

Lynette Jacobs

Reflecting on a University Partnership Project in Underprivileged South African Schools

Abstract

Over many years, universities that offer teacher education programmes have been in partnerships of different kinds with schools. Not only are schools sites of research for faculty members, but student teachers get workplace experience during practicums. In the post-modern world, there is emphasis on amelioration at grassroots level, instead of only at systems level. The sentiment is that school-university partnerships should benefit schools as much as their higher education partners. In this paper, we reflect on the first seven years of a university-school partnership project. The purpose of the partnership was in part to improve the school results of potential students from underprivileged feeder areas towards access to higher education programmes. Looking back, some successes can be claimed, as the relative success of learners in the project schools has improved notably. Still, the project has to find ways to remain financially sustainable, and to expand the project to ECD and primary schools, in particular to improve numeracy and literacy skills of young children.

Keywords: mentorship, leadership, access

Introduction

Amongst many other things, it is the task of higher education institutions (HEIs) to work with schools in their regions. Inter alia, HEIs could contribute to staff development and help prepare learners for post-school education (Officer et al., 2013). Examples of such partnerships show the value thereof. In England, one option for teaching students is school-based training (Hilton, 2017). Officer et al. (2013) report on partnerships between school communities and universities in the USA to turn around, what they call, failing schools. Furthermore, around the world, teaching students do their practicum at schools and faculty members do research amongst schools (Walsh & Backe, 2013). Partnerships between universities and schools are thus commonplace.

In the post-modern world, the nature of such partnerships, particularly where there might be a power differential, must be scrutinised. Carnwell and Carson (2009, p. 7) emphasise that a partnership is “a shared commitment, where all partners have a right and an obligation to participate and will be affected equally by the benefits and disadvantages arising from the partnership”. They list specific defining attributes to partnership, including trust, working together, sharing vested interests, having common aims and objectives, mutual benefit, and compassion for one another. Walsh and Backe (2013) stress that partnerships between schools and universities should not mainly benefit the latter, and that the needs of schools should be recognised.

The needs in South African schools are very real 24 years into a new dispensation. While certain milestones have undoubtedly been reached, such as over

98% of children being enrolled in schools (Modisaotsile, 2012), the vast majority of schools are still underprivileged and many are under-resourced. Furthermore, the performance of South African learners in international benchmark tests sketches a grim picture, even compared to other countries in the region, and many learners who enter school never complete it (Jacobs, 2016; Jacobs, Stals & Leroy, 2016; Van der Walt, 2016). Moreover, Modisaotsile (2012) found that teachers in many of the lower quintile schools are regularly absent and teach fewer hours than their counterparts in the higher quintile schools. She also highlighted challenges in terms of the management and governance of these schools. In spite of many efforts to change the situation, and a relatively large percentage of the GDP spent on education, what she calls 'the failing standards of basic education' contribute to sustaining the cycle of poverty in indigent communities. There is general agreement about the challenges faced in the South African education system, and many external stakeholders have come on board in an attempt to improve the situation. One such an example is the School Partnership Project (SPP) of the University of the Free State (UFS).

Rationale and statement of the problem

The FSP is one of nine provinces of South Africa. It is a rural province, with its inhabitants forming 5% of the 55.7 million people of the country. The youth population in the province remains at about 37% and, according to Ngende and Khoza (2016) in 2011, only 22% of persons aged 20 years and older in the province have completed secondary schooling. The latter statistics have profound implications for the children who are still at school, as parental support is limited, and the vast majority of adults in the province certainly never entered higher education. In 2010, 30 516 FSP learners enrolled for the final Grade 12 examination, but only 27 586 actually wrote (Department of Basic Education, 2011). This constitutes a dropout of 9.6%. Of those that wrote, only 5 890 received Bachelor passes, which allow them university access. This is a mere 21.4% of the learners who wrote and 19.3% of those who initially enrolled. If one takes into account the more than 28 500 learners from this cohort who dropped out from the system in earlier years (Department of Basic Education, 2011; Department of Education, 2002), one can argue that we are creating a lost generation in the country. The overall pass rate in the Free State (FSP) for this year was only 70.7%, and the province was ranked 5th amongst the others. Looking at scarce subjects, only 3 422 (12.4%) of the candidates passed Mathematics and only 2 854 (10.3%) passed Physical Science. These statistics do not only have implications for the individual learners and those communities, in terms of breaking the cycle of poverty, but it certainly also had implications for the UFS, which states part of its mission as "[a]dvancing social justice by creating multiple opportunities for disadvantaged students to access the university" (University of the Free State, 2018).

Towards advancing social justice, the UFS engaged with different role-players and in particular with schools in the feeder areas of the institution to change things around. In the summative foundational document (Jansen, 2011) towards the Schools Partnership Project (SPP), seven key problems were highlighted that threaten sustainable change in schools. They were: 1) learners not receiving the required teaching time; 2) lack of subject matter knowledge amongst teachers; 3)

teachers lacking pedagogical knowledge; 4) lack of instructional leadership amongst school principals; 5) lack of parental involvement; 6) lack of necessary resources; and 7) lack of consistent investment by external stakeholders (Jansen, 2011). In this document, the strategic objectives were outlined, which include improving the quality of passes in scarce subjects, developing leadership and management, providing support to schools “to strengthen the social fibre of the school and the community”, and to increase opportunities for access to universities (Jansen, 2011).

The project commenced on a small scale in 2011, and by mid-2012 it was up and running. Nearly seven years into the project, it was time to reflect and consider the road ahead. This paper provides an overview of these considerations, and is the first of a number of papers that will follow, focusing on particular issues within the project.

Methodology

I took a qualitative approach, generating data through interviews and documents generated over the 7-year period. The latter provided me with secondary data, both qualitative and quantitative. The interviews took the form of unstructured discussions on the project, with two colleagues (the current project coordinator “Mike”, and one administrator “June”) from the SPP unit. I requested permission to scrutinise reports generated over time, including annual reports to funders of the project. Afterwards I send the paper to the two participants, as well as the relevant Director, to validate my interpretations.

Findings

Evolution since the beginning

Initially, a retired colleague was, in 2010, tasked with getting the project off the ground. Mike explained:

Invitations were sent to all the secondary schools in two of the districts. They could apply [to be part of the project], and had to indicate what they would like the project to achieve.

Based on the inputs from the schools, the founding document was finalised. They liaised with the Free State Department of Education (FSDoE) and the South African Democratic Teachers Union. The project then started, with one mentor, a retired school principal (“Harry”), who was also an Accounting expert. Mike explained:

Harry visited the 23 schools who applied, and evaluated the situation at each. His initial target was to assist the grade 12s with Accounting and he based his support on a workshop model. He would get all [the learners] from Thaba’Nchu for instance, in one venue, and present a workshop, and then all those in Botshabelo, and present a workshop again. He would present these in the afternoons.

However, the intention from the onset was that there would be mentors for the school principals and then also specialist mentors for Mathematics, Physical Science, and Accounting, and indeed this was launched mid-2012. Through sponsorships enough funding was available to appoint mentors in clusters of five schools each. This meant that the group of mentors could visit a different school

every day of the week for the whole day and do it on a weekly basis. They assisted different Mathematics, Physical Science and Accounting teachers, as well as members of the School Management Team (SMT). Since those early days, the project matured. It expanded to other schools and other districts.

Mike explained that annually the size of the project depends on the funding secured.

The project expanded to also include schools in other areas, not only in the Free State but also in Mpumalanga and the Eastern Cape. However funding limits us. At one stage, we had 30 mentors in the project with more than 70 schools. That was 2014/15. For a while, we had mentors for primary schools just to assist with the management, and that project ran for 3 years. We learnt valuable lessons.

Currently the project runs at 17 schools (from two districts in the FSP and one in the Eastern Cape).

Modus operandi

At the start of the project, the focus was on pass rate. June explained: “The FSDoE and the sponsors wanted to see an improvement in matric results, and that meant pass rate”. Mike however pointed out that currently, the focus is on improving the number of quality passes and increasing the admission points of the learners.

From the start of the project the focus was on teachers; by empowering the teacher with content and pedagogical knowledge we could improve the performance of the whole class group.

The mentors go to the schools once or twice a fortnight. Mike shared:

You physically go to the schools; the principal mentor sits in the offices with the principals, and works with the principals and the SMTs, attends meetings, and supports them. The subject mentor goes to the subject teachers; sits in the classes, and assists and supports.

He stressed that it is important to first build a relationship, so as to not be seen as impostors. He acknowledged that it initially took some time to build such relationships, but that they are now fully accepted. The sustainability of the change was emphasised, even if those project teachers then move to a non-project school, learners will benefit. He shared that they “realised that learners with potential to achieve higher marks were being left behind with this over-emphasis on pass rate”. Thus learners with Bachelor passes, but low AP scores, and learners that just missed their Bachelor passes, were identified and given extra classes and encouragement. This enabled many learners to successfully apply for tertiary education.

Social support

Mike shared that apart from the principal and subject mentors, there is currently also one mentor who specifically focus on social development. Harry is still involved and dedicated to the social support for the schools in the two townships in one district. In these areas, gangsterism and drug abuse is rife. He works to get the school-based support teams going again, so that learners who need support can be identified. Harry even physically drives the social workers and other professionals to the schools. Mike explained:

A big problem is drugs. We assist to get those kids referred to rehab centres. We work with an NGO, who then goes to the schools, shares information with the learners, and assists to get those that need to, to rehab.

Furthermore, there is one mentor who informs learners about getting access to university. She supports the learners in the process of application, and once they enrol at the institution, she provides support to bridge the gap between school and university. She also provides support for the senior students.

Achievements

Although there are many other similar projects in the province and the efforts of the teachers and the FSDoE need to be acknowledged, a comparison between the SPP schools and a control group of schools suggest that the project is making a significant impact. Overall, in 2017, as in 2016, the FSP was ranked first in terms of their Grade 12 results, with an 86.1% pass (Department of Basic Education, 2018). Comparing the SPP schools to the control group, the percentage pass difference changed from -4.07 in 2011 to +7.06 over a six year period. In 2014, the control group schools had a 19.8% Bachelor pass and the project schools' was 20.2%. In 2017 our schools achieved a 32.4% Bachelor pass, compared to the control group who achieved a 25.2% Bachelor pass. Furthermore, the number of students enrolled from Thaba'Nchu and Botshabelo project schools increased from 33 in 2012, to 88 in 2017.

Challenges

The biggest challenge that the SPP faces is financial sustainability, being fully dependent on sponsorships. Mike explains: "Although we want to stress that we believe interventions should start at an earlier stage, it is something that neither the sponsors nor the Department of Education initially wanted to acknowledge". The focus thus remains on the exit-level examination, although some ground was won: "It was even a battle to convince them to include Grade 8 and 9, but at least that is happening" (Mike). Still, a submission has been made to potential sponsors about a primary school project, and the project management will continue to look for funding.

Touching lives

Above all, the lives of individuals are touched through the project. A current UFS student gave feedback:

I come from a family of five. My mother is unemployed. My father is a car guard. He relies on the generosity of motorists, which means that he sometimes comes back home empty handed and we often sleep with an empty stomach. The mentors at my school provided me with an entry form to enter the "Star of the stars". Because of my outstanding academic performance, I was chosen as one of the top 11 finalists, and came out as the top winner. The support we got from the mentors contributed to me getting a distinction in Maths. I was awarded [a] full scholarship by the UFS to study Actuarial science.

Not only are the lives of youth changed, but the lives of teachers certainly are as well. A project member shared the story of "Mr Mokoena":

At the start of the project Mr Mokoena had no knowledge of Expo [a science fair], [but he] immediately showed an interest when [the mentor] introduced it to him. A group of his learners was the first to participate in 2014. By 2016 Mr Mokoena was mentoring 20 learners from three schools, as well as coordinating an Expo community of practise in the area. Under the mentorship of [the mentor] he went from an unqualified volunteer, called in to fill in temporarily for an absent teacher, to a highly valuable member of staff who is on his way to becoming a qualified teacher. He continues to voluntarily allow learners to work on his computers at home. He also provides extra Science and Maths lessons to children in the neighbourhood, and provides ICT skill to anyone who asks him for it.

Looking ahead

The SPP unit is determined to find sponsorships to continue the support they provide in schools. Furthermore, it is vital to expand to primary schools and ECD units. Expanding the project to also include recreational activities at schools such as sport and drama is a dream, as it could help curb the many social problems that exist.

Conclusion

The SPP at the UFS is a partnership in which the institution, the FSDoE, the schools and individuals benefit. Based on a ground-up approach, not only does the project contribute to the advancement of quality education in the project schools, whilst opening up access to HEIs, it touches the lives of individual teachers and learners. This is, however, not possible without the financial support from philanthropists and commerce.

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Dr. Lynette Jacobs, University of the Free State, South Africa, JacobsL@ufs.ac.za