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# A TRIPLE HELIX APPROACH TO ADDRESS SOCIAL AND LEARNER SUPPORT NEEDS IN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

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## Abstract

Social ills are increasing globally, necessitating higher education and teacher-training institutions to produce teachers with specific attributes to address the challenges. The University of Pretoria employs a triple helix approach, combining a set of interactions between community engagement, work-integrated learning and work readiness into the curricula. The aim is to yield adaptable teachers with employability skills and knowledge to function in a rapidly changing, 21st-century world. This paper reports on a follow-up or Stage 2 community engagement project conducted with identified third-year pre-service teachers. The first stage or Stage 1 of the qualitative approach study within participation action research embedded in Kolb's cyclic experiential learning theory found that many learners at the school experienced learning difficulties. This paper reports the Stage 2 findings following an investigation into the systematic factors that contribute to learning difficulties. The findings suggest interrelated dynamic contributions and highlight the crucial role of universities in advancing the social development of communities. The study further proposes a fundamental shift in focus to a joint stakeholder collaboration in supporting communities and learners, thus sidestepping the social and anticipated learning difficulties.

**Keywords:** anchor institutions; community engagement; experiential learning; mainstream school; triple helix approach; work-integrated learning

## Introduction

This paper is a sequel to a community engagement project that established a relationship between the underdevelopment of perceptual skills and reading comprehension in Foundation Phase learners (Thuketana, 2020). The project also revealed a worrying trend of learners dropping out of mainstream schools because of their inability to access the prescribed curriculum. As predicted by Carney et al. (2019) and Foster-Cohen and Mirfin-Veitch (2017), some of these young learners, who had been labelled social outcasts, developed substance abuse problems or engaged in risky sexual behaviours, thus perpetuating criminality and violence in the community. Equally worrying is the increasing number of individuals experiencing learning difficulties, thereby challenging their teachers' pedagogical skills to support them. Literature abounds with definitions of 'learner support', which range from early identification, outsourcing the relevant support, and the placement of learners with suitable professionals to meet their identified challenges. Mampane (2016) argues along the same lines, but reiterates the need to accelerate teacher training to avert some of the outcomes associated with the teachers' struggle to support these learners. Florian and Linklater (2010) argue that, despite the increased number of learners experiencing learning difficulties in mainstream schools, learner-support research finds itself in an ideological bind between historical discrepancies and practical

implementation requirements. The emerging norm can be attributed to the atypical cognitive development of these learners and a lack of coordinated, multidisciplinary teams to provide support. A holistic approach is critical to reveal the specific issues contributing to learning difficulties related to the learners' psychosocial, economic, physical and cognitive challenges (Florian, 2017). Similarly, Rose, Garner and Farrow (2019) emphasise the importance of ensuring that the approaches and modes used in mainstream schools are evidence- and research-based to inform practice, thus ensuring sustainability.

Furthermore, the South African schools' teaching and learning environment is evolving rapidly, adding to the education system's challenges (Hlengwa, Chimbo & Buckley, 2018). Florian (2017) and Congress (2002) argue that the implementation of 'inclusive education' – an ongoing, progressive education system aligned to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 – further magnifies the socioeconomic diversity of schools. However, teachers' pedagogic knowledge contradicts learners' support needs, resulting in curriculum access challenges for those with learning difficulties. It is also important to remember that inclusive education, among other things, is an evolving paradigm, and government policy in South Africa expects schools to enrol learners with a spectrum of abilities (Mizunoya, Mitra & Yamasaki, 2016). The support needs of these learners are vast and non-linear, requiring teachers who can identify learning challenges and provide relevant interventions that can facilitate learning and development. However, there is a lack of mediation between universities as anchor institutions, the government, which is responsible for monitoring the implementation of policies, and schools as the beneficiaries of the processes.

It is against the above background and the findings of the first stage community engagement project that the severe lack of in-service teachers' abilities to provide learning support should receive attention for the benefit of future generations. The findings of the main study (Stage 1) assumed that a lack of pedagogic and intervention skills perpetuates learning difficulties in learners (Florian, 2017; Daniels & Brooker, 2014; Thuketana, 2020), increases teachers' frustration levels, and intensifies the dropout rate of learners (Carney et al., 2019), thus contributing to the escalation of crime rates in communities (Van Raemdonck & Khan, 2017). The Council on Higher Education (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007) mandates teacher-training institutions to anchor surrounding communities and produce flexible graduates to share skills and knowledge with in-service teachers (Hendricks & Flaherty, 2018). The anchor institution phenomenon is under-researched in the literature (Perry & Villamizar-Duarte, 2018). Perry and Villamizar-Duarte (2018) and Thuketana (2020) agree that co-sharing research-based knowledge and experiences among graduates and in-service teachers benefits both parties. It transforms novice teachers into experts in their fields and informs in-service teachers about the theoretical developments in education, thus improving the quality of teaching and learning.

In an ongoing effort to establish relations with schools to improve the professional quality of all teachers in the South African school context, the University of Pretoria offers work-integrated learning (WIL) in a learning support module. By design, the module has a community engagement or service-learning component that requires pre-service teachers to acquire experiential learning in schools. The University provides student teachers with hands-on experience in diverse settings, ranging from affluent to socioeconomically deprived schools in the Tshwane District of Gauteng.

The experience contributes to the construction of student teachers' identities (Lairio, Puukari & Kouvo, 2013). It also provides them with on-site practice in assessing perceptual skills development, while comparing the contributions of different contexts to school readiness and learning difficulties.

Based on the service-learning notion established by the Quality Committee of the Council on Higher Education (Scott et al., 2007), such learning experiences should address the interests of student teachers, as well as the needs of the learners, the teachers in schools and the community. Given the above, this integrated effort further augments the University's social responsiveness and increases its impact on society. Machimana, Sefotho and Ebersöhn (2018) reiterate the importance of collaborating with communities to help address the real issues.

### **Research Questions**

The systemic challenges in South African schools are widespread; hence, the University of Pretoria combines community engagement, WIL and work-readiness as the three interrelated concepts that encapsulate a comprehensive teacher-training programme. The questions below provided a beacon to guide the researcher towards the credible data that rendered this study trustworthy (Stewart, Gapp & Harwood, 2017). Furthermore, the investigation was intended to point to the environmental issues exacerbating learning difficulties and community digress. The two research questions that guided this study were:

- What constitutes a triple helix approach?
- What are the systematic factors that affect learner and community development?

### **Literature Review**

The literature review discusses the triple helix approach as an innovative strategy to advance universities as anchor institutions, combat inequalities and create equitable, democratic and just societies. The triple helix approach is a revolutionary model to promote collaboration between teaching, learning and research, and the progressive community development and work-readiness of university pre-service teachers (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1998; Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2017). Because of the diverse needs of societies in the 21st century, this paper discusses anchor institutions, WIL and community engagement. Together, they form an inextricably linked conceptual model for advancing student teachers' work readiness.

In this paper, the triple helix approach refers to interactive and innovative strategies among academia, schools and government to foster communities' social and economic development. However, there is a lack of mediation between universities as anchor institutions, the government, which is responsible for monitoring the implementation of country policies, and universities for teachers in schools to be qualified to offer a collaborative effort that will benefit learners and the community.

### **Anchor Institutions**

Anchor institutions are critical units such as hospitals, universities, churches and other entities entrusted with bringing economic and social change to communities (Scott et

al., 2007). While WIL and community engagement aim to benefit all stakeholders in education, in this case, there is a paucity of research on how universities can use community projects to identify specific needs and become anchor institutions for communities. Taylor, McGlynn and Luter (2013) draw on the work of the Anchor Institutions Task Force to position or reposition the concept of universities as anchor institutions for the communities around them. The authors found that universities are fixed assets located in communities that grapple with different social and economic challenges. However, the communities may not know how to access these assets to resolve their challenges. They further established the mission of an anchor institution as striving for social justice, parity and equality. With the above said, universities that engage in well-structured community projects can create relevant curricula that target practical issues for their students.

### **Work-Integrated Learning**

Aprile and Knight (2019) recognise WIL as a reformist approach to producing teachers who are ready for work. However, in the same vein, the authors question the methodology's effectiveness, as it does not acknowledge the pressures experienced by student teachers working with mentor teachers. Careful consideration of all the factors that may contribute negatively during WIL is necessary to ensure that WIL is seen as being to the benefit of all concerned. Puccioni (2018) recommends, among other things, considering teacher belief systems to facilitate mutual benefits for the teacher cohorts. Daniels and Brooker (2014) advocate a focus on personal preferences as a strategy to facilitate veracity and sovereignty in developing the independence of student teachers.

Furthermore, student teachers need to know their prospective employers and envisage their contribution to the education system as qualified teachers. While differences in opinion may appear to throw out the gains made by previously conducted research, the combined mission of the above authors is to produce teachers with autonomy and independence. Both these characteristics will significantly benefit schools and communities.

### **Work-Readiness**

Work-readiness is a crucial workplace attribute required by newly employed teachers. They need to adapt research-based strategies and contribute positively to the working environment, while putting theory into practice. It is common knowledge, however, that newly employed teachers require practical skills to become accustomed to their new reality. Kondakci, Beycioglu, Sincar and Ugurlu (2017) found that newly employed teachers at a school presented with negative attitudes because of their low level of work-readiness, while Movkebayeva et al. (2016) suggest that the teachers should be adaptive, proliferate and idyllic. These are characteristics that newly employed and in-service teachers should strive to engender, as they are important for mutually beneficial relationships with their employers. Unfortunately, newly employed teachers often meet with resistance from their experienced school colleagues. Therefore, the cohorts of teachers must be cognitively ready to change and adapt to the new reality (Kondakci et al., 2017).

Despite the mixed views that Aprile and Knight (2019) present on the concept, work-readiness is progressive. The authors also praise the approach as fundamental to equipping student teachers with research-based capabilities that integrate theory and practice. At the same time, their impression is that WIL alone cannot equip student teachers with the professionalism required. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly revise the teacher-training curricula (Aprile & Knight, 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Kolb's experiential learning theory, which looks at active experimentation, reflective observation, concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation, was used as the theoretical framework to guide the study (Kolb, 1984). This participatory action research (PAR) study showed that it was mutually beneficial for the pre- and in-service teachers who participated. The in-service teachers benefitted from learning about the theoretical background of learning difficulties and using the resources that the student teachers made to assess perceptual skills development in learners. In contrast, the student teachers advanced their theoretical knowledge by applying the perceptual skills assessment skills they had learned in the physical classroom environment. Kolb's experiential learning theory is iterative and beneficial for multiple partners to learn from each other. The study offered a mutual benefit to all participating research partners. The theory aligns with an assertion by Tyszka and Silverman (2018), that PAR empowers and benefits the communities for which researchers engage in solving contextual problems.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethics involves the permission to conduct research, the literature review, data analysis and the methodology used. All these components must promote the integrity of the research project (Ryen, 2016). Before the data was collected, the University of Pretoria's Ethical Committee granted ethical clearance for this study. The study's parameters were limited to participants working with or within the school environment. The researchers were not allowed to interact with or interview other individuals outside the school premises, despite their association with the school. They could interview teachers, parents and other school community members in the schoolyard. Participants at the school were informed of the purpose of the study, as well as their rights regarding anonymity, confidentiality and withdrawal without retribution (Maree, 2010). Before any data collection commenced, written consent was sought and obtained from all the participating individuals.

### **Research Methodology**

The research methodology used was participatory action research, which mainly aims to achieve social justice and eradicate poverty and inequalities in communities. Participatory action research proposes advocacy and commitment between research partners in identifying and resolving identified issues in industries, schools, government and communities (Arieli, Friedman & Agbaria, 2009). The research partners in this study comprised Level 3 (Bachelor of Education (BEd)) students, Foundation Phase teachers, learners identified from the initial study that the present study follows, and the module lecturer. The lecturer expected the BEd students to equip Foundation Phase teachers with the knowledge to collaborate with education

partners and enhance learner support skills. Additionally, the environment provided students with the real-life challenges to expect and ways to solve them at school. However, the researcher also solicited valuable insights from the school governing body (SGB) member and the security staff member whom she interviewed. They mentioned difficulties emanating from a lack of stakeholders' collaboration strategies.

### **Stage 1**

Twenty in-service Foundation Phase teachers, 217 teacher-training students, and 300 Foundation Phase learners participated in Stage 1 of the study. The study found a lack of skill among teachers in their ability to assess learners' perceptual skills development and their association with reading comprehension (Thuketana, 2020). The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Mullis, Martin, Foy & Hooper, 2016) reports low-performance levels and an inability for Grade 4 learners to read for meaning. The study presumed, among other things, perceptual skills underdevelopment as a contributory factor, hence the interest in pursuing a follow-up study on the issue.

### **Stage 2**

Findings other than the underdevelopment of perceptual skills motivated Stage 2 of the community engagement project. In Stage 1, eighteen pre-service teachers recorded learning difficulties experienced by learners in their journals as emotional, cognitive and psychosocial. Furthermore, the student teachers observed the in-service teachers' frustrations with the learners who presented the abovementioned challenges. The commonalities found in the student teachers' reflections during Stage 1 of the study gave rise to the conceptualisation of this follow-up study.

Consequently, Stage 2 of the study aimed to use the triple helix approach to identify the systemic challenges exacerbating learning difficulties among learners and suggest intervention strategies. The second stage of the study employed a qualitative case study design within an interpretivist methodological paradigm. During this stage, the 18 selected student teachers went back to the school to investigate the systematic factors contributing to the learners' development. Learner development is not linear; hence, the pre-service teachers and the lecturer developed research protocols that were informed by reflections captured in the research journals during the Stage 1 data collection.

### **Selection of Participants and Research Sites**

The study employed a non-probability, convenient sampling method to reuse the project's Stage 1 research partners. The proximity and previous engagement prompted the choice of the school and the participants for the follow-up study. The Foundation Phase teachers who took part in Stage 1 of the project, the student teachers whose reflection reports prompted the conceptualisation of this follow-up study, the lecturer and the learners who took part in Stage 1 constituted the study's participants. The above aligns with the view of Taherdoorst (2016), which postulates that large samples in research eliminate researcher bias and increase the study's trustworthiness. Additionally, it eliminates the power struggles in PAR.

The Department of Community Engagement, a secondary participant at the University, funds student transport to schools and encourages collaboration with projects headed by women in the community. These projects subsidised the resources used by the

pre-service teachers for their assessments in Stage 1, while, at the same time, the women made money to support their households.

### **Data Collection**

Stage 2 of the study adhered to the ethical principles stipulated in the permission document, and used interviews, observations and document analysis for data collection (Maree, 2010). The procedure occurred at the school and lasted five days. Twenty schoolteachers, the chairperson of the SGB and the security guard working at the school participated in individual semi-structured interviews. The South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS) documents were analysed as part of the document analysis process. This system captures information about learners from the initial day of school and includes their family backgrounds. As the data collection process developed, the lecturer and pre-service teachers observed and recorded the unfolding value activities in their research journals.

### **Data Analysis**

The study used an inductive, thematic, hand-analysis method to analyse the data (Tracy, 2013), while at the same time incorporating the six-step data analysis guide of Braun and Clarke (2006). After reading through the data, the pre-service teachers and the lecturer identified emerging themes. The study used axial (not open) codes to assign meaning and answer the research questions. According to Loeb et al. (2017), data only has meaning when explained to elucidate the phenomenon for the reader. Hence, the study used the descriptive method below to explain the study's findings.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The study suggests a broader-focused and multidisciplinary approach to address learner and community needs, and further presents the findings according to the three data collection methods: interviews, document analysis, and observations.

### **Interviews**

The in-service teachers at the school who had previously been interviewed, the chairperson of the SGB and the security guard working at the school responded to interview questions. The semi-structured interview questions for the targeted participants were developed and brainstormed between the lecturer and the pre-service teachers before administering them.

### **In-Service Teachers**

The in-service teachers were asked questions about their conceptualisation of learning difficulties, the types of difficulties experienced by learners in their classes, how these manifested during learning, and how they thought the difficulties affected the learning and development of learners. The responses were audio-recorded, and other factors, such as the teachers' expressions as they responded to the questions, were captured in the research journals. However, some teachers did not respond to the question that should have elicited their explanation of learning difficulties. This implies that they were



not confident about giving their definition. It was interesting to note how two of the teachers responded:

You know, I must be honest, the first training we had with you opened my eyes regarding inherent learning problems that learners in my class have. I may not know the name of the learning difficulty, how to support them, or have the time to, but I understand that it is a learning challenge requiring learners to understand the content we teach in class.

The other one responded as follows:

Mmmmm, I think learning difficulties are neurologically based and affect the confidence of these learners to solve problems and access age-relevant content. Learners with learning difficulties are more absent from schools; however, after some time, they come back to school, which shows that they love school, but have learning problems that they are battling with.

I wish the Department conducted short courses with schools to update us with learning difficulties and the strategies to support these learners. They would then be informed of the large classes and the resources that would help us with intervention.

### **Chairperson of the SGB**

The SGB chairperson was a regular at the school, and the researchers asked for his consent to participate in the interviews. The South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996, mandates the SGB to represent parents in making holistic school decisions about their children and chair parents' meetings. The chairperson was informed of the confidentiality associated with the research and the participant's right to withdraw without retribution. He gave his consent. When the chairperson was asked how involved parents of learners at the school were in supporting their children's success, he responded as follows:

A few parents get involved in helping their children with homework or any school-related matters. Teachers try to communicate with parents, but they are not interested. Many parents do not attend parents' meetings nor come when called for anything concerning their learners. Eish, if parents got involved mam, some of the issues we face would be resolved. You do not want to know the types of problems we deal with at this school. You would think this is a school for older learners, whilst it is a primary school. I wonder what will be happening with these learners in 10 years to come. It is pathetic, but we know they learn the unbecoming behaviour from home.

### **School Security Guard**

The study followed the ethical considerations as per the permission granted for the research in interviewing the security guard. The school security guard was asked questions about the problems she experienced with learners and/or any visitors at the school, and she only ventured the following remark:

Yooooo, children here are involved with gangs in the community. Should the gang heads know that I said something to you, I will be in trouble, I

am working for my children here, I. I, I do not want to die and leave them alone.

She then refused to engage with the researchers further and we respected her right to privacy.

### **Document Analysis**

Information on the SA-SAMS and the progression records revealed a vast social divide between parents. Altogether, 77% of the parents were unemployed and those who were employed earned an income on a scale ranging from the poor and the medium brackets. The researchers also noted that some problematic learners came from medium-income or well-to-do families, but they had been expelled from better-resourced schools because of their unacceptable behaviour. The behaviour of the learners from families whose parents did not work was varied. Some were severe delinquents, mirroring different characteristics of the surrounding community.

Similarly, the management system revealed that 11% of young learners at the schools had been in the Foundation Phase for more than five years – even though the progression policy of the Department of Education assigns only three years for this phase. The study further noted that some of the learners who had started Grade 1 were no longer in the system. Transfer letters only accounted for a small percentage of those learners, but most had simply dropped out. Furthermore, the school's progression records revealed a low pass rate for most of the learners at the school.

### **Issues with which the School Contends**

Given the above revelations, the researchers asked the teachers follow-up questions to explain their understanding of the root causes of these challenges and thereby gain in-depth insights into the school's issues. Some of the teachers explained their understanding as follows:

T1: We have parents interested in their children's wellbeing and support them and those that don't. Also, the socioeconomic gap and the presence of older learners in the Foundation Phase create many problems. Though we have no proof of sexual violation, older learners bully and steal from the little ones.

T2: The government included the school in the nutrition programme; however, learners engage in food-related fights. Learners whose parents do not afford to pack "nutritious" or "food that young children love" steal from the ones whose parents do.

To solve the problem, we developed a school policy that did not allow learners to bring lunch boxes, but employed parents that afford better lunch boxes refused to comply, saying they pack what their children like. The practice causes many problems at the school, as we really cannot force them not to pack food that their children love. What is sad is that the parents pack junk food for their children.

T3: When the older boys realise that teachers identified their abusive behaviour and ask them to bring their parents to school for a meeting, they disappear from school. Some become street kids, start using and depending on drugs.

## Learners Dropping Out and Stealing from the School

While the research was in progress, three teenage boys broke into some teachers' cars on the school grounds. After checking the surveillance cameras, the principal identified two boys who were the school's dropouts. They managed to steal the radio out of one of the teachers' cars. In line with the researchers' advice, the school reported the incident to social workers, and the boys were taken to a juvenile delinquency centre that provided psychosocial intervention.

One of the teachers made the following remark:

These boys are associated with the wrong crowds, whom they consider role models in the community. It started with these boys using substances and mainly being absent from school or only came in for meals provided in the nutrition programme and leaving after that.

Another teacher responded by stating:

The community is terrorised, houses are broken into, and assets are stolen. The police ignore these incidents as some are in the drug lords' payrolls. We are scared to report these cases as we are unsure whether the person we report to is a genuine police or not.

In response to our further probing about what the school's intervention policy was, one of the teachers stated:

Unfortunately, there is nothing we can do without the parents' consent. According to the school policy informed by the South African Schools Act, serious offences can be attended to in collaboration with the parents. Through the Institutional Level Support Team [sic], the policy requires teachers to invite the parents to meetings to discuss their learners' transgressions. Parents of many learners do not come to these meetings. On realising that most parents have cell phones, we started using SMSs, but many parents still did not come, including the boys' parents who were always in trouble. We found that the parents were alcoholics and used marijuana themselves on further investigations.

We probed further to find out if the school used the services of the School-based Support Team (SBST), previously known as the Institutional Level Support Team, to outsource professional support for these learners, and one of the teachers responded as follows:

Mam, you do not know the load of work we have and the curriculum advisors' expectations from us. We spend much time doing administrative work, not teaching, and ignoring small matters that could reveal a lot about the learners we teach. We convince ourselves that we do not have the time to tackle such issues. Meanwhile, honestly, these are the issues that could help expose the deep root causes of the learners' challenges and enhance teaching and learning.

On being asked if they ever met with other stakeholders such as community members to share and seek support for the challenges they experienced at the school, there was a unanimous "no", followed by laughter from the teachers.

## **Observations**

The researchers developed and administered an observation schedule that yielded the themes listed below.

### *Lack of parents' interest in learners' work*

A worrying fact that was revealed was the non-involvement and disinterest of parents in their children's academic journey. The researchers observed parents coming to school early in their sleepwear and slippers. Not only did this reveal their disinterest in their children's progress, but it also exposed their disrespect for the meetings they were coming to attend. Furthermore, it possibly showed that parents could not keep up with the commensurate support demands of their children.

### *High unemployment rate*

We observed large groups of community members sitting at the entrance to the school as we were driving in. The purpose of the gathering was for the community members to pass the time while they waited for possible day employers to fetch them and take them to their homes for small jobs such as painting and gardening. These community members held placards that described their job specialities, such as painter, plumber or carpenter. However, it was evident that some of those waiting spent many days without being picked up for their envisioned jobs, and the waiting area had turned into a recreational space. The researchers also observed groups sharing what seemed to be drugs and cigarettes, and many appeared to be intoxicated.

### *Parents' qualifications*

The SA-SAMS revealed that less than 20% of the parents had a matriculation qualification and that most had been dropouts too. This may suggest that they had not been interested or motivated during their school years, or they may have suffered neurological disorders linked to the learning difficulties that their children had inherited.

## **Discussion**

The community engagement project achieved outcomes using the triple helix approach to investigate and suggest a collaborative intervention strategy for uplifting the communities around the school that was investigated.

The systemic challenges identified revealed many interwoven and pertinent issues requiring transdisciplinary professional intervention at school and community levels (Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2017). While the challenges that learners in low socioeconomic households face when they need to access the various services of specialists are a reality in most South African institutions, schools cannot continue to work in isolation without the necessary support (Florian, 2017). The empirical data in this study showed that the ripple effect suffered by communities emanates from the learning difficulties that learners experience in schools and the in-service teachers' lack of learner support skills. The fragmented service delivery model is another factor perpetuating learning difficulties in children.

The in-service teachers experienced first-hand the systemic factors contributing to learning difficulties in early learning. The results suggest that the gains will contribute

to both student and in-service teachers' pedagogical knowledge for the ultimate benefit of learners at the school and in the surrounding community (Thuketana, 2020). Similarly, the study assumes that, with the propositions made, in-service teachers might start to use the available resources to offer assessment. They might also engage in interventions and collaborate to access the available support services (Department of Education, 2005).

### **Limitations and Recommendations of the Study**

The report presented the challenges of a single case in terms of demographics and the unit of investigation; however, it mirrors challenges in many schools and community settings in South Africa. The findings in other settings and provinces could be different. Therefore, the study recommends further research and using different methodologies to investigate other districts across South Africa and to compare challenges requiring interventions in those areas. They might provide contextual solutions and present building blocks to consider further research in community engagement projects.

The paper recommends that related follow-up research includes community members to hear their views and get to the root cause of the challenges, ensuring the community's buy-in to the suggested interventions and solutions. The project also surpassed its mandate by suggesting the importance of collaboration to enhance interventions and confront the solutions to the challenges experienced by the school. In addition, the study predicts that collaboration may further address the challenges that emanate from teachers' inability to identify and support learners with learning difficulties.

### **Lessons Learnt**

- The teachers, parents and district officials worked in isolation, despite the responsibilities assigned by policy to the coordinators of the district-based support teams. Interestingly, all structures at the school were in place, but the team members, including the teachers, did not have a strategy or plan prepared to enable them to perform their duties.
- The government did not track the non-compliance and accountability of the relevant officials to monitor the schools and holistically strengthen the schools' ability to offer scaffolding for all learners in need. The research identified challenges in the ecosystem emanating from the complacency of district officials and weak monitoring systems.
- Corruption has impacted the security system at the school to the extent that community members do not feel safe reporting criminal activities. They fear that the police might collude with drug lords and other syndicates who use learners to perform criminal activities.
- There are neither recreation centres in the community nor ongoing extramural activities to engage learners. The learners admire the criminals and wish to join gangster activities.
- The teachers feel overwhelmed and do not have enough support from the South African government.
- The government needs to action school policies and other governance documents to mitigate them stifling learners' progress and community development.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The contribution of this paper is the realisation that community challenges are vast and require intentional contextual investigation for solutions. Methodologically, the triple helix approach was the most relevant to expose those solutions and confirm the critical anchor role that universities and other higher education institutions can play. A more focused tactic is necessary to develop community engagement programmes to cater to the holistic support needs of schools and communities.

The paper concludes by reiterating that universities and teacher-training institutions should consider using a triple helix approach as a strategy to benefit teacher pedagogy. The approach could further enhance in-service teachers' capabilities, expose real issues contributing negatively to learners' academic progress, and identify the relevant learning support strategies in collaboration with other stakeholders in education.

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