence of a wide network of government departments; private-corporate sector and local businesses; faith-based formations; and non-governmental organizations some of which offered similar or overlapping services while others offered a diverse range of services to the school. The study proposed that the school must minimize the frequency of late arrival and unwarranted early recusals in knowledge production meetings. It further called for increased cultural capital and inclusion of parents from lower socioeconomic households in decision-making processes; and elimination of procurement policy red tape that occasionally delayed the provision of much-needed social support to schools, families and learners.

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**Keywords:** knowledge application; knowledge creation; decision making; problem solving; social responsibility; school-community partnership

## 1. Introduction and Background

The focus of the study was to understand ways in which a considerably effective partnership between a South African township secondary school and a multisectoral network of community-based organizations collectively addressed the social needs of the school and the community at large. The study propounds the need for schools to function as a knowledge society by managing ways in which they create and apply knowledge. Moreover, the study makes reference to the spillover effects of globalization and the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab, 2016) which continue to impose major changes on schooling systems. Therefore, in the face of a changing world the expectation is that schooling systems must ensure that their functionality, human capital and policies sustain improved capacity to process, create and apply knowledge. Based on the important role of teachers, administrators, principals and departmental heads in moving schools to the knowledge economy (Cheng, 2015), there is a sentiment that schools must rid themselves of now obsolete industrial-age mentalities and professional practices (Senge, 2012) and position themselves within the canons of 21<sup>st</sup>-century education by enhancing their own capacity to learn (Senge, 2011). That addresses the need for them to direct their development, innovation, relevance, resilience and future readiness intently on professional learning.

According to Lunenburg (2011), professional *“learning helps people to create and manage knowledge that builds a system’s intellectual capital”* (p. 1). Likewise, professional learning would enhance the capabilities of the role-players mentioned above to generate, manage and apply knowledge that would strengthen their schooling system’s intellectual capital. Educational institutions that have high work ethos expose people continuously to alternative problem-solving activities and reflective practices, compelling them to *“learn very carefully how to share all resources”* (Heasley, 2020, p. 93) and integrate one another’s droplets of mental modes into a unified body of knowledge that can be deposited into their institutions’ knowledge repositories for future exploitation. In an academic milieu, the end goal of embarking on professional learning is for staff to develop best practices and cutting-edge professional standards to ensure that their institutions become conducive spaces for learners/students to consume quality academic skills and a tapestry of soft skills that would cultivate their development of interpersonal qualities, emotional intelligence, problem solving competency and human agency.

Senge (2006) argued that professional learning must become a conduit for the development of the continuous ability of schools to adapt to constant sectoral changes. Consistent with this, Drucker (1993) stated that professional learning keeps organizations motivated to deal with grey areas and future uncertainties, including the spillover effects of the knowledge era and globalization. Zhao (2010) also

maintained that, as knowledge increasingly becomes the primary means of school productivity, professional learning can enhance the knowledge management practices of schools significantly. Organizations that take learning seriously are generally organizations where “people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 2006, p. 3). Schools’ understanding of the idea that networking beyond the confines of their sector of operation makes them stronger and keeps them in touch with contextual social realities (Lunenburg, 2011), implies that they classify themselves as subsets of the broader ecosystems of their communities (Nkambule, 2020). As such, they do not shy away from exploring formal and legal, as well as informal and voluntary relationships with a diverse range of external community sources (UNESCO-IIEP, 2022). Such schools constantly open themselves up for collaboration with their community networks, based on the understanding that they will inevitably secure the necessary support, brain power and resources to further their goal of providing quality education (Ezugoh, 2012).

Much of what has been discussed indicates that an effective school-community partnership is an embodiment of a principled bond between a school and the community. Effective school-community partnerships are described as follows:

*“Effective school–community partnerships are those that have been forged with the business fraternity and community members to address a specific learners’ need or develop an educational opportunity. They are well-planned, sustainable, collaborative, and based on a mutual sharing of expertise, knowledge, resources and skills. They encapsulate clear roles and responsibilities for each party involved and they are premised on an ongoing commitment to the partnership from the highest level in each organization. The partners collectively determine the programmes of action, which are based on the envisioned goals of the partnership.”* (Clerke, 2013, p. 4)

As a caution, Bauch (2001) added that forging these partnerships is not easy, but a process that requires all parties concerned to show genuine commitment supported by relational interaction, a common vision and action. Effective school–community partnerships in impoverished communities can not only improve schools’ academic and administrative effectiveness, but also ensure that schools are socially responsive to the needs of the families of their learners (Malatji et al., 2018). This statement bears resonances with Arstein’s ladder of citizen participation, which as pointed out by Gaber (2020), views partnerships as processes of establishing and sustaining supportive relationships in order to collectively develop tailor made solutions. Similar connotations can be drawn from the stakeholder theory which attributes productivity to close working relationships between schools and their surrounding communities (Romm & Nkambule, 2022). By working closely with their communities, schools can respond easily to the plight of socially vulnerable families and individual residents of the communities by providing information on how they can go about receiving the necessary assistance. In some instances, such schools

facilitate the referral of the vulnerable families to government departments and non-governmental agencies for social relief or support. This proves that schools as knowledge-building organizations play a key role in creating and applying knowledge that not only enhances their internal contexts, but also that of their external communities (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1999).

This research sought the input of the teachers, heads of departments (HODs), deputy principal and the principal in a public secondary school about the management of context-specific knowledge creation and application through collective social responsibility in school-community partnerships. The study was based on the following research questions:

1. What factors do participants attribute to an effective school-community partnership?
2. How wide is the scope of the school-community partnership network, and to what extent does it enable the creation and application of socially responsive knowledge?
3. What are some of the barriers that hinder the integrity of the school-community partnership?

Based on these research questions, the study profiles pertinent literature and accounts for how the adopted research methodology, research paradigm and the ethical position of the research facilitated the generation of the findings of the study.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Relating Collective Social Responsibility to School-Community Partnerships**

Low and Kok (2020) defined a school-community partnership as a goal orientated “*collaboration among families, schools, communities, individuals, organizations, businesses, and government and nongovernment agencies to assist students’ emotional, social, physical, intellectual, and psychological development*” (par. 1). Public schools in countries like the United States of America (USA) and Australia have been reaping the benefits of initiatives masterminded by school-community partnerships since the 1970s (Bosma et al., 2010). Considering the state of township schools and learners’ social conditions, the study makes a case for renewed formulation of school-community partnerships. Township schools remain infrastructurally and financially underresourced (Khumalo & Mji, 2014). Worth noting too is that in such schooling contexts some societal ills inevitably infiltrate schools and are linked directly to how affected learners (children) handle their relationships with peers and teachers and treat their schoolwork. Msila (2012) asserted that in the face of a plethora of challenges, school-community partnerships can create platforms where the parties can learn from each other reciprocally and come up with context-specific solutions to problems that besiege schools.

Malatji et al. (2018) argued that school-community partnerships can present lasting and socially responsive solutions to challenges that confront learners, schools and families subjected to impoverished living conditions in townships and rural areas.

The Department of Education gazetted the South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 of 1996 (Department of Education, 1996) as a legislative framework that not only attempts to define the spirit of unity between the education authorities and members of communities, particularly parents, guardians, learners and role models, but also guide the development of such relationships into formal, internal structures like school committees and governing bodies. According to Myende (2014), SASA seeks to propagate the ideology that a child's future lies in the hands of stakeholders from all corners of life. By quoting the African proverb, "it takes a whole village to raise a child," the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU, 2018) accentuated the need for a collective social responsibility among schools, families, communities, and societies in education.

The importance of schools and communities developing strategies and action plans collectively to propel schools towards achieving their goals is also emphasized in literature (Bwana & Orodho, 2014). There is consensus that, if implemented properly, school-community partnerships can be a panacea for a myriad of complex challenges confronting schools (Myende, 2019). Gross et al. (2015) and Stefanski et al. (2016) agreed that, when carried out in good faith and on a relational basis, school-community partnerships can potentially solve the most problematic areas of education. Sumiati and Kurniady (2022) reported that school-community partnerships promoted ongoing communication between schools and parents and were instrumental in the improvement of instructional practices in Indonesia. According to the OECD (2018), school-community partnerships in Japan resulted in clean school environments, and efficient coordination and implementation of extra-curricular activities. Such partnerships, furthermore, assisted in bringing schools closer to 21<sup>st</sup>-century academic practices (OECD, 2018). In their study undertaken in the US, Dove et al. (2018) established that school-communities ensured that both parties understood their collective responsibility towards learners' academic success. These findings are an indication that education is a social responsibility that requires all sections of a society to play a participatory role in improving the quality of teaching, learning and learner support. After analyzing extent literature, it became apparent that not much is discussed about ways in which schools used partnerships to anchor knowledge creation and application processes.

## **2.2 The Shape of Knowledge and Its Socio-Cultural Relevance in the Workplace**

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) used words tacit and explicit to label forms of knowledge. Brown and Duguid (2000) described tacit *"knowledge as something we digest rather than merely hold. It entails knower's understanding and some degree of commitment"* (p. 120). In different life contexts, the unravelling of knowledgeable people's tacit knowledge happens when they commit to apply their knowledge to address contextual problems or issues that require their resolve. In the workplace, individual workers demonstrate their possession of tacit knowledge through the precision with which they perform assigned tasks or the sheer brilliance with which they guide others to perform specific tasks. Experience is the primary source of tacit knowledge accumulation (as propounded by Malik, 2023), implying that the more

experienced people are, the higher their expertise (tacit) knowledge. The second type of knowledge is known as explicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is one that is generally easy to get hold of or that which is physically recognizable and accessible to read, watch and amend, for example lesson plans, road signs, restaurant menus, websites, books, letters, and so forth.

Bratianu and Orzea (2010) pointed to a complementary synergy between tacit and explicit knowledge. In accordance with the knowledge creation theory, this synergy is essential for the perennial flow and multidimensional transformation of knowledge from one form to the other, namely, 1) *“tacit knowledge to tacit knowledge, 2) from explicit knowledge to explicit knowledge, 3) from tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge, and 4) from explicit knowledge to tacit knowledge”* (Nonaka, 1994, p. 19). Following an analysis of the epistemological and ontological imperatives of knowledge creation, Mazzocchi (2006) deduced that a significant corpus of Western scholars propagates a view that knowledge is objective and quantitative rather than subjective and qualitative. Brown and Duguid (2000, p. 5) contended that treating knowledge as a phenomenon that is objective implies that no credit is given to the qualitative subjectiveness of *“the social context that helps people”* comprehend what knowledge *“might mean and why it matters”* in their daily lives and developmental trajectories. The study argues that for knowledge to be considered powerful, its creation and application processes must be informed by ethics and cultural values that apply in a particular social context. Hence the study used collective fingers theory as a lens to make a case for collaborative knowledge creation and application processes to underpin the productivity of schools situated in indigenous localities such as township schools. This view ties well with Osborn et al. (2020), who argued that in South African schools, there must be a systematic way of embedding the management of knowledge in *“the Constitution, common value systems, common leadership/management skills, and professional values, inherited language skills and cultural knowledge”* (p. 1). They argued that in so doing schools will operate in a socio-culturally responsive way to decision making and problem-solving (ibid).

### **2.3 The Management of Knowledge Creation and Application Processes in Education**

There are uncountable terms used to define knowledge management (KM). In layman's terms, KM can be defined as a mechanism to create and apply knowledge to actuate problem solving and decision making (Wiig, 1997) *“within and across communities of people and organizations with similar interests and needs”* (Rosenberg, 2001, p. 66). Sallis and Jones (2013) concluded that knowledge creation and application processes of KM are key competencies of all educational institutions. Broadly speaking, *“knowledge creation and application determine power, development, and equality worldwide”* (Maphosa, 2023, p. 150). In their seminal work, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) often describe the creation of context specific knowledge as a process that is reliant on the availability of *Ba* (a Japanese word for knowledge sharing space) (Romm & Nkambule, 2022). Senge (2011, 2012) argued that schools constitute such a space where knowledge transactions extend beyond knowledge sharing to include

the creation, application, storage and innovation processes of knowledge. Nkambule (2020) noted that schools create knowledge on a trial-and-error or a learning curve basis. That implies that they use learning and socialization/dialogue as a tool to facilitate the creation of knowledge that applies in their teaching, learner support, administrative and leadership ecologies. In addition to this, they ensure that the knowledge that has been created is stored for future use or remodeling. Sallis and Jones (2013) further indicated that through its processes, KM ensures that schools perform knowledge work and related transactions wisely and strategically. In that sense, KM is crucial for achieving sustainable development in primary and secondary schools (Nkambule, 2022; 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d; 2023e; Nkambule & Ngubane, 2023; Raudeliūnienė et al., 2020; Romm & Nkambule, 2022, 2024).

Seoketsa and Moeti (2013) added that, in community-based structures and organizations (schools included), the adoption of KM carries a community-development implication. *“It is [after all] people in their communities, organizations and institutions, who ultimately decide what [knowledge] means and why it matters”* (Brown & Duguid, 2000, p. 18). Through KM, community developers, activists and stakeholders can gather information about issues affecting their communities, on the basis of which they can create a body of knowledge to prevent or eradicate the continuance of prevalent problems (Seoketsa & Moeti, 2013). Partnering with communities enables schools to exercise effective knowledge management (Nkambule, 2020) by *“getting the right information to the right people at the right time, helping people create knowledge and sharing and acting on the information”* (Holm, 2001, p. 9) bound by common purpose and outlook towards knowledge work (Drucker, 1999).

#### **2.4 Theoretical Framework**

The study employed Mbigi's (1997) collective fingers theory (CFT). Premised on the proverb *“a thumb although it is strong cannot kill aphids on its own; it would require the collective cooperation of the other fingers”* (Mbigi, 1997, p. 3), the CFT considers consultation, mutual respect, care and collective responsibility as the cornerstones of meaningful dialoguing among knowledge stakeholders/actors. CFT bears resonances with the stakeholder theory and teamwork theory, both of which point to broad-based dialogical engagements and collective visioning as an enabler to organizational productivity. However, in view of the study being situated in an indigenous schooling context, CFT was deemed to have the gravitas to accentuate the values and principles that resource-constrained schools (in such a context) must uphold in order to build solid partnerships with their communities. In practical terms, the theory acted as a guide to developing themes that responded to the research questions/objectives. The theory further enriched the authors interpretation of the nuances of data and drawing of parallels between behaviors that harmonized with the values it espouses and those that eroded such values.

#### **2.5 Problem Statement**

Schools collaborate with different community organizations to enhance their capacity to address the psycho-social and academic needs of learners and provide the

necessary support to teachers, learners and parents (Ngobeni, 2022, 2024; Saunders, 2008). While South Africa is showing promising signs of improvement in the promotion of school–community partnerships (Naicker, 2011), it is worth mentioning that such inroads do not apply across all spectrums of its schooling system. Despite the availability of partnership-enabling policy guidelines and continued district support, empirical evidence of studies undertaken in South Africa suggests that not all schools share the same passion for partnerships. Myende (2011) established that heavy workloads and poor communication of the objectives of partnerships resulted in teachers being skeptical about throwing their weight behind such initiatives. Kwatubana (2014) found that some of the school–community partnerships could not facilitate effective school health promotion initiatives due to poor leadership skills and relational trust deficit among members. Ngobeni (2022) concluded that time constraints and individual members’ heavy work commitments weakened the productivity of school–community partnerships in township secondary schools. Kaka (2021) pointed to pessimism among members of staff and the school community as one of the factors inhibiting the promotion of entrepreneurship in rural schools. These findings demonstrate that managing school–community partnerships in South Africa’s under resourced schooling contexts is not an easy thing to do (Bhengu & Myende, 2015).

According to Dotson-Blake (2010), the common denominator among these findings is the absence of relational decision making and a collective sense of responsibility, which in any relationship or partnership, are an enabler for the creation and application of resolutions (knowledge). Naicker (2011) postulated that schools and communities fail to understand the power that lies in their partnerships to heighten the quality of teaching and learning processes. Often, failure to foster meaningful partnerships is attributed to irrational pessimism coming from both factions (i.e. schools and communities). On one hand, members of the community do not understand how their support and active involvement can have a developmental effect on their schools, but rather think that the government is better positioned to render effective support than them (Myende, 2014). On the other hand, school management teams misguidedly believe that members of the community are not sufficiently capable of understanding the internal politics of education and employing strategies to improve school productivity, due to a majority of them not having academic qualifications (Malatji et al., 2018). It is precisely these opposing mindsets that result in school–community partnerships’ failure to yield positive outcomes (Myende, 2019). However, due to the paucity of literature on the pros and cons of school–community partnerships, both locally and abroad, there is not much guideline that schooling systems can use to optimize the well-being of their partnership with different community networks (Myende, 2019). That is also the case concerning the variants of the topic that intersect school–community partnerships and knowledge management in underresourced schooling systems. Against this backdrop, the study elucidated ways in which schools nurtured meaningful partnerships to respond to the needs of their operations, and of learners and their families.

### 3. Methods

To achieve the objectives of the study, namely, to investigate the responsiveness of school-community partnerships to the needs of the school, learners and families, the following research methods were employed.

#### 3.1 Research Design

The study was positioned within the contours of a qualitative descriptive case study research design. According to Baxter and Jack (2010), choosing a case study design allows researchers to interface with the “*deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena*” (p. 544) within the applicable social context. The adoption of a qualitative case study enabled the researchers to obtain rich descriptive verbal accounts from participants (Chapisa & Khumalo, 2023). The interpretive nature of qualitative research ensured that interaction between the researchers and participants occurred in a natural setting and provided an opportunity for researchers to acquire observable material, assess environmental dynamics, interpret participants’ body language, and actively curate their narratives from an informed perspective.

#### 3.2 Study Sample

Research context ensures that readers understand the complexities of the data collection site. This study took place in a public secondary school in the Emalahleni area in Mpumalanga, South Africa. Despite being under resourced, the school managed to produce no less than an 90% pass rate among grade 12 learners for four consecutive years. It has a total number of 500 learners and a teaching staff component comprising 14 teachers, a deputy principal and a principal, as well as two office administrators (non-teaching component), altogether 18 members of staff. The researchers purposively sampled eight participants across three ranks of the teacher component, i.e., three teachers, three heads of department (HoDs), a deputy principal and the principal, as tabulated below.

**Table 1: Interviewed participants**

Participant	Occupation	Occupational code	Field experience	Gender
Participant 1	Teacher	T1	14 years	Female
Participant 2	Teacher	T2	27 years	Female
Participant 3	Teacher	T3	7 years	Male
Participant 4	HoD	H1	22 years	Female
Participant 5	HoD	H2	33 years	Female
Participant 6	HoD	H3	17 years	Male
Participant 7	Deputy principal	DPP	23 years	Female
Participant 8	Principal	PRL	31 years	Male

Participants were selected based on field experience, gender and occupational ranks. The decision to sample participants of different years of experience, age group, rank and gender was motivated by the aim of collating data across all spectrums of the workforce—a point also emphasized by Meyer and Mayrhofer (2022).

### 3.3 Data Collection and Instruments

Data collection provides the basis on which readers of a study can develop a sense of the instruments used to collate data and how they generated data that embodies the findings of the study. To extract data that responded to the research questions, one-on-one interviews were conducted. Interviews were held with individual participants for approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The audio recorded interviews were transcribed using a computer. These one-on-one, semi-structured interviews entailed casual and reciprocal, but compelling conversations between researchers and participants (Mirzachaerulsyah et al., 2023). An interview guide bearing a set of questions was used by researchers to conduct interviews with individual participants. The interview guide served the purpose of aligning the researchers' thinking patterns and style of questioning within the confines of the objectives of the study (Menzies et al., 2016). A literature review was used as a triangulation instrument. To address the issue of trustworthiness, authors cross-checked the findings of the study by reviewing extant literature to identify similarities and contradictory patterns data patterns between them. As pointed out by Flick (2018), literature review presents an alternative data triangulation tool to document analysis and observations.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a complex process of aligning data with the objectives of the research. Creswell (2015) defines coding a systemic method of separating "*qualitative data*" into various sets of textual elements that correlate with the objectives/questions of the study "*before putting the data back together in a meaningful way*" (p. 156). Contrary to the common practice of using a coding software system (Welsh, 2002), the researchers conducted manual open coding, which as pointed out by St John and Johnson (2000, p. 393), places researcher at the "*depth and meaning*" rather than "*the volume and breadth*" of qualitative data. It enabled the researchers to turn "*raw qualitative data into a communicative and trustworthy*" narrative (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p. 260). Before analyzing the data, the researchers read through the transcript repeatedly to gain familiarity with its content. Subsequent to that, they conducted a line-by-line inspection of the transcripts to identify recurring patterns (Maree et al., 2007, p. 105). Notes were written in the margins of the transcript and a highlighter was used to code words from each sentence (Nkambule, 2020) to categorize the codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and formulate preliminary themes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The fact that codes and themes were developed directly from the data implies that the nature of the coding process was inductive. Finally, the researchers discussed among themselves about the codes to clarify their meaning relative to the "*essence of what each theme was about*" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92).

## 4. Results and Discussion

To ensure anonymity in the reporting of the findings, participants were referred to by occupational title (followed by a number) rather than by name (e.g., **T1**, **T2**, **T3** for teachers; **H1**, **H2**, **H3** for HoDs; and **DPP** and **PRL** for the deputy principal and the principal, respectively). The overall outcome of the thematic analysis yielded three

primary themes and nine sub-themes, which were used to relay the results of the research, as tabulated below.

**Table 2. Research themes**

Research questions	Themes	Sub-themes
1. What factors do participants attribute to an effective school-community partnership?	<b>Theme 1:</b> Factors contributing to effective school-community partnerships	
2. How wide is the scope of the school-community partnership network, and to what extent does it enable the creation and application of socially responsive knowledge?	<b>Theme 2:</b> The scope and benefits of a school-community partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School-non-governmental partnerships</li> <li>• School-business community partnerships</li> <li>• School-interdepartmental partnerships</li> <li>• School-school partnerships</li> <li>• School-parents and-family partnerships</li> <li>• Partnerships between schools and faith-based formations</li> </ul>
3. What are some of the barriers that hinder the integrity of the school-community partnerships?	<b>Theme 3:</b> Apparent barriers in school-community partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forfeiture of knowledge production time due to late commencement of meetings</li> <li>• Parents' lack of cultural agency to take part in key decision making processes</li> <li>• Procurement policy red tape</li> </ul>

### **Theme 1: Factors Contributing to Effective School-Community Partnerships**

School-community partnerships must deal with a range of factors to offer an adequate variety of mutually beneficial opportunities, cater for diverse learners' needs and provide support to learners' families (Roche & Strobach, 2019). When asked what they considered to be factors contributing to an effective school-community partnership, participants offered different, but complementary comments about the kind of attitudinal and behavioral characteristics that enable effective school-community partnerships. They commented:

*"Common purpose is the main ingredient that makes our partnership with many organizations and the community work effectively." [H2]*

*"Respect from both sides is necessary." [T3]*

DDP said:

*“Here we suggest things together with stakeholders. We make them understand our challenges and our vision for the future. Then we ask them to assist us to achieve our goals as a school.”*

H3 elaborated that:

*“As a school we cannot ignore what is happening outside in the community. Together we, the members of the community, we try our best to come up with solution[s] to help them wherever we can.”*

From a leadership point of view, PRL stated:

*“Our doors are open for dialogue and suggestions on how best we can improve the school and the situations that happen around families of our learners. Internally, as a leadership of this school, we do not underestimate the input of teachers, clerks, community. We include their vision for the school in our strategies.”*

Based on these responses, it can be deduced that the school–community partnership studied bases its effectiveness in addressing issues of access and quality education, improving the social well-being of learners and their families (NEEDU, 2018), the sustenance of a culture of common purpose, mutual respect, collective decision making, care for others, social responsibility and democratic leadership practices. All these factors make it easy for the school and the community to create and apply the kind of knowledge that responds to social problems that occur within and outside the school. This finding is consistent with Nkambule and Ngubane (2023) whose study established that the infusion of values such as respect, teamwork, care and democratic practices in interpersonal relationships among internal stakeholders improved the responsiveness of the school towards parents, families, external education stakeholders and ordinary residents of a community.

## **Theme 2: The Scope and Benefits of a School–Community Partnership**

To move closer to realizing their visions and missions, schools establish multisectoral partnerships (Black et al., 2010). During the interviews, participants revealed a kaleidoscope of benefits resulting from the partnerships they had entered into with various community networks over the past years.

### *Sub-theme 1: School–non-governmental partnerships*

Over the years, the scope of the responsibilities of schools has broadened to include some competencies that are beyond their capabilities. Stăiculescu and Lacatu (2013) argued that the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the primary and secondary education space is to help schools in areas where they may lack resources, skills and depth of knowledge. Participants indicated that their school benefits from an assortment of assistance from their non-governmental partners. The nature of the partnership that the school has with non-governmental organizations was characterized as follows:

*"We consider ourselves lucky to be prioritized by NGOs like [the] Love Life foundation and Sanca who come to our school at least twice a year to conduct sessions on comprehensive sexuality education as well as on substance abuse." [T1]*

H3 said:

*"Whenever we need assistance, they do not hesitate to send their representatives to our school."*

T2 commented:

*"Social workers from NGOs and health practitioners come to our school all the time."*

Through observation of their body language as they relayed the nature of their partnerships with NGOs during the interviews, it became clear that participants considered their relationship with the NGOs as cordial and mutually beneficial. Their statements corroborated the findings of the study of Stăiculescu and Lacatu (2013), namely that the services and expertise provided by NGOs to schools directly and indirectly benefit learners, parents and the community at large. This finding replicates that of Verger (2019), which found that the involvement of the non-governmental sector in resource-scarce public schooling infuses new ideas and provide access to resources and support mechanisms.

#### *Sub-theme 2: School–business community partnerships*

Ethical businesses have a vested interest in their communities. They understand that the schools in their areas develop basic skills among future employees and produce their future customers or clients (Asia Society, 2024). In South Africa, the King Report on Corporate Governance 2009 compels businesses to act within the ambit of *Ubuntu* by coming up with a range of socially responsive community development initiatives, under the banner of "Corporate Social Responsibility". It is within that context that they partner with local public organizations, volunteer organizations, churches, projects and schools. To highlight the significance of the partnership, participants who constitute the leadership of the school commented:

*"Our school has a lot of partners in the private sector, and we make sure that we keep in touch with them now and then so that we keep the partnership going just in case we need something from them, and they need something from us...like asking us to advertise their products." [DPP]*

PRL added:

*"We are currently at an advanced and promising stage of securing funds from a local company to build a school hall."*

Teacher participants explained how they have benefited from the partnership that the school has with the business sector of the community:

*“Recently, our ablution facilities were refurbished by one of the neighboring mining companies at no cost.” [T3]*

*“An ICT company donated to us a smart board which we have installed in the staff room to be used for presentations.” [T2]*

Generally, participants expressed appreciation for the continuous support from the business fraternity. Based on this finding it can be concluded that the school richly benefited from their close association with local businesses. This finding is validated by Badgett (2016) whose study found that effective partnerships between a school and business organizations increased learners’ prospects of acquiring quality education.

#### *Sub-theme 3: School–interdepartmental partnerships*

Interdepartmental partnerships pertain to the collaboration between two or more government departments, which in the case of this study entailed the collaboration between the studied school and various public local and provincial government service departments. Such partnerships are aimed at widening access to public services to facilitate access to relevant services for learners, families and ordinary community members who do not have the agency or means to obtain the services on their own. The responses of the participants when asked how some of these interdepartmental partnerships benefited their school,

*“Social workers from Social Development have helped the families of learners with applying for adoption and social grants for orphaned learners” [T3]*

T1 commented:

*“The Sports, Arts and Culture Department works with our creative arts teachers to promote indigenous games in schools.”*

DPP said:

*“Home Affairs Department sends their people to help learners apply for IDs (identity documents).”*

Overall, participants indicated that the scope of their partnerships with government departments spans across various public sector departments, most notably health; higher education and training; science and technology; sports, arts and culture; home affairs; and social development. Although it is virtually impossible to satisfy every learner’s and family’s social needs completely, bringing the services within their reach goes a long way towards ensuring that most of them receive the comprehensive range of social assistance they may need from time to time (Roche & Strobach, 2019).

#### *Sub-theme 4: School–school partnerships*

Partnerships among schools represent strong alliances or affiliations between either two or more schools (True Education Partnerships, 2023). Although the target school remains an under resourced school, it is regarded as better off than surrounding

schools because of good fundraising skills. That makes the school a point of reference when other schools require assistance. As illustrated in the excerpt below, participants showed their willingness to share their resources with other schools in the area. T2 asserted:

*"We have a good relationship with other schools. So, with that I say that we get along, so we do practice Ubuntu [i.e. humility/humanity] for the fact that we can communicate with other schools in the community. Because we have better resources than them, they come here for exam copies, and they use our netball and soccer fields."*

This was confirmed by PRL who commented:

*"Some of my teachers come highly recommended. They are known as experts in their fields. So, I encouraged my teachers to agree to workshop teachers from other school when they are asked to. We really do not have a problem when they ask us to set tests for the year-end exams."*

The commitment shown by the selected school towards helping others brings to bear a suggestion made by Elias (2016) who encouraged the resource-deprived schools to maintain tight bonds, share resources, knowledge and experiences; and consult one another when they encounter challenges. This finding is validated by Romm and Nkambule (2022) whose study established that school-school partnerships promoted the sharing of knowledge, resources and best practices.

#### *Sub-theme 5: School-parents and -family partnerships*

Family is a crucial component of a school-community partnership. According to Michael et al. (2007), family and community involvement in schools bring about improved learner academic achievement, school attendance and quality. In its broader form, family includes parents and other relatives who have a vested interest in their children's educational future. Michael et al. (2007) argued that schools that care about their learners make time to listen to parents, support them and ensure that they are guided on how to keep their children motivated to remain actively engaged in education. Participants opined as follows;

*"I would say that we are open to the community to learn from us.... We do share information and express our feelings with the communities within our townships." [H3]*

PRL inferred:

*"To give you one example among many occurrences where we intervened in families: One of our learners passed away. When the uncle of this learner approached us to explain the financial difficulty they had with the burial of that child, one of our teachers asked fellow staff members to contribute R50 and learners to contribute R5 towards the arrangement of the burial of that child. On top of that, the school contacted one of its retail store partners to donate food parcels to the family. Through our help, the family laid the young man to rest in style."*

DPP added:

*"We noticed that a brilliant learner stopped coming to school. We [then] learnt that her single mother had fallen ill and stopped working. We took it upon [our]selves to pay for her transport fare to school for a few months until her mother recovered and found another job. Every day, after school, she was given a meal to take home."*

Based on these comments it can be concluded that the school understands the importance of working closely with parents and families to alleviate the plight of vulnerable learners. The way of doing things is in keeping with Msila (2008) and Maphalala (2017) who urged schools to extend *Ubuntu* (the African philosophy of displaying humanity, sensitivity and care) towards those who are needy or vulnerable. The ambience of *Ubuntu* became noticeable in the manner that the leadership of the school values mutual dialogue and participatory decision making (Setlhodi, 2019).

*Sub-theme 6: Partnerships between schools and faith-based formations*

Evidence suggests that a relationship between schools and faith-based formations has a positive effect on student success (Connelly, 2012). Illustrating the sound relationship between the school and faith-based organizations, Participants commented:

*"We are open to different ministers coming to share their word. So, I believe that we are open and receptive to the community."* [T3]

T1 said:

*"Every Monday we have assembly and usually our guests are pastors from the community and elsewhere. They motivate our learners and pray for them."* [T1]

Furthermore, H3 commented:

*"When we have award ceremonies we alternate, this year this one would come and the next time the other one would come. We need them to share with learners and staff the word of God."* [H3]

Through this partnership, learners are fed spiritual wisdom and the motivation to work tirelessly on improving their attitude towards teachers, families, parents and their schoolwork (Connelly, 2012).

**Theme 3: Apparent Barriers in School-Community Partnerships**

Although partnerships between schools and communities are meant to help the parties to develop jointly in a reciprocal manner, there several barriers that curtail their optimal effectiveness (Black et al., 2010; Dotson-Blake, 2010; Kwatubana, 2014; Myende, 2011; Naicker, 2011). Relevant barriers concerning this study are documented below.

*Sub-theme 7: Forfeiture of knowledge production time due to late commencement of meetings*  
Time management relates to the ability to use allocated time wisely to accomplish targeted outcomes, or discuss important issues, or perform specific duties and activities (Kapur, 2018). Late commencement of meetings or events is a characteristic of poor time management. To that end, participants in this study voiced some concerns about poor time management skills among some of their partners. As indicated below, this problem was more noticeable,

*“In meetings with stakeholders, some [of our partners] pitch up very late for meetings and expect to be recused before we deliberate on what was discussed.” [T3]*

Another participant commented:

*“[When] Government departments, including our own psychosocial services [referring to a team of counselors and psychologist employed by the Department of Education], social workers and NGOs do not stick to time when we do not get enough time to liaise with them in detail about the challenges we have with our learners.” [H1]*

This finding adds to volumes of evidence proving that poor time management continues to be a factor that diminishes the level of productivity of educational proceedings (e.g., Chukwu et al., 2022; Makgatho, 2007; Rammala, 2009; Zarbakhsh et al., 2015).

*Sub-theme 8: Parents’ lack of cultural agency to take part in key decision making processes*  
Mampane’s (2023) study demonstrated that active participation of the learners’ parents on the developmental affairs of the school has a positive effect on learners’ academic resilience. However, participants expressed a concern about the prevalence of a power imbalance in knowledge production among groups of parents. Research indicates that both socioeconomic status and educational level have a bearing on parental involvement in schools (Singh et al., 2004). Likewise, participants who belonged to the management echelon of the school, namely HoDs, the deputy principal and the principal, noted that parents who possess tertiary education tended to be more assertive and actively involved in identifying challenges and in suggesting possible solutions. They characterized their observation of the situations as follows:

*“Even though parents are encouraged to assert themselves [during meetings], there are some parents who are not open to share their thoughts.” [PRL]*

Another participant added:

*“We do [not] know whether they do this because they do not have the confidence to do so or [whether] they keep quiet because they think what we say does not make sense.” [H2]*

Another participant concluded:

*"Parents who are financially needy usually agree to everything that is suggested by us [i.e., school] or by the parents who are doing a bit fine in life."*  
[DPP]

The utterances that underline this finding, support the conclusion of Lewis and Naidoo (2006) that, in South Africa, "[m]any parents lack the cultural capital to participate effectively in the decision-making process" (p. 423) and therefore find it challenging to situate themselves as important role-players in the partnership and to act within the midpoint of participatory democracy where their inputs matter the most. The UNESCO-IIEP (2022) further established that power imbalance occurs among groups of individuals in a school-community partnership because school management teams do not show willingness to understand the reasons why some members of the school community, forum or committee do not participate actively in decision-making processes.

*Sub-theme 9: Procurement policy red tape*

Research has proven that meaningful partnerships can result in schools receiving the necessary support, including infrastructure and facilities, and ensure that staff are legally capable to perform in line with desirable education standards (Siddique et al., 2019). However, participants shared how the red tape involved in the procurement policies of sponsors can sometimes create challenges. T1 said:

*"After securing sponsorship, we have to wait and wait....Sometimes it can even take up to two years before they make it happen in real terms."*

PRL added:

*"Procurement challenges are such that after being told that the school will be assisted, corporates would tell you to wait indefinitely while they finalize things with the head office – which can take a while."*

The intensity with which participants lamented the rigid nature of procurement processes demonstrated their desire to have them addressed urgently. The points raised by participants replicate what Siddique et al. (2019) found in their study, which, inter alia, established that the allocation of resources to Pakistan's needy schools often happens later than necessary or does not happen at all because of a lack of expeditious and systematic procurement processes.

## **5. Synthesis of the Results and Their Implications for Practice and Further Research**

The study, firstly, found that common purpose, mutual respect, collective decision making, care for others and social responsibility, as well as democratic leadership practices, ensure an effective school-community partnership in the target school. This finding validates a point made by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) that knowledge creation is a collaborative enterprise that requires the full participation of all stakeholders and a common sense of direction. A second finding pertains to the scope

and benefits of the studied school–community partnerships. It was clear that the partnerships were extensive and embodied the school’s strategic and mutually beneficial relationship with non-governmental voluntary organizations; small-to large-scale businesses; other government departments (interdepartmental) and other schools; parents and families; and faith-based formations. The study also identified a few barriers. Inconsistent adherence to scheduled time for attendance was found to limit productivity and the intensity of the knowledge-creation process and broad-based collaboration among stakeholders. The second barrier was lower than desirable levels of cultural capital and assertiveness among the faction of parents with low socioeconomic status and educational levels (Singh et al., 2004), which greatly affected their active participation “*in decision-making processes*” (Lewis & Naidoo, 2006, p. 423). Procurement policy red tape on the part of the sponsoring partners was found to delay the fulfilment of promises and the delivery of urgently needed social support to the school. The humility with which the school treated vulnerable learners and families (Romm & Nkambule, 2022) showed that its leadership (i.e., school management team) applied participative leadership (Nkambule, 2020) alongside values-centered leadership (Setlhodi, 2022) to enhance their knowledge management leadership role (Kazak, 2021; Nkambule, 2023e).

Notwithstanding the [aforementioned] barriers, the study illustrated how a healthy environment for “*verbal interaction, know how exteriorization*” and “*teaching*” (Politis, 2002, p. 187) not only ensured that “*the right knowledge [was relayed to] the right person(s) at the right time*” (Barbier & Tengeh, 2023, p. 171) but also led to the creation and application of context appropriate “*problem solving and decision making*” (Wiig, 1997, p. 2). The findings further demonstrated that knowledge management (KM) has a pivotal role to play in addressing emergency situations and crises that confront schools (Iacuzzi et al., 2020).

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The primary objective of the study was to draw on the views of teachers, heads of departments (HODs), deputy principal and the principal in a public secondary school about the state of their school’s partnership with a network of community-based organizations. It was also apparent that the success of these partnerships espoused a series of values. The study showed that the school’s promotion of common purpose, mutual respect, collective decision making, care for others, collective social responsibility and democratic leadership practices contributed to the success of its mutually beneficial partnership with relevant community networks. It also emerged that by going an extra mile to lobby for multisectoral social support, the school richly benefited from the benevolence of a wide network of government departments; private-corporate sector and local businesses; faith-based formations; and non-governmental organizations some of which offered similar or overlapping services while others offered a diverse range of services to the school. Despite the resounding success with which the school forged meaningful partnerships, participants conceded that the fluency of existing partnerships is affected by: forfeiture of knowledge production time due to partners’ late arrival and tendency to recuse themselves

before the adjournment of meetings; lower than desired cultural capital among parents from lower socioeconomic households to assert themselves in decision-making processes; and procurement policy red tape that occasionally delayed the extension of much-needed social support to schools, families and learners.

The study recommends that the school must minimize the frequency of late arrival and unwarranted early recusals in knowledge production meetings. It further called for increased cultural capital and inclusion of parents from lower socioeconomic households in decision-making processes; and elimination of procurement policy red tape that occasionally delayed the of much-needed social support to schools, families and learners.

By shining a spotlight on the knowledge creation and application processes of KM within the context of the schooling system, the study contributes a novel perspective to current understandings on the role of KM in school-community partnerships. The findings of the study also carry the implication for review of dysfunctional or unproductive school-community partnerships in South Africa and across similar schooling contexts in the Global South. They also have implication for further research, in terms of which future researchers can diversify the outlook of the topic by exploring the effectiveness of the acquisition, storage, transfer and innovation processes of KM in primary and secondary education.

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