

The role of Community in Education: A practitioner's reflection



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A professional community organiser works with leaders within communities to promote social and economic changes. In this regard the organiser plays diverse roles that are intended to build the capacity of people to gain collective awareness and confidence to confront public issues that impact on their lives. The organiser encourages organisation and remedial actions by people. This enabling role involves acting as convener, combiner, mediator, adviser, catalyst and facilitator while engaging in flexible and continuous learning and exercise of judgment and commonsense. Conversations and participatory action research are used to enhance people's awareness and assertiveness as well as empower their direct social action to enhance their chances to access power, positions and resources.

This reflection is based on lessons gleaned from working with public schools in rural and urban contexts. It must be noted that a lot of experimenting in this work took place. Each situation presented its own challenges. The organiser had to trust and believe in people.

Community Responsibility

All communities value education for their children. Families either have power to take command and use it for the wellbeing of their children's education or outsiders exploit and dominate those who are powerless and leave them worse off. Education as one of the public goods, therefore, must not only be valued by the community and the people, but must be advanced and protected or preserved. This is the responsibility of all community role players, stakeholders as well as educational institutions.

A community that values education jealously claims ownership of the process as well as educational institutions. Buyani Primary, a school established in Finetown next to Grasmere, Johannesburg by families in an informal settlement without government help, became the hub of positive education initiatives. The community was prepared to invest their own time, hard-earned money and energy in its development. It became so viable in many respects that the Gauteng education administration mistakenly classified the school as a private school that was serving the interests of the well off.

Tladi Technical High School in Soweto had to be closed down despite all goodwill from the Sowetan newspaper and donors that provided money to refurbish the

rundown school. The parents of children at the school kept an unhealthy distance from the school. The result was the worst matriculation examination results in the country attended by ill discipline among learners and educators and their respective organisations. Members of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) as well as those of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) displaced and marginalised all role players and stakeholders. The happenings in that school is the worst case of a school that was hijacked and used to serve the interests that were inimical to those of the community. The community did not assert itself with disastrous outcomes.

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Community must adopt proactive and reactive approaches in education.

A school that has strong constructive relations with the immediate community is most likely to flourish. The school in this regard is perceived as a public asset to be cherished and supported by all in the feeder community. A number of schools that have previously served the country well are best placed to be sustained against the odds. Historical schools such as Inkamani, Morris Isaacson, Sekano-Ntoane High and Naledi High continue to receive special attention from their past and present role players and stakeholders, their community. The historical success of the schools is constantly motivating and spurring stakeholders and role players to associate themselves with the schools in the interest of education. Organising support for, and involvement in, the affairs of such schools was always enthusiastically embraced.

Communities, like business and the state, are consumers and users of education services, products and facilities. Communities must demand and expect quality goods and services. Taxpayers must expect and demand more from government and public servants. Learners, families, public servants and barons of business must all be held accountable for implementation, monitoring and evaluation of goods and services. In general, the public education that is

offered to marginalised and disadvantaged sectors of society, fails the accountability and quality service test. It is no surprise that black parents are withdrawing from township schools and enrolling their kids in historically white schools in search of perceived quality education.

Education as a tool for social development

Education is at the heart of reconciliation, reconstruction and nation building programmes. Is education not a tool to enhance the realisation of people's full potential? If this were the case, the act of plunging into education is an empowering process. It is an act of enhancing the capacity and ability of people to act in a manner that directly and indirectly benefits them, their environment and the rest of creation. This suggests a personal and national responsibility to seriously take part in the education enterprise.

Communities or people have to take part in defining and shaping their education. Government leaders take it for granted that they are education providers and that it is their responsibility to determine content. The apartheid government prescribed an education that was intended to serve their pathological or ideological objectives. In Tanzania the late President Julius Nyerere advocated for 'education for liberation'. Business is requiring appropriate knowledge, aptitude and skills. Community or civil society should advocate and lobby for life-long education that conserves or promotes basic human values for a rapidly changing social and economic environment and concomitant challenges.

Promotion and protecting basic human values is a political civic act that should involve all sectors of society. Civic education raises awareness and commitment among citizens about their public rights, responsibilities and obligations. The positive outcomes of such education within community cannot be overemphasised. Formal and non-formal forms of education must make their contribution felt and enjoy a pride of place in this vital area of life. Community must help deepen and expand non-formal education through the agency of community institutions in a manner that complements public education. Community must adopt proactive and reactive approaches in education.

Educational governance

Statutory communication or governance structures in education are generally ineffective and dysfunctional. This is the case especially within historically

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Extensive research has shown that there is a strong link between community involvement in schools and better school attendance, as well as the improved academic achievement of students.²

Warren, Hong, Ruben and Uy³ examined the collaboration between schools and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) to engage previously marginalised or alienated families in schools. They studied public schools, (including community and charter schools) in Chicago, Los Angeles and Newark, and found that schools benefitted from the social capital expertise of CBOs.

Warren et al found that educators and CBOs working together were able to create partnerships which supported both school change and community development. Their research revealed that “collaborative power is critical to creating the civic capacity to build and sustain school reform”. (p 2213). The relationship between school and community they asserted, was reciprocal – the community cares for the school and the school revitalises the community. As a result neighbourhood schools become potential sites for building social capital, which benefits neighbourhood as well as school, and strong communities in turn can produce a change in the culture of schooling.

The study found that collaboration and parent engagement lead to improved student performance and marks. This fits with strong evidence emerging from the literature which indicates that school results improve in low achieving inner city schools when educators, parents, education officials and particularly school principals all work together as a team, to improve education.

marginalised and powerless communities. School governing bodies are often utilised to achieve external objectives and in some instances they are politically manipulated. The vulnerable are made powerless while powerful political interests are empowered to gain inequitable advantage over primary stakeholders, namely, learners, educators and parents. Isolated governing or parent bodies are too weak to stand their ground against established community groups and the activists that lead them.

Community can play a role in conscientising its members about their critical role and place in society. Social analysis based on observation of trends and practices can enhance the appreciation of education in society. There is room to learn from observation, doing and reflecting on our actions. People may have to develop the ability to question the state of affairs as well as the conditions that confront them. Facilitators or ‘combiners’ within communities must develop a need to learn as much about their own supposed abilities as all others in their group or community. We have a role in promoting the desire to learn from one another. The educator must cultivate the desire to learn as they educate their own charges.

Broad based community organising

The antidote is to build people’s power through engaging local leaders and residents in broad-based community organising. Broad-based community organising is based on pooling the resources and strengths as well as skills and knowledge of local institutions and leaders. This is what community leaders should consider in order to bring about a shift in power relations within education. This will enable them to express their concerns with one voice. Organised communities are best placed to propose alternative plans and policies for consideration by both business and the state. Organised people’s power makes it possible to hold stakeholders and role players accountable for the provision of quality and appropriate education. Organised people’s power will promote access to existing educational projects and institutions. The capacity of people to receive equitable share of resources and facilities and other services is enhanced where community leaders cooperatively and collectively take responsibility for developments in their community and education.

The public must promote, protect and preserve education facilities. It is a fact that in the past all public

facilities were often torched as an act of defiance against the apartheid administration. An organised people that have a stake in public amenities as taxpayers and ratepayers have a duty of care. They protect that which belongs to and serves the community. In many instances community members have maintained facilities at no cost to the state. Gaps and shortages have been addressed by members' giving of their own money, time and energy.

In addition to demanding quality education, facilities and opportunities from government or the private sector providers of education service, community members may engage in various self help initiatives and projects. Nongovernmental and community-based projects have offered viable alternatives to poor state-provided education. In some cases home-based education for families with means has provided answers to some expressed need for alternatives. These parallel projects demonstrate alternatives within a democratic society. It is true that demonstration projects that provide different or new ways and means are necessary where the state is discriminating against sections of its people.

Viable and tested alternatives do need to be institutionalised and adopted by society. Community could campaign for this involving both business and the state. Powerful social movements are needed to raise concerns about quality and access. Sustained public talk and campaign actions are part of social responsibility. In living memory, the people's movement against racist-inspired bantu education should provide instructive lessons. Students and community protests about the hated system of education did help to bring about change in priorities and programmes.

Taking personal responsibility for one's education is taken as self evident. It expected that people will do all that is required to ensure that they take part in education. This for many reasons does not always happen. There are people who have missed out. It is the duty of society to help them gain some useful education. This might not necessarily be education

that is based in the letters and numbers. Society may have to educate those who have no keen interest in this type of learning. I propose to consider the promotion of a movement to make our people engage in a kind of 'action learning' or learning to do things from people who are directly involved in making things. This movement could include mentoring and mentorship programmes.

I have attempted to describe various kinds of interactions and actions that should be implemented by community in the interest of education. We have to accept that all that we need to achieve in education is derived from learning from experience. Our role in education can become clear through our direct engagement. We can gain a lot of what is possible through acting together to give our collective inputs to our education system. We have goods, materials, information, skills and concerns to contribute. We have to do all that is possible to ensure that something is done. As individuals we can play limited, but critical roles. Working in a purposeful and organised manner with all stakeholders, a community is able to enhance quality and access to education.

Further, it is important for the community to raise its concerns regarding the quality of service and products in education. The community needs to make sure that its interests as customers, consumers, clients and voters are not compromised. It is people that make organisations and systems. Community has a responsibility to ensure that education is reformed or transformed in order to meet emerging societal change. In addition communities must ensure that education is aligned or challenges beliefs about people and the values of society. Communities have a right and an obligation to expect from government, effective and efficient provision and administration of education. For our inputs we expect good outputs and outcomes. The communities' role is to act as a watchdog and ensure that education serves people, industrial organisations, and the planet. People engage in its development, and education develops them as they involve themselves.

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¹ Related Research compiled by the Helen Suzman Foundation

² Fan, X., Chen, M. (2001). Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: a meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*. 2001;13:1-22.

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³ Warren, M., Hong, S., Ruben, C.L., and Uy, P.S. (2009) Beyond the Bake sale: A Community-Based Relational approach to Parent Engagement in Schools. *Teachers College Record* 3(9) September 2009, pp 2209-2254