

*Connie Moloi & Gerrit Kamper*

---

# Socio-economically challenged learners: two South African case studies

First submission: 19 July 2010

Acceptance: 4 November 2010

This article reports the results of research conducted in two successful secondary schools situated in a poor rural area in the Ehlanzeni region, Mpumalanga province. The research forms part of the International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP) which originated in 2001 among a group of experienced education leadership and management researchers. Notwithstanding a comprehensive body of research data on the qualities of good principalship and successful schools, there was a need to focus more directly on how to create and sustain a supportive teaching and learning environment for socio-economically challenged learners.

## Sosio-ekonomies benadeelde leerders: twee Suid-Afrikaanse gevallestudies

Hierdie artikel handel oor navorsing in twee suksesvolle sekondêre skole wat geleë is in die verarmde platteland van die gebied Ehlanzeni in Mpumalanga. Die navorsing is deel van die International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP) wat in 2001 deur 'n aantal deskundige navorsers in onderwysleierskap en -bestuur geïnisieer is. Met inagneming van die beskikbaarheid van omvangryke data oor die kenmerke van suksesvolle skole en skoolhoofde fokus die navorsing meer op hoe om 'n ondersteunende onderrig- en leeromgewing vir sosio-ekonomies benadeelde leerders te skep en te volhou.

*Profs KC Moloi, Dept of Communication and Education, Faculty of Human Sciences, Vaal University of Technology, Private Bag X021, Vanderbijlpark, 1900 & G D Kamper, Dept of Educational Studies, School of Education, University of South Africa, P O Box 392, Unisa 0003; E-mail: conniem@vut.ac.za & kampegd@unisa.ac.za.*



*Acta Academica*  
2010 42(4): 256-279  
ISSN 0587-2405  
© UV/UFS  
<<http://www.ufs.ac.za/ActaAcademica>>

SUN MEDIA  
BLOEMFONTEIN

The present research forms part of the International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP), which originated in 2001 among a group of experienced education leadership and management researchers (ISSPP 2007: 1). The article reports on two successful schools located in an impoverished rural area in the Mpumalanga province, South Africa. The two schools selected as research sites are located in the poorest villages of the Ehlanzeni region, where 29% of those aged 20 years or older have not undergone any schooling (Steyn *et al* 2008: 42). The aim of studying these schools was to understand how a supportive teaching and learning environment for socio-economically challenged learners could be created to enhance their academic achievement. The rural areas in South Africa are extremely poor and continually challenged by both the harsh physical conditions and the changing educational, social, economic, and political realities under which teachers and learners work (Gunter 2001: 17, Motshekga 2007: 1).

Teaching in South Africa has to a large extent been shaped by the historical legacies of the past and should be viewed within the context of a schooling system designed and shaped by the apartheid regime, where social relations between people were structured by biological and cultural characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities that constituted the rural and urban divide (Cole 2009: 42). Thus, teachers in South Africa have a much diversified career preparation, teaching experience, and opportunity for development (Motshekga 2007: 2). It has been argued that the matriculation results in South Africa strongly reflect this divide, with schools situated in enabling contexts producing good results while the majority of the schools in townships and rural areas continue to provide poor quality education (Motshekga 2007: 2). This situation necessitates a thorough acknowledgement and study of the role of the learning context in a school's and/or learner's success or failure.

In addition, Bush *et al* (2010: 164) note that the majority (70-80%) of primary school children, overwhelmingly from disadvantaged schools, complete their primary education without being able to read fluently in their school's instructional language. According

to Fleisch (2008: 119), weak mastery of English, in particular in some of the schools in Mpumalanga, is a major contributory factor to low standards of literacy which negatively affect academic achievement. Reeves (2006: 72-3) pointed out that in studies of schools with high poverty rates, a high number of second-language learners, and simultaneous high achievement levels, specific leadership and teaching practices that mitigate against the influence of socio-demographic characteristics have played a major role.

According to Bush *et al* (2010: 162), one of the major functions of principals is to lead teaching and learning. The principal, the staff and the governing body are required to create the conditions and structures to support effective learning and teaching. This study is primarily guided by the following research question: How can a supportive teaching and learning environment for socio-economically challenged learners be created and sustained? This question implies the need for a theoretical framework that focuses on the parameters for a supportive teaching and learning environment for socio-economically challenged learners.

## 1. Creating a supportive teaching and learning environment

Capturing how principals and their staff create supportive teaching and learning environments to make schools successful is the primary focus of many studies on school effectiveness and school improvement (Stringfield & Teddlie 1991: 15). These studies have provided useful insights into elements common among effective schools and classrooms (Connor *et al* 2009: 85). There is, however, a paucity of literature on how a supportive teaching and learning environment can be created for learners in socio-economically challenged circumstances, with high levels of parent unemployment and high parent mortality levels due to HIV/AIDS, large class sizes (overcrowding in some instances), long distances to schools and lack of running water in the school and surrounding communities. A literature survey revealed three themes which are of particular relevance for creating a supportive

teaching and learning environment for socio-economically challenged learners, namely school-parent partnerships, teacher leadership and value systems.

### 1.1 School-parent partnerships

Van Heck (2002: 77) indicated that there is a rising interest internationally in how school leadership and partnerships with the parents in the school contribute to effective teaching and learning. Central to the quality of school-parent partnership is the understanding by school principals of how to mobilise communities so that they engage in co-creating a supportive teaching and learning environment to make learning accessible (Grace 1995: 76). The parent-school partnership is significant for utilising the rich social and cultural experiences the learners bring to the school. It should be borne in mind that schools are not the sole providers of learning (Van Heck 2002: 77). According to Green (2006: 9), learners' histories can provide exciting learning material for critical dialogue and conscientisation (the process of developing consciousness by combining action and reflection). Thus, as agents for change, the teachers, together with the learners and the parent community, can use a fluid and open approach to creating critical spaces for dialogue and meaningful engagement in order to enhance the learners' academic achievement (Macbeath & Dempster 2009: 6).

### 1.2 Teacher leadership

Recent research by Gabriel (2005: 137) points out the significance of teacher leadership as one of the strategies to enhance learner achievement. Murphy (2005: 67) suggests that teacher leadership is grounded in classrooms because effective teaching, learning and leadership are inextricably linked to educational and social relationships. Teacher leadership should thus utilise assets of community cultural wealth which the learners bring from their homes and communities into the classroom. This can be used effectively to enliven teaching and to promote learning (Yosso 2005: 70, Murphy 2005: 68). In addition, transformative

teachers who engage in progressive struggles with education in poor contexts expose learners to high-contact learning by means of highly structured, teacher-directed and learner-centred programmes (Cole 2009: 36). These teachers help learners access and digest learning material and cultivate community in the classroom because some learners under-perform due to their lack of motivation (Gabriel 2005: 137). In line with these thoughts, Cole (2009: 2) is of the opinion that aggressively conscious efforts by teachers in classrooms are the only way to alleviate social inequality, poverty, and misery and to enhance academic achievement for learners. Teacher leadership and collaboration in schools is important for professional development so that knowledge creation can be viewed both as collective action and as an end in itself that is procedural and declarative for promoting positive learning outcomes (Courtney 2001: 24, Fullan 1997: 47, Harris 2000: 1). Teachers thus co-construct the necessary conditions for learners to succeed (Yosso 2005: 70).

### 1.3 Value systems

Murphy (2005: 69) asserts that good teachers are often distinguished by well-defined dispositions and values and that they remain instrumental in achieving social transformation, and effective teaching and learning in their classrooms. Harris (2007: 111) indicates the crucial role of values in education and notes that these include the need for changed mindsets and paradigms to positively effect change in people's life orientation. Values have to be embodied in the behaviour of staff and should be experienced as predictable and consistent over time (Harris 2007: 111). Thus, effective teachers in high-poverty schools embody what Peters & Biesta (2009: 10) refer to as "the ethico-political horizon of deconstruction – a concern for the other". With this the learners gain effective teaching and learning, and the school finds itself in partnership with the parent community. Accordingly, Macbeath & Dempster (2009: 6) argue that learning which matters and is most powerful in shaping attitudes comes through the "hidden curriculum", the implicit rather than the explicit messages that

a school conveys to its learners. According to Rizvi (2009: 109), established school values embrace how teachers deal with issues of historicity, relationality and the positionality of their learners.

With reference to this theoretical exposition, the article examines ways in which principals, teachers, parents and the surrounding community make educational sense of their lives within a highly challenging socio-economic context.

## 2. Empirical investigation

In accordance with the recommended research design and methods of the ISSPP project (ISSPP 2007: 14-5), a qualitative research approach was followed. Data were gathered by means of individual and focus group interviews to examine how schools working in challenging socio-economic rural circumstances could create supportive teaching and learning environments for learner achievement. Essentially, the gathering of data in each school was done by means of three one-to-one interviews, and three focus group interviews. The former (an orientational, an in-depth, and a wrap-up interview) were conducted with the principal, whereas the focus group interviews were conducted with selected groups (of not more than eight participants each) of teachers, parents and learners. The participants of each of these groups were nominated by the principal, as stipulated by the ISSPP research design (ISSPP 2007: 15).

The comprehensive interview schedules, as developed for the ISSPP project (ISSPP 2007: 17-30), were used. These schedules provide for wide-ranging data collection concerning principal and teacher biographies, school characteristics, and perceptions of the principal's leadership (outside and in the school as well as in the classroom). All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed *verbatim* for thematic analysis.

In addition, documentary information was gathered from each of the schools, including information on school policies, development plans, prospectuses and newsletters. This information was used in contextualising the empirical data and for cross-checking

trustworthiness of the data in instances where this was deemed necessary.

## 2.1 Participating schools

Two schools were selected for participation in the project. These are situated in a rural area of the Mpumalanga province, near its border with Mozambique. Mpumalanga province is one of the most impoverished regions in South Africa (Steyn *et al* 2001: 45). Financial problems, inefficient governance, a weak grasp of the curriculum and, in particular, the new National Curriculum Statement are obstacles to the provision of education (Bush *et al* 2009: 6-7). Despite these circumstances, however, the two selected schools (hereafter referred to as School A and School B) excel in their matriculation results, and are reputed within their communities and education district offices for their excellent leadership and management.

School A is a combined school, accommodating 1300 learners from Grades 1 to 12. There is severe poverty, with a high rate of community unemployment. The school has to cope with acute shortages of classrooms and furniture, as well as a lack of water supply. In the interview the female principal indicated that she had spent a considerable part of her teaching career at the school – the past two years at its helm. She conceded that her predecessor had led the school to its present heights. She regarded outstanding corporate relations, within the school and with the community, as its key characteristic feature: “We cope through collaboration”.

School B is a secondary school, catering for 1540 learners from Grades 8 to 12. As in the case of School A, the shortage of classroom space is critical, and there are problems with water supply. The latter is especially a concern as the school keeps its own vegetable garden for the provision of food to the learners. The surrounding community is exceedingly poor, and there are many deaths due to HIV/AIDS. The school is very well supported by the community, and all stakeholders in the school are committed to its success. At the time of the interview the female principal had been in her position at the

school for six years. She attributed the school's success to one simple factor: "The key aspect of our success in this school is discipline!"

## 2.2 Data analysis

The various interviews with the principals, parents, teachers and learners often rendered shifts in emphasis, which are beyond the scope of this article. In presenting the findings in this case, a holistic approach was used to reflect the findings from the interviews in order to identify the pertinent themes and categories.

In identifying the themes and categories, the approach generally followed in the analysis of qualitative data was used (immersion, inducing themes, coding, elaboration – Terre Blanche *et al* 2006: 320-44). The approach involves the prior gaining of a data overview by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and data summaries, followed by another round of reading for identifying emphases (themes) and related sub-themes (categories) in each. The data analysis ultimately provided the themes, categories and sub-categories shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Findings from data analysis

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories	Elements
1. Strategies	Teaching and learning	Teacher dedication	Long hours, extra classes
		Teacher expertise	INSET, peer collaboration
		Monitoring	Learner and teacher performance
		Resources	Sponsorships, materials, equipment, expertise
		Climate	Safe, healthy, happy Discipline



Themes	Categories	Sub-categories	Elements
	Partnership	Parent support  Community liaison  Teamwork	Supervision, labour, security  Police, health officials, education officials, businesses, municipal authorities, other schools, ex-learners Involvement in community activities. Open communication Networking  Shared decision making
	Care-giving	Physical learner needs  Emotional learner needs  Learner diversity  Job satisfaction	Clothes, food, health  Security, safety, happiness  Accommodating linguistic and cultural differences  Teachers' personal and professional needs
2. Principal qualities	Values	Belief in people  Spiritual  Thoroughness	Trust, respect, co-operation, understanding  Prayer meetings  Standards, discipline, appearance, extra mile, example, consistency
	Disposition	Visionary  Optimistic  Pastoral  Participative  Committed  Learner	Planning, academic achievement, IT literacy, community upliftment  Resilience  Love for people and task  Shared leadership  Hard work  Knowledge and advice

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories
3. Challenges	Acquisition	Facilities and resources
	Social	HIV/AIDS
	Academic	Grade 12 results
4. Experiential advice	Principal roles	Diversity
	New principals	Consultation and direction
	Failing schools	Action and standards

### 2.3 Data interpretation

As indicated in Table 1, four themes were identified in creating a supportive teaching and learning environment for socio-economically challenged learners.

#### 2.3.1 Strategies that are successfully used to address school challenges (abject poverty and the remote environment)

There is no doubt that the most prominent strategy in meeting the schools' challenges concerned the learners' exposure to quality teaching and learning. This dedication is aptly reflected in the following participating principal's statement:

We spend most of our time learning at school (07:30-16:30; study 17:00-21:00; Saturdays, school holiday camps). Our parents and community members support us.

The participating parents expressed their appreciation for the teachers' dedication:

The teachers work very hard. They are committed and they care about the children. They give extra classes in the morning, in the afternoon, on Saturdays and on Sundays.

The principals emphasised their teachers' commitment, and that each was qualified to teach his/her subjects. Where considered necessary, expert tutors were summoned to assist in teaching difficult parts of the curriculum. Teachers regularly attended

refresher programmes, and peer consultation on improving teaching was ongoing. On more than one occasion both principals mentioned their painstaking efforts to stay informed of each teacher's practice, and each learner's academic performance. In order to optimise the quality of teaching, the principals did their utmost to ensure that proper educational resources were available. The teachers and parents of one of the two schools commented as follows about the learners' exposure to quality teaching and learning:

The erection of a library, the computers we have, and the encyclopaedia in the library for reference are the initiatives of our principal.

In addition, the principals ensured that a constructive tuition climate was maintained in their schools. In practical terms, this meant discipline:

The key aspect of our success in this school is discipline! Both teachers and learners are disciplined.

All the participants interviewed alluded to the fact that their schools were conducive to learning: safe, healthy and happy.

The children love the school. Even children from far-off areas want to come to this school. That is why our numbers are large.

The second clearly discernable strategy for addressing the schools' challenges was optimising opportunities for partnerships. Metaphorically speaking, partnership was the oil that kept the school running smoothly. Partnership consisted mainly of three elements, namely parent support, community liaison and team work. The principals often mentioned their schools' strong ties with the parent communities, and the scope of parent support:

We work as a team. We have a supportive school governing body. As you can see the members of the school governing body are always at the school and the parents are always present to help with cleaning the school premise.

The teachers confirmed this by mentioning how parents support school functions and assist with study supervision.

Likewise, the comments about community liaison were very positive. The schools received significant community support and did their best to be constructively involved in their communities:

We have established good partnerships with the business community, the department of education and the regional office. The school community is supportive and we have all the services available for our learners (clinic and the police forum, etc). We also work well with the neighbouring schools.

All the comments about the liaison with parents and the community emphasised the necessity of open communication channels and networking.

All the participants interviewed strongly highlighted teamwork among stakeholders in the school. This involved constructive collaboration and shared decision-making within and across group entities, namely the school governing body (SGB), the school management team (SMT), teachers, parents and learners. The principals commented:

We work like a chain. We are committed and we support each other. We work as a team and we communicate often and effectively. Our strength lies in our unity.

Throughout the interviews, the team metaphor often came to the fore, underlining the strong culture of partnership in the participating schools.

The third prominent strategy for meeting the schools' challenges was establishing an ethos of care-giving. From the interviews it transpired that this particular strategy appears to be crucial in ensuring school success in impoverished environments. Table 1 indicates that care-giving in poverty-challenged schools essentially concerns attention to the physical and emotional needs of the learners, learner diversity and the teachers' job satisfaction.

All the interviewees specifically referred to the extent of efforts and measures to cater to the learners' physical and emotional needs. Both schools have an elaborate feeding scheme in place, in which the parents played an important supportive part. All learners were neatly dressed in school uniforms, the acquisition of which was also

facilitated through funds or by keeping the uniforms of school leavers at the school for learners in need. Health care is taken care of through close liaison with the local clinics. The emotional needs of the learners are primarily taken care of by ensuring that the school is a safe place. Both principals and several teachers in both schools “adopted” learners whose relatives live far away from the school, accommodating them in their homes. The spirit of care-giving is exemplified by the following learner statement:

I am happy because it is a school where the teachers motivate us. Our future is important to them. We are supported and we are usually encouraged to succeed.

The researchers were struck by the principals’ integrative capabilities, not only in breaking down possible poverty-based distinctions between learners, but also in accommodating learners from culturally and linguistically diverse and poverty-stricken backgrounds:

The influx of foreigners from Zimbabwe and Mozambique makes our work more difficult. The children struggle with our home language, *IsiSwati*. It becomes difficult to communicate with them because they speak a different language.

Concerning the teachers’ job satisfaction, it became evident during the interviews that the schools had a very low teacher turnover rate, and that the teachers were in fact envied by teachers from neighbouring schools. The teachers’ appreciation for the principal’s support and personal interest in their lives and tasks was obvious in their comments:

She is very supportive and she is a caring person. We do everything together. She consults us and we meet every day to discuss problems and to find solutions together.

Care-giving extends beyond the school gates, and manifests itself in the schools’ support of, and involvement in community development activities in areas such as computer literacy and tertiary-study facilitation. The interviews revealed that the scope and intensity of care-giving pointed to a high level of pastoral leadership.

From the findings on the first theme, it was concluded that a triad of strategies is effectively implemented by successful principals of poverty-challenged schools. This triad consists of the interplay between purposive measures to ensure that quality teaching and learning take place; that the poverty-related needs of the learners and teachers are optimally met through care-giving, and that all stakeholders in the school are optimally engaged in the school's activities through constructive partnership.

### 2.3.2 Perceived qualities of the principal

With reference to Table 1, the reported qualities of the two participating principals were categorised as values and disposition. The values to which the principals adhered and their personal dispositions became apparent in the preceding discussion and will now be briefly summarised.

Both principals stated that they were religious, and that corresponding values (concerning love and care-giving) were the basis of their personal and professional lives. These values were also inherent in the ethos of the schools through, among others, daily prayer meetings with local pastors who had the opportunity to address the school assemblies. In particular, two values were evident: a strong belief in people, and thoroughness. The former reflected trust in, respect for and understanding of every learner, teacher, parent and other stakeholder in the school:

I have time for people. I believe in people.

The school has a positive identity. We work according to good values and we espouse the Batho-Pele [People First] principle, enshrined in the constitution ...

Thoroughness as a personal value of the participating principals was clearly demonstrated in the schools' adherence to high standards, strict discipline, neat appearances, setting of good examples, consistency, and walking the extra mile:

My priorities are to ensure that our school is successful and that the children are well taught. We must always be at the top of the region with our matric results.

With reference to Table 1, it was found that the principals' disposition tended to be visionary, optimistic, pastoral, participative, committed and studious. The visionary and optimistic aspects of their disposition are obvious from the following comments:

I am happy. I have a vision – I want to see how the learners in Grade 1 are going to produce in Grade 12. We now have a laboratory and a science laboratory. I want to see my vision succeeding.

As mentioned earlier, the principals' pastoral disposition featured strongly in their leadership, and formed the basis for the prominent culture of care-giving in both schools.

She loves her work and she loves children. She is a 'fairy tale'.

Related to this, the principals' disposition towards leadership was distinctly participative, and focused on the well-being of their schools and communities:

My leadership is democratic. I believe in consultation.

I work about 90 hours per week. I do not have time to relax. I am concerned about our learners. They are very poor and most of them are orphans.

I work about 580 hours per term. There is no time to relax as I am involved in church and community activities.

Finally, concerning their dispositions, the principals were eager to learn and apply what they discover to their school practice:

... we meet the learners in order to share current news with them through reading newspapers, and community news so that they are aware about what is happening around them. We motivate our learners to read newspapers in order to gain knowledge about the country.

In summarising the findings on the second main theme, it can be stated with confidence that a successful principal of a poverty-challenged school has a particularly strong dedication to the upliftment of the less privileged. This is firmly based on spiritual, moral and altruistic values.

### 2.3.3 Persistent problems and new challenges

As could be expected, the challenges and problems with which the schools had to cope, including challenges for the foreseeable future, were often mentioned during the interviews. These problems and challenges concerned a lack of physical facilities and educational resources. The principals aspired to building a new assembly hall, as well as classrooms, a library, a laboratory and a computer centre. The development plans also involved the renovation of existing infrastructure, and the acquisition of furniture, books, computers, and laboratory chemicals. Assuring a constant and sufficient water supply to the schools was high on the list of priorities. Overarching most of these challenges was the crucial factor of finding sufficient finances to cater for the schools' needs. In terms of the principals' vision, the need for the schools to be part of the age of e-learning was conspicuous. Socially, the HIV/AIDS phenomenon would remain a formidable challenge:

The parents are very poor and many of our learners are orphans due to HIV/AIDS, the incidence of which is very high in this part of the country because of immigrants from Mozambique and Zimbabwe. They bring HIV/AIDS here.

The principals were not at all complacent about their schools' academic success, and aspired to even better results:

Although our results are good, the situation is not pleasing to me. In 2007, two learners failed. We are still crying. In certain areas the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) is assisting. We are growing every time.

Notwithstanding the problems and challenges, the principals strongly believed in the sustainability and continued improvement of their schools' success.

In summary: The principals were very open about the severity of their schools' problems and challenges, but these were mentioned in a matter-of-fact way, without any sign of disillusionment or desperation. On the contrary, as is evident from the last quote above, the message was bluntly positive: "We are growing ..."



#### 2.3.4 Experiential advice

The interviews focused on the kinds of advice the participating principals could give to fellow and new principals, in particular, of poverty-challenged schools. In this regard, the various roles the principal must play were eloquently pointed out:

I am an instructional leader and I play a supportive role to the teachers. I mentor new teachers and I am a mother to the learners.

On the kinds of leaders that will be needed in future in challenging schools, the following comment expresses the gist of our data analysis table (Table 1):

We need leaders who are committed to good education and leaders who can instil good values and good work ethics among the youth, but also those leaders who are humane, unselfish and who aspire for the common good of everybody inside and outside the school.

On the question of which approach to follow when entering a socio-economically challenged school as new principal, the participating principals' responses were markedly alike, emphasising a cautious and inquisitive but steadfast approach:

I would first analyse the situation in order to assess what has worked and what has not worked; and study the school records and hold discussions with different members of different committees, e.g. curriculum committee, examination committee, etc;

The principals emphasised the need for skills in managing diversity, especially in grooming new principals:

I would encourage the new principal to invite experts on diversity management to the school and expose staff to these talks.

On the key leadership strategies needed to turn a failing school into a successful one, the participating principals focused on the key role of the principal in setting standards and adhering to institutional values.

On the experiential advice of the participating principals to fellow (in particular, new) principals of poverty-challenged schools it was concluded that their suggestions pointed to an emphatic, look-and-listen approach in becoming acquainted with the school's

challenges, but without compromising pre-set performance standards and visionary ideals.

### 3. Discussion

In the theoretical framework three themes were identified and discussed as parameters for a supportive teaching and learning environment for socio-economically challenged learners, and the findings were briefly discussed.

#### 3.1 School-parent partnerships

In Table 1 the category “partnership” indicates the extensive scope of the school-community link. The principals and teachers believed that strong relationships with parents and the local community created the conditions for effective teaching and learning to occur in their schools. While research by Brooks-Buck (2008: 119) indicated that in the US children of the working poor spend more time alone or in front of the television as baby-sitters, the staff and parents at the two schools in this study ensured that the children were kept at school to study under their supervision: “We spend long hours at schools and on weekends and on school holidays”. For the children at the two schools, there was no time for idling as they left school at 21:00 after supervised studies and they would be escorted home by the parents from the community. They were also protected by their teachers from being mocked, as the schools provide uniforms. The findings unequivocally confirm that the link between the school, parents and the local community is about increasing capacities of individuals to create systems that enable children to learn, especially in schools with large classes such as the two rural schools in this study (Scheerens 2000: 54).

#### 3.2 Teacher leadership

The principals created a supportive teaching and learning environment, hinged on a good understanding of education policies and effective implementation at the school site. In Table 1 the category “Teaching and learning” highlighted the aspects of

teacher dedication, teacher expertise, monitoring, resources and climate. These teachers structured opportunities for professional growth and development, and were motivated to understand and implement policy. Such an understanding yielded a positive impact on learner performance as evidenced in the participating schools' Grade 12 results. Open communication and effective structures and processes for decision-making in the classroom and in the school are necessary in creating a supportive teaching and learning environment. The kinds of collegial interactions at the two schools fostered reflection and continuous dialogue, and the norm became a social and educational culture in which they willingly learned with and from each other and taught each other (*cf* Hoerr 2005: 21). There is conclusive evidence that the teachers actively nurtured and promoted a supportive teaching and learning environment by creating, among others, critical spaces for the learners' voices to be heard so that their lived experiences and histories of their struggles with poverty are listened to and their epistemologies are not silenced, ignored or distorted (*cf* Yosso 2005: 70). These are dialogue spaces and, in essence, dialogic encounters involving a respectful relationship, in which the participants (teacher and learners) think and reason together. In our view, dialogue as a communicative educational relationship is characterised by exploration and interrogation of the learning content, a co-operative and reciprocal inquiry between the teacher and the learner as partners in co-creating discourses of knowledge. There exist "speech communities" where teachers and learners work to promote educational equity within social and cultural diversity (Elsasser & Irvine 1992: 132).

The teachers' professional development in the two schools was ongoing and thoroughly supported by the two principals to impact on learning at all levels of the school. The teams of teachers identified individual needs and these were often negotiated in their communities of practice, thus creating an enabling environment for the learners to succeed. Their action plans assisted them to work according to time frames, to check themselves and to monitor effective implementation of set goals (Pearce & Robinson 1997: 16).

The principals, SMTs and teachers reflected on their personal and professional development initiatives because professional development was located in the context of practice. We are of the opinion that the struggle for teacher development cannot be accommodated in priorities that sit neatly within a tightly timetabled collection of subjects (Macbeath & Dempster 2009: 6). The teachers at the two schools worked from 07:00 to 16:30 and they, together with the parents, supervised the learners in the evenings while they were studying. Professional development needs dedication, selflessness, empathy and care – aspects which are of crucial importance in the tuition and support of poverty-stricken learners.

### 3.3 Value systems

The principals of the two schools embodied strong values and spirituality. They often spoke about prayer, and invited pastors to come and speak to the children. Both schools exemplified a strong belief in people (manifested by trust, respect, co-operation and understanding, *cf* Table 1) and had created a caring environment for staff, learners and the parent community. The staff members at both schools knew the plight of their learners and immersed themselves in finding solutions to the learners' problems, in particular poverty (Cole 2009: 36). In doing so, they turned difficulty into what was described as a wonderful school experience. The value of thoroughness (adherence to quality standards, firm discipline, neat appearance, setting the example and walking the extra mile, *cf* Table 1) was obvious.

## 4. Conclusion

The approach to and quality of the work done in the two rural schools are important for many reasons, but especially for being exemplary to the numerous dysfunctional South African rural schools on how high-poverty rural schools can effectively create and sustain a supportive teaching and learning environment for their socio-economically challenged learners. In achieving this, three themes emerged as particularly important, namely school-

parent partnerships, teacher leadership and value-driven passion for the upliftment of socio-economically challenged learners and communities. With disciplined commitment teachers in impoverished schools could expose learners to good-quality education, despite socio-economic challenges. These schools are dealing with issues related to education access and equity and to transformative and progressive education. They are struggling and succeeding in making the best education available to their learners by engaging parents and the local community. They set high standards and draw strength from the staff and parents, who are all engaged in a community of practice to make schooling a successful experience for their learners.

## Bibliography

BROOKS-BUCK J

2008. *Schools as markets: bilking the young and powerless*. Hopson *et al* (eds) 2008: 117-48.

BUSH T, R JOUBERT, E KIGGUNDU & J VAN ROOYEN

2010. Managing teaching and learning in South African schools. *International Journal of Educational Development* 30(2): 162-8.

COLE M

2009. *Marxism and education. Critical race theory and education. A Marxist response*. New York: Palgrave, Macmillan.

CONNOR CM, FJ MORRISON, BJ FISHMAN, C PONITZ, S GLASNEY, PS UNDERWOOD, SB PIASTA, EC CROWE & C SCHATSCHEIDER

2009. The ISI classroom observation system: examining the literacy instruction provided to individual students. *Educational Researcher* 38(2): 85-99.

COURTNEY J F

2001. Decision making and knowledge management in inquiring organizations: toward a new decision-making paradigm for DSS. *Decision Support Systems* 31(1): 17-38.

ELSASSER N & P IRVINE

1992. Literacy as commodity: redistributing the goods. *Journal of Education* 174(3): 26-40.

FLEISCH B

2008. *Primary education in crisis: why South African children under-achieve in reading and mathematics*. Cape Town: Juta.

FULLAN M

1997. *Change forces. Probing the depths of educational reform*. London: Falmer.

GABRIEL JG

2005. *How to thrive as a teacher*. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

GRACE G

1995. *School leadership. Beyond education management. An essay in policy scholarship*. London: Falmer Press.

GREEN D

2006. Against the tide: the role of adult student voice, student leadership and student organization in social transformation. *Convergence* 39(1): 1-5.

GUNTER HM

2001. *Leaders and leadership in education*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Paul Chapman Publishing.

HARRIS A

2000. Successful school improvement in the United Kingdom and Canada. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* 15: 1-4.

HARRIS B

2007. *Supporting the emotional work of school leaders*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

HOERR TR

2005. *The art of school leadership*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

HOPSON RK, CC YEAKEY & FM BOAKARI (eds)

2008. *Advances in education in diverse communities: research policy and praxis. Power, voice and the public good. Schooling and education in global societies*. Tokyo: Emerald.

INTERNATIONAL SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL PRINCIPALS PROJECT (ISSPP)

2007. *Comparison of country case studies*. Nottingham: University of Nottingham.

KENWAY J & J FAHEY (eds)

2009. *Globalizing the research imagination*. London: Routledge.

MACBEATH J & N DEMPSTER

2009. *Connecting leadership and learning. Principles for practice*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

MOTSHEKGA A

2007. Budget speech by Gauteng MEC for Education Angie Motshekga for the 2007/8 financial year. Prioritising quality education and skills development for a better life. <<http://www.gpg.gov.za/docs/sp/2007/sp0619a.html>>

MURPHY J

2005. *Connecting teacher leadership and school improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

PEARCE JA & RB ROBINSON

1997. *Strategic management. Formulation, implementation and control*. 6th ed. Chicago: Irwin.

PETERS MA & G BIESTA

2009. *Derrida, deconstruction, and the politics of pedagogy*. New York: Peter Lang.

REEVES D B

2006. *The learning leader. How to focus school improvement for better results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

RIZVI F

2009. Mobile minds. Kenway & Fahey (eds) 2009: 101-14.

SCHEERENS J

2000. *Improving school effectiveness*. Paris: UNESCO.

STEYN HJ, SC STEYN & EAS DE

W AAL

2001. *The South African education system. Core characteristics*. Noordbrug: Keurkopie Uitgewers.

STEYN HJ, SC STEYN, EAS DE W AAL & CC WOLHUTER

2008. *The education system: structure and issues*. Noordbrug: Keurkopie Uitgewers.

Moloi & Kamper/Socio-economically challenged learners

STRINGFIELD S & C TEDDLIE

1991. School, classroom, and student level Indicators of rural school effectiveness. *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 7(3):15-28.

TERRE BLANCHE M, K DURRHEIM & D PAINTER

2006. *Research in practice. Applied methods for the social science*. Cape Town: UCT Press.

VAN HECK E

2002. *Making markets: how firms can design and profit from online auctions and exchanges*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

YOSSO TJ

2005. Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 8(1): 69-91.