Praxis towards sustainable empowering learning environments in South Africa

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Overview

Praxis towards sustainable empowering learning environments in South Africa

This collection presents some of the best peer-reviewed papers from a conference with the theme “Creating sustainable empowering learning environments through scholarship of engagement”. This conference was held from 20 to 21 August 2009 at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University in South Africa. Over 110 papers were presented, out of which 20 were selected for this publication, based on a rigorous blind peer-review process. The main criterion for inclusion was that the paper should contribute to the theme by means of an original, tight, theoretical and empirical study conducted with the aim of informing the practice of creating sustainable empowering learning environments.

In the compilation of this book, another consideration was that all contributions should assist in the telling of the original story of how sustainable empowering learning environments are created by combining educational theory, educational research and educational practice, jointly referred to as educational praxis. In reading this book one discovers this golden thread running through all the papers as chapters in this seamless narrative which analyses and describes Praxis towards sustainable empowering learning environments in South Africa; hence the title. The book contributes to the ongoing debates and discussions in South Africa and the world regarding how best to create optimal conditions for excellence and quality in learning, irrespective of the learner’s grade or academic level.

The book manages to make this contribution because it is a collection of new but strong voices on the educational scene in the country and the world spanning six local and two international universities, namely North-West University (NWU), University of the Free State (UFS), University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Central University of Technology (CUT), Walter Sisulu University (WSU), Rhodes University (RU) as well as Curtin University in Australia and University of Tennessee in the United States of America. Manchester University in the United Kingdom is represented in a chapter by a colleague working as a school principal in the Free State province of South Africa but continuing his research with the aforementioned institution. Botswana is also represented in a study conducted by a colleague from the CUT on practices towards creating sustainable empowering learning environments in that country.

The story told throughout this book starts with a chapter by Sechaba MG Mahlomaholo which provides a practical framework for conducting research in schools in the North-West province with the aim of involving the teachers, the school management teams, parents, learners, North-West University academics from the Faculty of Education Sciences and professionals from the North-West Education Department in reflective practice towards the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments. This chapter is appropriately entitled “A framework for university and provincial education department’s collaborative research towards the creation of sustainable
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empowering learning environments”. The major contribution of this chapter is its reflection on the research problem confronting all chapters in this book, namely that of the dysfunctionality in some South African schools due to the problematic past of apartheid education. The chapter proceeds to describe the theoretical framework for the study in the North-West province which includes social constructivism, social justice research and scholarship of engagement. The strong point of the chapter is its methodology which demonstrates how the identified stakeholders get involved together in this praxis.

Chapter 1 thus reports on a study which ultimately also serves as the framework for the book. Chapters in this book tend to focus on praxis towards creating sustainable empowering learning environments conducted by and for the benefit of the partnerships of the stakeholders identified in Chapter 1. Other chapters also use some of the theoretical aspects described in this chapter. Briefly, chapters in this book report on praxis relating to:

- Teacher development as a continuing collaborative effort among the identified stakeholders.
- The role of the teacher as a reflective practitioner who conducts socially just action research, fosters self-regulation among his/her peers and charges, uses a range of effective social constructivist strategies from solo taxonomy, simulated games, interactive formative assessment, mother tongue as medium of instruction wherever possible, and is always sensitive towards the inclusion of and reaching out to all learners towards optimal learning in sustainable empowering learning environments.
- The value and power of building partnerships for praxis among the universities, the schools, the Departments of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training, social and rural development agencies as well as other instances of civil society.

Tšeliso Makoelle’s Chapter 2 on “Action research: a tool for stimulating reflection and innovation among teacher researchers” discusses the development of practising teachers, as reflective practitioners in particular (see point 1 above). In a convincing argument, he describes the value of action research for the practising teacher as a tool for reflection that will enhance his practice towards the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments. He cites examples from the literature, his own research and practice as a PhD student and principal of a school to validate his point.

Linked to this intensely theoretical chapter, Aubrey Golightly from North-West University and RG Brokett from the University of Tennessee, in Chapter 3 entitled Teacher trainees’ perceptions of their own self-directedness in learning, focus on the training of aspirant teachers and the value of self-directed learning for them as life-long learners. This chapter emphasises the need for teacher training programmes to foster this quality and characteristic, as pre-service training teachers will definitely need it in order to continuously develop their practice towards the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments.
In Chapter 4 entitled “Self-regulated learning: a case study in fashion design at a university of technology” Francina Venter from Central University of Technology and JH van Schoor from the University of the Free State elaborate on the concept of self-regulated learning by demonstrating through empirical data the need of lecturers in Fashion Design to model the characteristics of independently setting one's goals, planning, seeking help from others, and deploying strategies to be successful academically and later in the fashion industry.

Thapelo Mamiala from North-West University and David Treagust from Curtin University in Australia, in Chapter 5 entitled “The development of schedules using solo taxonomy to assess the quality of mathematics and science learning in South African schools”, demonstrate the power of teacher explanatory strategies in the teaching of the natural sciences by means of empirical data from South Africa and Australia. Their contribution is mainly about the uncontested role of the teacher in the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments.

Still on the subject of effective teacher strategies, Michael van Wyk from the University of the Free State, in Chapter 6 entitled “Rethinking the value of simulated games in economics education: an experimental teaching strategy”, makes a passionate plea for the use of simulated games in the teaching of Economics Education for both aspirant student teachers and their future learners. He argues that this strategy is effective because it operationalises the principles of experiential learning and reflexivity towards the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments in Economics Education classrooms. He weaves together a convincing story by using empirical data from his personal experiences.

In Chapter 7 entitled “Moving towards interactive formative assessment” Jabulisile Ngwenya from the University of KwaZulu-Natal highlights the value of assessment feedback to learners in the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments. She argues that assessment is and should be regarded as a learning opportunity for the assessed learners. Information about the outcomes of the assessment tasks thus need to be communicated as soon as possible to the learners being assessed in order to enhance their learning further.

Chaka Chaka and Leeto Ramothea, both from Walter Sisulu University, in Chapter 8 entitled “21st century learning and teaching: emerging approaches, new pedagogies and a scholarship of engagement”, reiterate the value of collaborative praxis (described earlier) which is located within a spectrum of theoretical positions ranging from social constructivism to scholarship of engagement. They argue that such an eclectic approach, which all stakeholders in education must adopt, enables them to manage the challenges they face in the current educational contexts as they embark on praxis towards the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments.

In Chapter 9 entitled “Mother tongue teaching in practice: experiences with pre-service foundation phase teachers at UKZN”, Nontokozo Mashiya from the University of KwaZulu-Natal demonstrates on the basis of empirical data how fulfilling and satisfying it is for both learners and teachers when learning is conducted in one's mother tongue. She argues that mother-tongue teaching and learning facilitate learning material that seemed inaccessible.
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From the above discussion of the teaching strategies and the emphasis on the role of teachers in the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments, the following chapters advocate inclusivity of all learners, irrespective of socio-economic status, race, creed and/or HIV/AIDS. The argument is that all learners deserve better education and enhanced sustainable empowering learning environments where they can explore their potential and create a better future for themselves and the country as a whole.

Ona Janse van Rensburg from North-West University, in Chapter 10 entitled “Bringing marginalised children to the centre of learning through a grade R initiative”, presents empirical findings from her study aimed at establishing a Grade R class for children of farmworkers in the North-West province. This is an instance of scholarship of engagement where university academics who teach courses in Foundation Phase to aspirant teachers go out into the community to put in practice their knowledge and skills towards the inclusion of marginalised learners in the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments for all.

Chapter 11 by Masilonyane Motseke from Central University of Technology, entitled “Why is OBE failing in the township schools of the Free State Goldfields?”, aims to facilitate inclusion of all learners, in particular those from poor socio-economic backgrounds and previously disadvantaged communities in the mainstream of social constructivist learning. He presents data that show what still needs to be done in order to enable the proper implementation of Outcomes-Based Education in black, poor and disadvantaged schools.

Sibusiso Radebe from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education in collaboration with Milton Nkoane from the University of the Free State, in Chapter 12 entitled “Psychological assessment and evaluation of learners by child guidance clinics”, using critical theory as a paradigm in social justice research, argue for a shift in assessing learners psychologically. They claim that current practices of assessing learners with special educational needs are still informed by the discredited ideologies of apartheid. They also claim that there is thus a need to formulate practices reflecting the current socially just and democratic ethos of enhancing and facilitating inclusivity, not separation.

In Chapter 13 Christa Beyers and Dennis Francis in a study entitled “Sexuality education: are educators in transition, or just imitating expectations?” demonstrate how overburdened teachers seem to feel especially when it comes to dealing with problems of HIV/AIDS-affected and -infected learners. They argue that some of these teachers are not even able to deal appropriately with the problems of stigmatisation at the personal level. They lose the enthusiasm to care for and support such learners to the extent that they are absent from school and ultimately lose their morale when expected to provide this much needed support for inclusion. In order to create non-discriminatory, sustainable empowering learning environments for all, they propose that teachers be skilled and thus empowered to deal with all such eventualities, as they have to play their role as social agents for change appropriately.

From the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Fumane Khanare’s Chapter 14 entitled “School management, learners at risk and HIV and AIDS in South Africa” responds adequately to
many of the challenges that teachers and schools face, as identified by Christa Beyers and Dennis Francis. They found that schools through their school management teams need to set up multidimensional and collaborative programmes that will spread the burden of caring for HIV/AIDS-affected and -infected learners accordingly so that individual teachers are not overburdened. According to the study reported in this chapter, the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments must include all learners and enable them to explore their fullest potential.

In Chapter 15 Merridy S Wilson-Strydom and Driekie Hay from the University of the Free State, in a study entitled “Reducing the gap between being eligible and being ready for higher education: a learner engagement perspective”, advocate for closer collaboration and partnership between the schools and the university in attending to problems of underprepared learners entering university. The chapter points out that the university could help schools with the teaching of learners before they complete their Grade 12 in order to better prepare them for their successful university studies, resulting in greater inclusivity and accessibility in the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments.

Xany du Toit from the University of the Free State, in Chapter 16 entitled “Interpreting: the argument for multicultural learning environments at the University of the Free State”, argues for inclusivity based on ensuring that Afrikaans- and English-speaking learners are able to benefit from the same lecturer by the provision of simultaneous translation services from one language to the other in what she calls linguistically integrated classrooms. She presents data from her study conducted at the University of the Free State which she argues could serve as a model for other higher education institutions faced with similar multicultural linguistic challenges.

The remaining chapters of the book focus on the practice and value of engaged, reciprocal, mutually respecting and validating partnerships between the university and the community towards the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments. The focus on this collaboration becomes the climax of the contribution which this volume makes to knowledge and facilitation of learning both in the university and the community. Through engaged research and service to the community, the university learns from the community in as much as the community benefits from the university. This combines educational theory, practice and research, which is praxis.

In Chapter 17 entitled “CSL as a scholarship of engagement: findings and recommendations” Arno van Niekerk from the University of the Free State presents a convincing argument that community service learning is a credible and valuable mechanism that can be used to facilitate holistic development of learners, especially at a tertiary institution. Backed with empirical evidence, he demonstrates how critical cross-field outcomes undergirding all education in South Africa, geared towards the cultivation of a democratic citizenry, constitute the essence of community service learning as an approach to the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments.

From the University of the Free State (UFS) Gregory Alexander, Michael van Wyk, CD Jaftha and Milton Nkoane confirm Arno van Wyk’s findings regarding the value of community service learning. However, they also emphasise the importance
of building well-functioning partnerships geared towards the same objective of creating sustainable empowering learning environments for all learners, especially in deprived contexts. In Chapter 18 entitled “The University of the Free State community service intervention on grade 12 science, mathematics and accounting: scholarship for teaching and learning” the authors present empirical evidence gleaned from UFS’ close collaboration with the schools from the local community, rural development partners and the Volksblad. This becomes a shining model to be emulated by all universities intending to reach maturity by remaining significant instances of civil society, contributing to its experiences, as well as sharing in its fears and aspirations in a respectful and meaningful manner.

Roelf Van Niekerk of the University of the Free State and Joe-Anne Vorster from Rhodes University, in Chapter 19 entitled “Economic responsiveness in Organisational Psychology curricula”, conclude the discussion on university-community engagement by focusing on the practical need to align academic programmes with labour market requirements by:

- developing a sound understanding of constantly changing labour market trends;
- acquiring accurate and comprehensive information;
- establishing and maintaining close links with business and industry;
- agreeing on graduate profiles that portray the competencies demanded by the labour market, and
- facilitating academic creativity to develop new programmes using modern teaching and learning technologies.

Community engagement and community service learning should serve, for example, the practical economic needs of both the university and the community in a mutually beneficial manner within the context of equal power relations.

Chapters 1 to 19 focused on the question of creating sustainable empowering learning environments through engaged partnerships, inclusivity of all and effective strategies for teaching and learning in South Africa. In Chapter 20 entitled “The nature of learning styles of students and their implications for learning in Botswana”, Almon Shumba from the Central University of Technology presents some learning experiences in Botswana. The most important finding reported in this chapter is that, in South Africa and globally, learners tend to model their learning after how they are or were taught. This implies that in the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments participants need to be responsible for their own learning, be creative, have initiative and collaborate with others in a meaningful manner.

In order to achieve quality in education all instances of civil society need to collaborate towards a common goal. This book makes this point based on rigorous educational reflection, empirical research and informed practices.
CHAPTER 1

A framework for university and provincial education department’s collaborative research towards the creation of sustainable empowering learning environments

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1. INTRODUCTION

The framework for research as praxis described in this chapter attempts to analyse, understand and on the basis thereof discover and describe significant processes underpinning the creation of learning environments that empower stakeholders in education in a sustainable manner. These stakeholders include learners, teachers, School Management Teams (SMTs), professionals from the North-West Education Department (NWED), and academics from the North-West University (NWU). In order to achieve the above in a systematic manner, the framework focuses on the following seven educational priorities of the Dr Kenneth Kaunda Education District, hence the North-West Education Department and the National Department of Basic Education:

▪ Foundations for Learning Project (FFL);
▪ Quality Improvement, Development, Support and Upliftment Programme (QIDS UP);
▪ the Learner Attainment Implementation Plan (LAIP);
▪ effective implementation of the National Protocol on Assessment for Schools in the General and Further Education and Training Band (NPAS);
▪ Quality Learning and Teaching Project;
▪ Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS), and
▪ Continuing Professional Teacher Development (CPTD).

Besides the above national priorities, the study is couched within the following four Millennium Development Goals (MDGs_ (UNDP, 2005: 2-3) as priorities at the international level, namely to:

▪ **Goal 1**: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
▪ **Goal 2**: Achieve universal primary education.
▪ **Goal 3**: Promote gender equality and empower women.
▪ **Goal 4**: Develop a global partnership for development.

This research project as praxis, hereafter referred to as SELEN, is firmly located within all the above MDGs as it intends to create sustainable empowering learning
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environments that will create a new person who will be a productive citizen of the country and the world, who is self-regulated and capable of independent thought, is creative, respects him-/herself and others, and is committed to improving his/her life and that of his/her fellow human being. Such a new person will be able to address issues of poverty, will seek empowering education with primary education as a mere starting-point, will be sensitive to issues of discrimination be they gender, race, cultural, language, creed or socio-economic issues. Such a new person will also be health conscious, protective and respectful of his/her environment and collaborate with all for sustainable growth and development.

2. The problem

The South African nation has not successfully emerged from the ravages and legacies of a dehumanising and dysfunctional apartheid education (DoE – Ministerial Committee on NEEDU April 17, 2009). This is currently evidenced by the continued poor performance of learners, teachers, schools and the entire education system. The matric (National Senior Certificate or Grade 12) examination results which continue to decline as the barometer of this progress and development (or lack thereof) away from this abhorrent system of apartheid education also attest to this fact (Mail & Guardian online January 07, 2009: 1). The average national matric pass rate was 65.2% in 2007, 62.6% in 2008 and 60.7% in 2009 (Buanews December 30, 2008: 1; DoE-EFA, 2008: 10-14; Mail & Guardian January 07, 2009: 1). This ongoing sad state of affairs regarding South Africa’s education system and performance of our learners is further confirmed in international research involving our learners. For example, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) (Van den Berg, 2009: 1-21) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Baer, Baldi, Ayotte, Green, McGrath, 2007) are the point in question where our learners are outperformed by learners from countries with even smaller economies than our own.

The North-West Education Department (NWED), where this study was conducted, also reflects similar levels of dysfunctionality because of its apartheid education history as part of the South African nation as a whole, and in the words of this province’s Learner Attainment Strategy (LAS) document (NWED-LAS February 02, 2009: 3):

The number of matriculants endorsements increased from 14.6% to 15.9% and the number of schools performing below 60% went up by 14% from 132 to 146 […] and an increase in the number of learners with access to institutions of higher learning to 19.4%.

Although the document describes these percentages from the optimistic perspective of increase, it is, however, noticed that these matric throughput rates with admission to higher education, as is the case nationally, are alarmingly too low and not acceptable as they are symptomatic of an ailing educational system.

Against this backdrop, however, this study acknowledges and credits the efforts of the new democratic and developmental state of South Africa (including the NWED) which are aimed at ameliorating, reversing and uprooting this seemingly recalcitrant