‘IN SCHOOLS, IN COMMUNITY’ – IMPLEMENTING A UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

P. Silbert*
Schools Improvement Initiative
e-mail: patti.silbert@uct.ac.za

J. Clark*
Schools Improvement Initiative
e-mail: jon.clark@uct.ac.za

J. Dornbrack**
Education Faculty
e-mail: jdornbrack@uwc.ac.za

*University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
**University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is twofold: the first is to describe the Schools Improvement Initiative (SII) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) – a university-school partnership implemented in six schools in the Western Cape township of
In schools, in community

Silbert et al.  ‘In schools, in community’

Khayelitsha. The second purpose is to report on the methodology of the case study as used during the initial stage of the intervention. Working in collaboration with faculties and groupings within UCT; with education-related organisations in the community; and with the Metropole East Education District (MEED), the SII aims to bring about systemic school improvement in its partner schools. Through purposeful collaboration, the SII focuses its interventions on both the professional development of teachers and the organisational development of the school. Underpinning the SII’s work is a context specific approach, and it is through the methodology of the case study that this is achieved. The case study is used as an initiator of dialogue and a preliminary ‘step to action’ (Adelman, Jenkins and Kemmis 1980 in Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2009, 256). Accurately generated data from the case study, that is shared openly with the participants, can be a powerful way to generate trust and collaboration, and engage all stakeholders in school improvement initiatives.

Keywords: university-school partnership, collaboration, school improvement, teacher professional development, organisational development, case study

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It is widely accepted that schooling in South Africa is in crisis. Numerous studies since 1994 indicate that even though significant advances have been made in improving educational provision, the educational possibilities of South African students, especially in high poverty areas, remain bleak (Bloch 2009; Fleisch 2008; Taylor 2011). Despite improved access to education, particularly at the secondary level, there remain deep inequalities with regard to educational achievement, as demonstrated in the Annual National Assessments (DoBE 2012); the Grade 12 national school-leaving results; and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Howie; Van Staden; Tshelek; Dowse and Zimmerman 2012). The poor performance of the majority of students who attend township schools results in relatively few of them qualifying for tertiary studies, thus reproducing deep inequalities in the social and economic fabric of South African society.

As a response to the crisis in South African education, the Schools Improvement Initiative (SII) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) was launched in 2012 as one of the university’s strategic initiatives. The overarching aim of the SII is the development of a university-school partnership as a vehicle for extending the university’s engagement in schooling. Drawing on university-wide resources, expertise and initiatives, in particular those of the Schools Development Unit (SDU) and School of Education wherein the SII is positioned, the SII works in alliance with groupings both within and outside of the university, including in particular the provincial education authorities. The close collaboration with officials of the Metropole East Education District (MEED), responsible for the delivery of
schooling in the Western Cape township of Khayelitsha is intentional and signals a recognition that the improvement of the quality of educational provision requires the co-operation and involvement of all those involved in education in this community.

The notion of ‘partnership’, as understood by the SII, refers to a collaborative engagement between UCT and a targeted group of schools for the purpose of systemic school improvement. The ultimate impact on improving the life chances for the individual learner underpins the key objectives of the SII (discussed later in this article). Pivotal to the notion of partnership is reciprocity and collaboration – and the development of mutually beneficial relationships (Nehring and O’Brien 2012) to strengthen capacity at both the university and the school. As Corrigan (2000) points out, collaboration extends beyond cooperation and coordination and implies that something new is enabled or produced that individuals or organisations would not produce alone. At the school level, this has particular implications in the areas of teacher professional development and organisational capacity building for the core purpose of improving teaching and learning. At the university level, benefit is derived through improving admission rates of students from Khayelitsha, a context in which, historically, very few students have qualified for admission to UCT, and the community in which the SII is active.

The recognition by universities that their ‘destinies are inextricably linked with their communities’ (Harkavy and Hartley 2009, 9) requires a shift in the relationship between the university and the school, from what at times might be limited community involvement to the establishment of deeply collaborative partnerships.

The first purpose of the article is to describe the SII’s model of university-school partnership as implemented in the six partner schools in Khayelitsha. Secondly, the article reports on the methodology of the case study as used in the SII partner schools during the initial stage of intervention for the purpose of conducting an in-depth needs assessment. Situated within the current scholarship of university-school partnerships, and with a specific focus on context-specific whole-school development, we present the case study as a methodological tool used to generate a deep contextual understanding of the school.

The importance of context in school reform has been emphasised by numerous scholars at the level of both policy and practice. Yet reform interventions continue to be criticised for limited engagement with their social contexts of application, representing an ‘apolitical, ahistorical and de-ideologised view of educational change and development’ (Morley and Rasool 1999, 34). Fleish and Christie (2004, 95) comment on how specific historical contexts are often ‘glossed over’ in school development models. Angus (1993, 341) similarly critiques the decontextualised approach of school effectiveness: ‘Not only is context understood as something that exists outside or beyond schooling rather than in relation to it, but also it is something that is prior to schooling rather than being historically contiguous’.
A complex and differentiated approach to school improvement takes into account a broad range of factors including the social, cultural, economic, political and historical – ‘factors which are inextricably interconnected and which are powerful determinants in influencing and defining educational change’ (Silbert 2008, 150). The relationship between systemic school improvement and the social, economic and political context is therefore interdependent:

Rather than being the product of a set of interlocking school-related factors, or of institution-level changes, the experiences of school change in South Africa suggest that historical context needs to be an overriding consideration that frames all judgments of effectiveness and improvement (Fleisch and Christie 2004, 96).

The development of contextually specific school improvement strategies requires that within the broader social and economic context, the precise nature of the programme be tailored to the ‘presenting culture and context of individual schools’ (West and Hopkins 1996, 13). Although we regard the teaching-learning process as key to school improvement, the focus of the article is capacity building at the school organisational level, in order to support improved teaching and learning. Such an approach is contingent upon the implementation of a set of contextually specific strategies.

Before describing how the partnership is enacted, we present an overview of recent admission trends of students schooled in Khayelitsha.

THE SCHOOLS IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE IN KHAYELITSHA

UCT acknowledges that the underperformance of the majority of South African public schools has had a direct impact on student admission to its undergraduate programmes. This is well illustrated by the situation pertaining to recent admission trends of students who were schooled in Khayelitsha. We take as our initial baseline the situation pertaining to 2013 admissions: at the end of 2012, a total of 2 938 learners in the township’s 20 secondary schools wrote the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations. Of these, 1 934 passed (i.e. 65.8%) with just under a third (575) of the candidates achieving a matriculation exemption or university entrance pass. It should be noted that one school, the Centre of Science and Technology (COSAT), with a 98.2 per cent pass rate and with 39 out of the 56 successful matriculants (69.6%) obtaining bachelor’s degrees in 2012, was honoured as one of the top ten schools in the Western Cape for its performance in the previous year’s NSC examinations.

Yet, of the total of 575 matriculants who obtained a (nominal) university entrance pass in the 20 Khayelitsha schools, only 29 enrolled at UCT for the 2013 academic year and of these, eight were from COSAT. The 21 remaining learners came from
In schools, in community

ten of the 19 schools (excluding COSAT), with nearly half the schools having no representation in the first year at UCT; indeed a number of schools in the township have never sent a learner to study at the university.

In terms of educational achievement, this suggests that the majority of Khayelitsha schools display performance levels typical of those in similar socio-economic contexts elsewhere in South Africa. As such they inhabit the one end of a strongly bi-modal education system, which sees the majority of working class schools characterised by high levels of under-achievement and failure, off-set by the small number of mainly middle class schools which perform significantly better. As noted by Spaull (2012), this bi-modality in learner performance is evident at all levels in the system (see also, Taylor 2011; Van der Berg 2007), resulting in what has been characterised as a ‘dual economy’ of schooling (Shalem and Hoadley 2009; Taylor and Yu 2009; Van der Berg and Louw 2006) which is deeply entrenched in the country. But it is at the exit (Grade 12) level that its impact is most apparent, particularly in the key indicator subjects of mathematics and physical sciences.

In response to the challenge to ensure that a greater number of matriculants from Khayelitsha schools gain entry to UCT, the SII has committed itself to long-term practical and developmental engagement at both the primary and secondary school level, in ways that it is hoped will contribute to enhanced learner performance. In addition to working across all schools in the township, a smaller number of ‘partner schools’ have been identified, that is, schools where deeper and more extensive links are being forged. To date three primary and three secondary schools fall into this category.

The identification and selection of these six SII partner schools are based on a number of factors, including (for primary schools) evidence of improved student performance as reflected in the annual provincial systemic tests; levels of present (and interest in future) participation of members of the School Management Team (SMT) and teachers in university-certified professional development courses on offer at UCT; and input from MEED officials working directly in the Khayelitsha schools.

The participation of teachers and school managers in professional development courses, coupled with school-based support is a key element of the SII’s engagement in schooling and will be returned to later in the article.

THE UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP IN SUPPORT OF WHOLE-SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

Positioning itself within the university-school partnership literature (Deppeler 2006; Groundwater-Smith and Dadds 2004; Nehring and O’Brien 2012; and others), the SII holds that through purposeful collaboration between the university, the education district, community organisations and the school itself, a deeper, more effective support intervention can be implemented and sustained. The need for partnership within the SII is based further on the assumption that the school intervention strategy
is constructed in context, in close collaboration with the principal; SMT; School Governing Body (SGB) and teachers. This whole-school development strategy implies a multi-level focus on the professional development of teachers as well as principals and school management, as a prerequisite for development.

Within the post-1994 South African context there have been numerous partnership-based interventions that have sought to redress the inequalities inherent in disadvantaged schools as a consequence of apartheid-era education. This acknowledges also the extensive history of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector (both before and after 1994) in its efforts to bring about change in South African schools (Soudien 2013). In their recent publication, Sayed, Kanjee and Nkomo (2013) offer an overview of some of the broader initiatives, many of which were based on different types of partnership. Once such initiative, the Education Quality Improvement Partnership Programme (Equip), a whole-school development intervention, was one of the earliest examples of a public-private partnership (O’Connell 2013). In addition to Equip, the interventions referred to by Sayed et al. (2013) supported school development through different types of collaboration. While, increasingly, school improvement partnerships have been forged between the public and private sector in South Africa, university-school partnerships based intentionally on interdisciplinary engagement within the university for the purpose of whole-school development are relatively new in the country.

Further afield, models of university-school partnerships have proliferated, as illustrated in the United States (USA) over the past two decades (Harkavy 2006; Harkavy, Hartley, Weeks and Bowman 2011; Pecheone, Tytler and Ross 2006; Thorkildsen and Scott Stein 1996). Despite the increased scope for university involvement in school improvement, Stoll and Fink (1989, 143) maintain that there is no blueprint for improvement and that no two models are identical. In keeping with a context-specific approach, we support Deppeler’s (2006) assertion that the university-school partnership must be adapted to the needs of the particular institutions within their broader contexts and, more specifically, to the contexts of the individual schools.

Internationally, collaborative stakeholder engagement through university-school partnerships has been widely advocated as an approach for improving the practice of teacher training (Deppeler 2006; Ramsey 2000). The centrality of teacher training to the university–school relationship in the South African context aligns with Mutemeri and Chetty’s (2011) study on university-school partnerships in pre-service student teacher training. The need to promote collaboration between universities and schools and to strengthen the links between student teachers and practising teachers is underscored by these authors, signalling one of the SII’s key objectives, namely to establish ‘Professional Practice Schools’. This objective supports the notion of collaboration between universities and schools, as a recognised approach for improving teacher and student learning practices (Deppeler 2006; Ramsey 2000).
As highlighted in the next section, through strong, mutually beneficial collaboration, the SII seeks to address teachers’ professional development needs within the schools, while these schools provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to broaden their experience in the classroom. This objective underpins the SII’s approach to collaboration which extends beyond the provision of services to schools, towards partnership and reciprocity from which both parties mutually benefit.

Within the broader scholarship on school reform there is consensus that effective school change requires multi-level approaches, and that the development of reform strategies must impact simultaneously at whole-school, department and classroom level (Fullan 1992; Harris and Bennet 2001; Hopkins, Ainscow and West 1994; Hopkins and Harris 1997; Reynolds, Hopkins and Stoll 1993, amongst others). West and Hopkins (1996) and Hopkins (2001) assert that in adopting a whole-school approach, emphasis should not be placed on one element of the school – such as staff development, organisational development or leadership training – but on developing the capacity of the school at an organisational and management level as well as at a classroom level.

Signalling the work of the School Improvement Research Group at the Institute of Education, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom (UK), the SII regards school improvement as a strategy for educational change that seeks to improve the organisational development of the school as well as the professional development of teachers, in order to impact positively on student outcomes: ‘In this sense school improvement is about raising student achievement through focusing on the teaching-learning process and the conditions which support it. It is about strategies for improving the school’s capacity for providing quality education in times of change’ (Hopkins et al. 1994, 3).

Hayes et al. (2006, 179) endorse the view that inherent in school improvement is ‘... the upgrading of teacher quality through a focus on classroom, school and system-level reform’.

Similarly, within the South African context, differential approaches to school reform have converged around the critical issue of improving performance levels in schools (Muller and Roberts 2000). To this end, according to Muller and Roberts (2000, 1), it is the classroom rather than the school that is regarded increasingly as the ‘primary institutional site’ in poorly functioning schools. However, as these authors suggest, the classroom must be considered an integral component of the school rather than an entity that can be worked with outside of the school organisation:

... unlike an earlier cycle of interventions where ‘curriculum’ or ‘teaching’ interventions took place in an isolated or ‘stand-alone’ form, the ‘classroom’ is now seen in an embedded nest of systems including the school, the school support environment, the district, the province, and the national department (Muller and Roberts 2000, 1).
The SII’s distinctive focus on instructional practice and children’s learning is therefore intentionally linked to organisation processes and capacity building within the school’s management structures. As noted by Jacklin, Clark, Laugksch and Kuhne (2010, 2), school improvement needs to be located in the relation between teacher knowledge, teacher development, pedagogic practices and the leadership, management and culture of the school. Over and above the school context playing a powerful determining role in shaping a teacher’s pedagogy (Clark and Linder 2006), we argue that organisational activity is needed to support teaching and learning through building structures of accountability and collaboration.

Capacity-building at the level of both the classroom and the school management team requires a multi-level interventional approach, in conjunction with the development of partnerships and networks outside of the immediate school context (West and Hopkins 1996, 12). The provision of support by provincial departmental structures is underscored by Earl, Watson and Torrance (2002, 10) amongst others. At a micro level, collaboration involves productive mentoring, building peer relationships, team building and professional learning communities. At a macro level, it involves building the capacity ‘to work in organisations that form cross-institutional partnerships such as school district, university and school-community ...’ (Fullan 1993, 18). This aligns with Nehring and O’Brien’s (2012) recent study on university support for school level improvement, in which they found that district level collaboration is crucial to sustained improvement efforts.

Significantly, it is the classroom as it exists within the context of the school that marks a theoretical shift in the more recent literature on school improvement and school effectiveness (West and Hopkins 1996). While acknowledging the need for contextually specific strategies at both a micro and macro level, we are cautioned by Hayes et al. (2006, 17) not to regard these strategies as ‘solutions’, but instead to engage with them in ways that foreground the core function of schools, namely, teaching and learning.

THE SCHOOLS IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE OBJECTIVES

The SII’s school-based engagement is operationalised through five strategic objectives, which are interconnected and interdependent. These were conceptualised after the completion of the needs analysis, which to a large extent informed the objectives. In addition to attempting to address the overarching needs of the schools, the objectives, illustrated in Figure 1, foreground the central aims of the university-school partnership.
Referring to these objectives in turn, the main delivery vehicle for Objective 1, that is, teacher professional and school organisational development, is the range of accredited professional development courses on offer at UCT. The professional development model preferred by the SDU, which is responsible for delivering these courses, links formal qualifications with school-based support thereby enabling university staff to address issues of course and curriculum implementation in the classroom. As indicated, the need for professional development was identified as a priority need across each of the six schools.

In support of Objective 2, the SII partner schools in Khayelitsha are regarded as professional practice sites where reciprocal links with the university are established. As suggested earlier, through the School of Education, opportunities are created for selected post-graduate student teachers to undertake their teaching practice in these specific schools. In addition to the partnership offering opportunities for pre-service teacher training, fourth-year Occupational Therapy students from the Faculty of Health Sciences have undertaken the practical component of their qualification in the partner schools. As from 2014, the six-week rotational placement of these students was extended to include Speech Therapy and Audiology students who also undertake the site-based component of their course in the SII primary schools.
Directly linked to the establishment of professional practice schools is Objective 3, which highlights the SII’s role in facilitating a greater level of engagement by university-based social responsiveness initiatives and programmes in Khayelitsha schools. Significant in terms of broader university engagements is the collaboration between the SII and UCT’s student volunteer organisations. The student volunteer programmes, ‘TeachOut’ and ‘Iinkanyezi’, for example, are UCT-based interventions offered by Ubunye student volunteers to Grade 8–12 learners in one of the partner secondary schools.

Objective 4 responds to the under-representation of students from Khayelitsha schools at UCT. ‘100-UP’ is a three-year support programme, which focuses on building the academic and life-skills of learners so that they might be better prepared to compete for places at UCT once they have completed their schooling. As of 2014, a total of 300 learners across the three grades (10 to 12) are involved in this programme. Each of the three cohorts comprises 100 students, five per school from each of the 20 secondary schools in the township. Equal representation from all 20 schools is an intentional feature of the programme and one which signals the university’s commitment to forging links as widely as possible across the community. In addition to the core 100-UP learners, a further group of potential university candidates are identified in the middle of their final year of schooling. They too are assisted in their applications to UCT.

First indications are that the programme is having a significant positive impact on enrolments. In 2014, the year in which the first 100-UP group was eligible for tertiary studies, a total of 79 Matriculants took up offers of places at the university, a notable increase from the 29 of the previous year. Moreover, these learners were representative of 19 of the 20 schools in the township.

A longer-term objective is to use 100-UP to build institutional knowledge and experience, which can better inform the university’s bridging programmes and school-based interventions.

Objective 5 signals a commitment to external engagement and the forging of partnerships with education-based groupings outside the university. This includes significantly, collaboration with MEED, as mentioned earlier in the article. In addition to working closely with the departmental district officials, the SII has established a partnership with other non-profit organisations (NPOs), such as The Bookery, in supporting the establishment of libraries in the SII primary schools.

THE SCHOOLS IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE IN SCHOOLS

Drawing on Fullan’s (1982) stages of change, the SII’s school-based programme implementation comprises three phases, namely: Initiation, Implementation and Continuation. Rather than exist as discrete components, these stages are iterative and
interactional. What follows is a description of the Initiation Stage of the intervention, which, given the relatively early stage of the SII, reflects a key component of its activities to date in the six partner schools. The Initiation Stage lays the foundation for subsequent development and it was through the methodology of the case study, conducted at the start of the project, that data was generated in order to assess the needs of the school. This elicited a complex and differentiated approach to development that took into account a broad range of factors including the social, economic, political and historical factors that articulated with the lived dynamics and cultural features of the school.

What follows is a description of the SII’s approach to the case study and an overview of how this methodology was used to shape and inform the subsequent interventions.

**CASE STUDY**

**Step 1: Entering the school**

The case study describes a process of collaborative enquiry in which the SII project manager spent an average of two weeks in each school. Ensuring buy-in by the whole school community from the outset was critical in generating support, trust and investment. Commitment to building trust is key to any school improvement initiative (Harris 2002), as is the importance of working with participants who are willing to embrace change (Westraad 2011). For this reason, the case study commenced only once there was full agreement by the principal and SMT in consultation with the SGB and teachers.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal; deputy principal; members of the SMT; SGB and non-teaching staff. This amounted to an average of ten interviews in each school. In the secondary schools, focus group discussions (with an average of four to six per group) were conducted with learners. During the interviews and focus group discussions, the questions focused on participants’ perceptions of the school’s strengths and challenges and their suggestions for improvement. The intentional focus on strengths underscores the importance of building and expanding the elements that are working well within the school. This supports an affirmative stance to school reform, as advocated by Bruce King and Bouchard (2011), rather than a deficit approach.

In addition to interviews and focus group discussions, participant observations were conducted in each school. Daily practices observed included: assemblies; staff briefings and meetings; parent meetings; SMT meetings; departmental meetings; and extra mural activities. Events such as prize-givings were also observed. Time spent in the staffroom offered insight into interpersonal and socio-political dynamics.
as suggested, for example, through seating and eating arrangements. Additionally, informal interactions both between members of staff and between teachers and learners were noted. Parent meetings and meetings of the management team shed light on organisational issues, providing a window into the broader dynamics of the school. Observation of classroom practice offered critical insight into teachers’ lesson planning, pedagogy, classroom management and the quality of teaching and learning.

Lastly, key school documents were analysed, including: vision and mission statements; policies and the School Improvement Plan. These texts helped to develop a clearer idea of the school’s dominant discourses, offering insight into the school’s projection of itself as compared with its daily functioning.

Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and examined using a discourse analysis approach. Participants were informed that all responses would remain anonymous. Observations and findings were compiled into a comprehensive report that was fed back to the principal, SMT and teachers in consultation with whom key development priorities were identified.

The process of feeding back within a public forum constituted a crucial stage of the case study, offering participants an opportunity to express their concerns and engage in critical dialogue. The importance of the feedback being facilitated by an external agent supports Hopkins’ (2001, 101) view that ‘information gathered by outsiders ... is often seen as having more significance than information that is routinely available to those within the school community’. This feedback is more likely to be valued when it is perceived as objective and accurately represents participants’ perceptions and insights.

Further to the case study offering a method through which to generate an understanding of the school context and to build trust and buy-in, it provided a platform through which to initiate dialogue and stakeholder engagement. This acknowledges the insight of Senge (1990) who reminds us that team learning starts with dialogue – the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and engage with one another. Despite the contentious and at times confronting issues discussed during feedback sessions, these opportunities provided moments for reflection and review. The outcome of this feedback was collaborative planning, and it is in this sense that the case study was used as a ‘step to action’ (Adelman et al. 1980 in Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2009, 256).

Step 2: Planning and development

Following the case study feedback sessions, support was initiated through a process of strategic planning, beginning with the drafting of a shared vision and mission. While a shared vision helps a school to define its own direction, Harris (2002, 30) makes the point that ‘the possibilities for school improvement are extended
if there is a clear vision linked to high-quality support’. Senge (1990, 9) asserts that the practice of translating individual vision into shared vision fosters genuine commitment to a set of agreed upon principles and guiding practices. Christie (1998) suggests that maintaining a strong sense of purpose is a source of resilience for many disadvantaged schools.

While it is frequently stressed in the school leadership literature that the strongest influence of principal leadership on outcomes is through vision building (Fullan and Sharratt 2009; Hallinger and Heck 2002; Hopkins 2001; Leithwood; Jantzi and Steinback 1998), it was found in the SII schools, that the principals did not have the time, capacity nor expertise to lead the staff in vision-building processes. Moreover, in most instances schools had existing visions in place; however, these had been formulated many years before and were regarded by members of the school community to be outdated: in one of the schools the deputy principal explained that their vision was five years old and was no longer relevant. This vision, he explained, was drafted by a small group of teachers without any clear direction or guidance:

[The vision is] very much complex because the paragraph itself it tells a lot of things and then it doesn’t give you the straightforward thing of ‘this is our vision, this is where we want to go ...’

Although a number of changes had taken place at this school over the preceding five years, these changes were evidently not consistent with the vision:

... The vision is not adhered to you see ... everything that you pick up ... are not in line with the vision of the school.

The vision crafting workshops conducted by the SII involved both teaching and non-teaching staff as the inclusion of all role-players was viewed as a critical element in establishing loyalty and commitment, and in positioning all roleplayers for the future.

The importance of full collaboration was endorsed by one of the principals from a school in which conflict had threatened the unity of the staff. His comment below was made a year after the vision crafting process had taken place:

Vision and mission statements are very important. We cannot achieve our goal without them. The benefit of vision crafting is that all stakeholders are aboard and therefore own the process. Indeed unity is beginning to creep in especially among the SMT.

Another principal commented on the value of having the vision crafting workshop conducted by someone from outside of the school:

I found that it was extremely useful to have an objective expert from outside assist and guide the staff in the vision crafting process. The fact that you observed the school ... and reported on your observations added credibility to the process. We all share the common vision because of the participatory and transparent process.
According to Harris (2002), optimal levels of involvement require clear communication and transparency, and conversely, where communication is unclear, the evidence suggests that this impedes collaboration.

Step 3: Collaborative goal setting

Because successful school improvement occurs when schools apply strategies that are most suited to their particular development needs, Harris (2002) suggests that a critical step in the school improvement process is to diagnose and prioritise the school’s development needs and subsequently to select the most appropriate improvement strategies.

Following the vision building process, the setting of key development priorities created opportunities for participants to collaboratively identify the development needs and to reflect on goals. This, as Hayes et al. (2006, 195) suggest, needs to be ‘formally structured as part of the organisational operation, as do opportunities to build shared understandings, and to develop joint capacity for addressing problems and learning from experience’.

Examples of key development priorities that were identified in the primary schools included: whole-school support for leadership and management; teacher professional development and curriculum support with particular focus on improving literacy and numeracy systemic test results in grades 3 and 6. The need for strategies to address discipline was also raised as a key development priority as was the need to heighten parent involvement. In response to the need for professional development in both the primary and secondary schools, the Advanced Certificates in Education (ACEs) and accredited Short Courses (see note 4) are offered in conjunction with classroom-based support and mentoring to teachers by education specialists drawn from the SDU. Such school-based curriculum support takes place alongside the ACEs. Although it is not a requirement for teachers in the SII partner schools to study one of the ACEs, a number of teachers have opted to do so in an effort to extend their professional development.

In the SII secondary schools, the need for curriculum-based support was addressed initially through subject-based case studies in mathematics, physical sciences and life sciences. These case studies, conducted by SDU education specialists, generated an understanding of the specific areas of support needed. This in turn helped to inform the subject-level intervention strategies and the nature of support offered by the education specialists.

Given the number of development needs, a critical step in the strategic planning process was the prioritising of goals into four to six key development areas and linking these with particular strategies and activities. In all the SII schools the overarching goals focused on creating an environment that would support improved
learner performance. These goals and the accompanying strategies to achieve them are reflected in the SII’s five key objectives illustrated in Figure 1.

The urgent need for improved planning was strongly articulated in each of the schools. As an SMT member from one of the schools stated prior to the strategic planning process:

... There’s no planning and nothing is really seen ... I’m very goal orientated and if something is wrong I want to tackle it and I want a plan of action and I want to go there. But it’s not the way that it’s done. Everything is left to the very last moment and then it becomes a crisis.

The link between planning and action was established through the formation of action plans reflecting particular activities. This made explicit the responsibility of staff members for specific activities; target dates for completion; and success indicators. We are mindful that while schools may have well-articulated development plans, these do not necessarily lead to school improvement (Harris 2002; Hopkins 2001). School development activities therefore require integrated and coherent planning that reflects the school’s vision and organisational culture. Simultaneously, procedures of accountability and reflection on practice need to be structured into the planning process in order for the plan to be operationalised.

CONCLUSION

In the current article the SII has been presented as a partnership between UCT and a group of six schools in Khayelitsha. The purpose of the partnership is to provide opportunities for mutually beneficial stakeholder engagement with the intention of building professional development and organisational capacity.

The case study was presented as a methodology conducted during the Initiation Stage of the intervention in each of the partner schools to generate a context specific development strategy. In addition to building trust, the case study functioned as an initiator of dialogue for the purpose of collaborative planning and action.

As the SII moves forward, it will continue to build interdisciplinary engagement, enabling expertise and resources to be harnessed to support efforts in improving the quality of teaching and learning in the partner schools. Furthermore, it will continue to deepen its partnerships with the schools so that reciprocity is strengthened. A significant way in which this is envisaged is through the development of the partner schools as Professional Practice Schools. As outlined earlier, school-based professional practice for students both from the School of Education and from the Faculty of Health Sciences offers opportunities for improved teaching and learning practices, whilst simultaneously building strong inter-disciplinary collaboration within the institution. The establishment of professional practice sites is thus a significant way through which the SII’s university-school partnership can be sustained, and constitutes an important area for future research.
In partnering and collaborating with others, the SII seeks to blend external support with internal capacity building, thereby ensuring that whole-school development is effectively strengthened and sustained. The piloting of this approach by the SII in its six partner schools is presented then as a model that can be replicated on a broader scale and in different socio-economic contexts.

NOTES

1. Khayelitsha is situated on the eastern edge of the Cape Metropole and is home to around 430 000 people, with a school-going population of just over 64 000 students (2015 figures).
2. This is the minimum requirement (in terms of subject performance) for entrance to tertiary studies; it does not, however, guarantee a place at any given tertiary institution to which a learner applies.
3. Towards the end of the academic year, in addition to the Annual National Assessments (ANAs) all learners in Grade 3, 6 and 9 in public ordinary schools in the Western Cape write standardised literacy and numeracy tests.
4. Besides a number of accredited two-year part-time Advanced Certificates in Education (ACEs), a suite of university-certified Short Courses is offered. These formal qualifications are variously tailored to meet either the subject-specific professional development needs of practising teachers and/or the broader organisational management needs of school leaders. In response to the new national qualifications framework for teacher training, the existing ACE programmes are in the process of being replaced with the equivalent qualification – the Advanced Certificate in Teaching (ACT), to be implemented from 2015 onwards.
5. UCT’s pre-service teacher training is limited to graduates only.
6. The Bookery is an NPO that supports the establishment of school libraries and the capacitation of Library Assistants to manage the libraries.
7. The article was written after the SII’s first year of implementation.

REFERENCES


DoBE see Department of Basic Education.


