Reimagining Community Schools as Beacons of Hope and Possibility in the South African Context

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Abstract

South African schools in poor communities are facing a crisis of inefficiency and inequality. The failure of the present education schooling system to address the needs of the majority of local communities requires a reimagining of the concept and function of schools. We posit that to adequately address the current education realities in the country, stakeholders in schools need to re-evaluate their role within communities, and how they can best serve these communities by opening up possibilities for a better future for all. Using findings from our respective studies with members of both rural and urban South African communities, we reflect on how fostering mutually beneficial partnerships between a school and its community can contribute towards the holistic development and well-being of all school stakeholders. The article advances an argument for the need to start a process of reimagining school as not only a space for pursuing academic outcomes for the learners, but as an evolving site of possibility of betterment of the community that it serves. As such, the aim of the article is to challenge the present deficit definitions of the "community school" in South African education discourses and to present a progressive reimagining of community schools. We further offer three propositions for enabling such community schools to become beacons of hope and possibility in socio-economically challenged South African communities.

Keywords: community school; hope in education; PALAR; schools as beacons of hope; values-driven schools

Introduction

> Open the doors and walk inside, you'll know a successful school right away. Look at the hallway walls, inside the classrooms and offices, and into the meeting areas. These are the best places to see how schools are working. They show how learning happens, how professional knowledge and planning work, even the extent of community involvement. They also show how students learn effectively—or don't. Excellent schools are schools that work well. (Langer 2004, 1)

Langer's description of an effective school is what most people imagine of schools that "work well", but what is often lacking in such descriptions is the context in which these schools have to survive each day. It is commonly believed that quality education can lift a society from poverty and oppression, and that the function of a school in society is to nurture future generations into responsible global citizens. However, schools are complex spaces that are susceptible to the prevailing socio-political and cultural milieu in which they are located, as well as legislative policies in a country. Despite many democratic changes, restructuring, and reforms over the past two decades in South Africa, its education system is still burdened by high levels of socio-economic inequality and poor levels of academic achievement in schools located in poor, working-class communities, comprising the majority of the South African population (Christie, Butler, and Potterton 2007; Jansen and Blank 2014; Spaull 2012). It appears that the remnants of an apartheid regime that discarded black education remain prevalent in "dysfunctional ex-Black schools", which simply serve to perpetuate social injustice and poverty in their communities (Spaull 2012, 3). As such, the failure of the present South African education schooling system to address the needs of the majority of local communities requires a reimagining of the concept and function of schools. Surely, an excellent school can only function when the community in which it is located is also able to "work well"?

We argue that to adequately address the current education realities in the country, stakeholders in schools need to re-evaluate their role within communities, and how they can best serve these communities by opening up possibilities for a better future for all. The aim of this article is to present how schools in rural, peri-urban, and urban township communities, in the pursuit of quality public education, could become beacons of hope and possibility within their communities. In positioning themselves as beacons of hope, these schools become more responsive to the socio-economic challenges faced by their community, which threaten the functionality of the schools.

We begin by outlining the current challenges facing South African schools in achieving quality education and the often strained expectations of school principals to deliver "effective" and "efficient" schooling in challenging contexts. The discussion then moves on to presenting an understanding of the complexity of the concept of a community school. As our argument tries to move away from the traditional deficit conceptualisation of this term, we present a review of alternative

models of schooling, with a special focus on our understanding of the concept. Based on the assumption that the school-community relationship can be mutually beneficial, this article further explores how forging meaningful and collaborative ties for the benefit of all can be achieved through the concept of integrating community and school for a shared vision. The article then advances an argument for the need to start reimagining a school as not only a space for pursuing academic outcomes for the learners, but as an evolving site of possibility of betterment for the community that it serves. Using findings from our respective postgraduate studies (Cherrington 2015; Damons 2012; 2017), we reflect on how a values-driven school, which creates an enabling and supportive environment and works towards fostering a mutually beneficial partnership between itself and its community, can contribute towards the holistic development and well-being of all involved. We conclude by suggesting three propositions for guiding community schools to foster hopeful interactions on the personal, relational, and collective levels, and consider the implications of such community schools as resources for education transformation in an unequal South African society.

Considering Effective Schools and Quality Schooling in the South African Context

Education scholarship and policy in South Africa provide several key conceptualisations for considering effective schools and quality schooling (Christie, Butler, and Potterton 2007; DBE 2016; Prew 2009). Among these key conceptualisations are the following: responsibility and agency; effective leadership; teacher commitment, effective teaching and learning; safety; discipline; and a culture of concern for effective schools. Particularly, the focus is placed on the important roles of teachers and school leadership in contributing to learner performance in the school (Christie 2010).

In the South African context, as a country still dealing with the inequalities of past policies, there has been a renewed focus on finding ways to rebuild a severely damaged education system. However, the quality and effectiveness of schooling are still mostly measured against the outcome of the Grade 12 results each year (Berkhout 2007), and quantitative measurement of the performance of other grades using instruments such as the Annual National Assessment (ANA). Thus, "effective" schools in South Africa are primarily viewed as schools that are producing good academic results (Berkhout 2007). This understanding of effectivity leads resources from government, the private sector, and other sources to primarily be channeled towards academic outcomes of schools, especially in terms of improved Grade 12 results. However, according to Christie, Butler, and Potterton (2007) and Spaull (2012), for the majority of schools in South Africa, the legacy of a divided past has been largely ignored when it comes to setting such performance expectations. The result is that regardless of the various challenges facing many schools in

impoverished and marginalised communities, they are expected to compete as though on an equal footing with their more privileged counterparts (Damons 2017).

To create an enabling environment for schools to be effective, the Department of Education (DoE 2001) introduced the Whole School Development Model (WSD). This model provides nine key performance areas to measure school effectiveness, which cover curriculum and learning programmes and assessments, the creation of a positive learning environment and extracurricular activities, professional staff development, accountable leadership, good communication and serving the governing body. This model has been met with sharp criticisms for its emphasis on improving internal processes within the school, but paying little attention to how schools can surmount the prevailing social environments of the communities in which they are located, and the role and function of community members in contributing to school development (Christie 2010; Witten 2006).

Along with other principals in the country, the first author of this paper (Damons 2017, 24) reflected during his research on the complexity of understanding school effectiveness in the local context:

> As a school leader with more than fourteen years' experience, the concept of school effectiveness has always been a challenging one for me. "Efficiency" means doing things right, whereas "effectiveness" means doing the right thing. In my opinion, schools tend to focus more on doing things right (efficiency), instead of doing the right thing (effectiveness) in their context. This effort to be "efficient" is informed by the way the Department of Education conceptualises school effectiveness.

This has resulted in many principals prioritising efficiency over effectiveness, and thus the quality of schooling is affected. We support the argument that to achieve quality education for all in the country, South African schools should be shifting their focus from purely academic pursuits towards being more responsive to some of the socio-economic challenges that prevent them from achieving performance outcomes. According to Witten (2006), schools in marginalised communities often struggle with high absenteeism due to ill health and malnutrition, child abuse and general neglect, a lack of hope for the future caused by poverty, and a general apathy towards education. This means that socio-economically marginalised communities necessitate a different understanding of the role and function of schooling if the school is to meet the basic needs of the child, as well as the aspirations of the community. The notion of a community school then comes to mind, which Hoppers (2005, 118) proposes as a viable modality for "basic education provision that can respond better to the interests of learners and their communities while meeting social-policy goals of equity and social justice".

What Is a Community School (and What Is It Not)?

A survey by the National Center for Community Schools (NCCS 2011) found that the term "community school" has been adopted and adapted in more than 69 countries across the globe, including South Africa. Although definitions of the term vary, a common characteristic is the principle of complementary learning that requires systematic, multi-sector collaboration to ensure successful learning and effective schools (Bouffard and Weiss 2008).

In the United States of America and now in some European countries, the concept of community schools is mostly focused on government-funded schools that have opened their doors to community engagements that strive to actualise the full potential of the child (Blank, Melaville, and Shah 2003). As such, the *community* aspect entails mostly in-school and after-school programmes aimed at supporting learners' academic as well as psycho-social development (NCCS 2011). However, in the context of developing countries (such as those in sub-Saharan Africa), a community school often refers to a school that has been established and run by the local community, with some support from government and donor agencies (Naidoo 2009). These divergent views highlight the complexity, and as such lack of consistency, regarding the conceptualisation of the term community school in education discourses.

There are two distinctive models of schooling that build on the notion of a community school: The Health Promoting Schools (HPS) of the World Health Organization (WHO), and UNICEF's Child-Friendly Schools (CFS) (Vince Whitman and Aldinger 2009). Although both models originated from the global North, they have been embraced by the departments of Basic Education and Health in South Africa as frameworks for emphasising the complementary support structures and processes required to enable children to actualise their full potential (Vince Whitman and Aldinger 2009). The multi-systemic approach promoted in both these models recognises that holistic health (mental, physical, environmental, spiritual, and emotional) is key to enabling effective schooling and human development. This is particularly relevant in the South African context in considering the educational context of children living in harsh socio-economic environments (Damons 2017). However, the notion of a Health Promoting School highlights the need for community schools to not only focus on the intellectual and social-emotional development of the learners, but also on the development of the stakeholders within the community who contribute towards and support the school's ability to reach its educational goals (WHO 2014).

These two models have informed our thinking about the role that community schools could play in promoting quality education in socio-economically challenging environments. To be successful these models require community schools to address

the factors that impact their ability to deliver quality public education. However, according to Jansen and Blank (2014, chap. 7, loc. 383):

> You cannot photocopy change. It is difficult to simply transfer the lessons of good practice from an effective school to a dysfunctional school. Every school is different in terms of the context in which it operates, the culture of the school and the challenges it faces.

This means that a failure to recognise the unique and shifting needs of the schools' community, and to build meaningful relationships and solidarity with stakeholders, could result in the generic implementation of programmes that will have little or no relevance to schools, thus dooming them to failure (Rowling and Jeffreys 2006).

Studies on the conceptualisation and effectiveness of community schools in an African context are still quite scarce. According to Hoppers (2005, 118), community schools are "established, run and largely supported by the local organizations, whether they be geographic neighbourhoods (villages or urban townships), religious groups or non-profit educational trusts". Further, it is a school that not only focuses on academic outcomes but also looks at "the building of stronger communities through complementary support and partnerships" (Damons 2017, 3). Hoppers (2005) found that community schools for the most part were established as alternative provisions for basic educational services in areas that otherwise would not have access to conventional public schooling. This makes community schools "primarily a phenomenon of the 'periphery'" (citing Cummings 1997). Building on Hoppers' work, we would like to propose that community schools should become the norm rather than the alternative. However, this requires a shift in the South African education discourse from looking at community schools from a deficit perspective to seeing them as positive spaces for community development and engagement.

Disrupting Deficit Views of Schools and Communities

Within the South African context, the notion of a community school has often been framed from the deficit understanding of a school located in what is known as a township or rural contexts, which are mostly black. Such schools are also often under-resourced and not seen as functional. Despite the bleak picture painted by most literature about the state of schooling in South African communities, there is also evidence that some township and rural schools have succeeded in achieving consistently good results (Jansen and Blank 2014). In 2006, the National Ministry of Education established a committee to look more closely at what they termed "schools that work". The report by the committee provides valuable insight into why some schools, despite being classified as historically disadvantaged, were performing well in terms of successful achievement in the National Senior Certificate Exam (Christie, Butler, and Potterton 2007). Overall, the report states that successful schools

consisted of school members who were highly motivated, and although they had little control over their external circumstances, they battled social conditions by leveraging support from external agencies where possible, and acknowledging, rewarding, and celebrating the notion that success breeds success (Christie, Butler, and Potterton 2007).

Similarly, Jansen and Blank (2014), describing the common characteristics that make schools in challenging contexts work well, list the following strategies as key: Schools establish and maintain firm routines and extend time for learning; teachers teach every day and in every class and demand high expectations of their learners; learners are provided with love and discipline, while parents are encouraged to be involved in the life of the school; principals are visible in their leadership, and act on (and manage) the external environment; and while the school members engage in social entrepreneurship, the focus is on offering learners a life beyond the school. It is evident, as Prew (2009, 826) explains, that schools need to become more "flexible and resilient". Effective schools are those that are able to adapt to the needs of the environment, which means that principals are able to make better informed decisions around the structure and culture of the school. Langer (2004) describes effective schools as not only places where learning happens, but also considers the degree of community involvement in the school's daily functioning. This requires building and sustaining a complementary relationship between the school and its community, which is framed around the understanding that the school has something to offer the community besides education for its children; and conversely, the community has something to offer the school. We argue that it is such a relationship which requires us as educationists and researchers to look beyond the entire traditional construct of community and school engagement. The school in the community should serve a larger purpose than the legislative requirements and should champion the interest of the community it serves (Damons 2012). Similarly, the community should have a direct interest in ensuring that schools develop into spaces that actualise the full potential of their children. These ideas prompted us to ask: What constitutes a community school in a South African context? And, what role could such a community school play in becoming a beacon of hope in socio-economically marginalised communities?

To address these questions, we turn to some of the findings that emerged from our various studies in the field of education: two studies involved a township primary school and members of the community (Damons 2012; 2017), the other engaged with 9- to 12-year-old children and a group of childcare workers at a community-based organisation in a rural community (Cherrington 2015; 2017; 2018). As a comprehensive discussion of each of these studies and their complete findings is not within the scope of this paper, we instead offer selected ideas, reflections and moments from these engagements that shaped our own thinking around reimagining community schools and how these might enable hope and well-being in the community. In this article we offer a synthesis of our key findings on the

characteristics of a community school, and then recontextualise these learnings with literature on hope in education. Guided by a Framework of Afrocentric Hope developed by the second author, we present our emerging ideas on how a school might be transformed to serve not only its primary academic purpose, but also as a beacon of hope for its community.

Methodology and Context of the Studies

The findings and vignettes presented in this article stem from two studies conducted by the first author (Damons 2012; 2017). In the first study, the focus was on exploring the value multi-stakeholders place on "efficacy" when establishing a new school in a socio-economically marginalised community. As an experienced school manager, Damons was formally requested in December 2011 by the Department of Basic Education to lead the opening of a primary school. The community in which the school was located was established as an initiative by the South African government to provide low-cost housing projects and infrastructure in informal settlements (HDA 2012). The challenges that confronted the community at the time included reliance on welfare assistance due to high unemployment as well as social and health challenges (due to HIV and AIDS, substance abuse, and domestic violence). At the time of the request there was only an empty building, with no resources allocated to the school or staff appointed. However, by the end of the year Damons was able to return to his original school and a principal was appointed to continue with the now established school. The study purposefully recruited participants from the teachers, community volunteers, and external organisations that collaborated to establish the school. Damons engaged with these multiple stakeholders to explore the key elements that need to be in place when opening a new community school for it to provide quality education. Returning to the school, his second study built on this work by engaging with a group of community participants, as co-researchers, on how community volunteers could be recruited, supported, and sustained to do work in a community school. Both these studies made use of Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) methodology, a genre of action research. The process of PALAR entails developing a critical collaborative approach to dealing with complex challenges facing society (Zuber-Skerritt 2011) and was especially beneficial for allowing scholarship to emerge through praxis. The action learning set (ALS) (Zuber-Skerrit and Teare 2013) for the study comprised all the co-researchers (Damons, 15 community volunteers, and a foreign community worker who was volunteering at the school at the time). The transcripts and various artefacts generated by the ALS through the dialogical and dialectal discourse became the primary data, which was further triangulated with other secondary data sources (minutes of meetings, newspaper articles, visual artefacts) as the school had a rich history of community volunteerism (Damons and Abrahams 2009). The triangulation also included transcripts of a focus group held with the school management team (SMT). Data was analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA) through narrative analysis and thematic analysis.

The discussion linking Damons' engagement with members of a township primary school to the concept of hope in education is framed by the findings of a third study, which was conducted by the second author. Guided by a critical transformative design, Cherrington (2015; 2017; 2018) engaged over a one-year period with 12 primary school children (aged 9–12 years) residing in a rural community. The children were all Sesotho home-language speakers and registered as beneficiaries of a children's programme (subsidised by the government, the Catholic Church, and various other organisations) where the study took place. The aim of the study was to engage rural South African children, through multiple participatory visual methods (drawings, collages, photo-voice, Mmogo-method), in constructing their experiences of hope. A thematic analysis of the visual and textual data was recontextualised with existing theories of hope and a Framework for Afrocentric Hope was developed to describe hope as conceptualised by rural South African children (Cherrington 2018).

The key findings and propositions below do not stem from a secondary analysis of the data generated by these studies, but rather are used to highlight the complementary value between the school and the community it serves. Further, we share selected vignettes and moments that emerged from these studies to evidence how our own rethinking about the notion of a community school as a beacon of hope and possibility had been guided and shaped into the discussion presented.

Findings: A Community School Is a School in the Home, and the Home in the School

The participants of Damons' study (2017, 168) describe the community school as "an inclusive space that united all stakeholders in creating a non-judgemental and collaborative environment for the children and community members to actualise their full potential". The school's purpose was not only to serve the internal stakeholders (learners, staff, and management), but also to nurture the developmental needs of external stakeholders (parents and other community members). This requires an enabling environment and relationship building, which can be achieved through practising the key values of care, love, loyalty, trust, and respect. These values should not only be enacted within the school to create a safe and enabling environment for learning, but also extended out into the community, encouraging hope and possibility for a better future for all community members. Stemming from this description, the school members' conceptualisation of a community school as a beacon of hope encompasses three key themes: A community school is values-driven; it creates an enabling and supportive environment for all; and it fosters solidarity and mutually beneficial relationships with the community.

A Community School Is Values-Driven

According to the community members in Damons' studies, for a school to be effective it must develop a positive culture that is values-driven. When discussing

what values were most important for a community school to promote within the classroom and in the community, participants decided on love, respect, care, trust, and loyalty.

Love was regarded as the primary foundation for a caring school culture, as it "created a climate of trust, which assisted the school in meeting its obligation of providing quality education to its learners" (Damons 2017, 171). An unemployed community member volunteering at the school explained: "Many of us come from homes without love", therefore the school opens up spaces for learners, teachers and community volunteers to "experience love in different ways" (Damons 2017, 128). She added that coming to school every day and hearing someone say "I love and care for you" had taught her to love and care for herself, as well as to have more love and compassion for others. That is why she expressed that a community school should be founded on love.

Closely linked to the value of love was showing care and support for others by not only providing for their physical needs (such as food parcels and material support), but also by encompassing their spiritual and emotional welfare. According to another community member volunteering at the school, "this could be expressed by a simple 'thank you' for work done; a feeling of being respected by the staff at the school; or of being appreciated by learners" (Damons 2017, 190). The values of love, care, and support could be demonstrated in the school when everyone's contribution to the functioning of the school was meaningfully recognised, acknowledged, and appreciated.

The values of trust, respect, and loyalty were strongly intertwined and emerged when love and care had been established. Respect was discussed in terms of appreciating the role each person played towards improving the school. According to the community members who participated in the study, a community school is all about strong positive relationships, and a lack of interpersonal trust would result in problematic relationships (Damons 2017, 171). It is indeed critical for trust to be fostered between all internal stakeholders of the school through positive, respectful interactions, but it was equally important for the school to develop trust and respect with its community stakeholders. The participants stated that it is vital that members of the community also have trust in the school to be an agent for addressing the challenges experienced in the community. Consequently, trust would encourage loyalty by the community members towards assisting and supporting the school in reaching its purpose of providing quality teaching and learning (Damons 2017). In a community school respect and trust are put into practice when everyone's role and contribution is acknowledged as being equally important for serving the core business of the school (Damons 2012). Loyalty, in turn, can emerge when care, love, and trust are evident. Finally, the embodiment of all these values encourages mutual respect, manifested in the willingness to listen to each other and validate one another's opinions and feelings. For the participants it was clear that if interactions

within and outside of the school are based on these values, "the school site becomes a home to the community members, the school is in the community, and the community is in the school" (Damons 2017, 171).

According to Nieuwenhuis (2007, 66), "Values are enmeshed in everything a school does or aspires to be and is a natural part of what education is about." It is important for schools to set out clearly what values will be upheld, overtly taught and reinforced. But merely stating a school's values will not necessarily translate into action. Values and policies need to be specifically designed into a school's operations, so that the school becomes a "dynamic and changing institution typified by collaborative practices and strategic planning to meet the changing needs of its learners" (Nieuwenhuis 2007, 75). This idea was also highlighted by the community members, who emphasised that while these core values were regarded as the heart or centre of the community school, there should be joint ownership and responsibility between the internal stakeholders of the school (learners, staff and leadership structures) and the community members to ensure the values are upheld through ongoing collaboration and dialogue (Damons 2017).

A Community School Creates an Enabling and Supportive Environment

Once a solid foundation of values is established and agreed upon, it becomes incumbent on the principal and school management team to shape the school culture by ensuring that the values are enacted in consistent and purposeful actions in the school and beyond. From the participants' responses it seems that a community school recognises that learning occurs in an environment that is caring, enabling and supportive. Working on transitioning the primary school towards being a successful community school, Damons (2012, 133) reflects, "I believe that the culture that emerged was one of caring, compassion, and openness to learning. This was important in creating the conditions for the effective functioning of the school."

Another explanation of how the values could be put into practice was when the staff and learners at the school recognised and celebrated the role and value of community members in making the school successful. According to Damons (2017, 129), this is pivotal in creating "an enabling and supportive environment which further fostered the key values of the school". According to one of the older community volunteers who was part of the action learning set, being treated in a kind and respectful way by the teachers and learners created a positive climate at the school, which allowed her to develop her confidence and start respecting herself more. Reflecting on this participant's engagement in the study, Damons (2017, 134) notes, "The better she felt about her role in making the school a success, the more she began to think about a better future for herself and her community too."

To ensure that the school environment is welcoming and supportive for all members who make use of the school, Damons (2017) suggests that the principal and school

management need to adjust and revise existing school systems. Key recommendations include moving away from the hierarchal culture of schooling to a flatter organisation, where all the voices of the multiple stakeholders are heard, valued, and validated. This culture, which creates a humanising space, will encourage voice, create community, and promote agency (Zinn and Rodgers 2012).

The reflections presented here align with Witten's (2006) argument that issues emerging from the context of the school must be addressed for effective learning and teaching to take place. The third theme that emerged strongly from the community members about a community school is that it should be a place that takes responsibility for everyone's development and learning.

A Community School Fosters Mutually Beneficial Relationships with the Community

A visual representation created by the participants in Damons' (2017) study portrays their idea of a community school being a "home" (see Figure 1). In the centre are the images of a house and a school, which comprise the key stakeholders—learners (L), teachers (T), and parents/volunteers (P). The surrounding blocks indicate the key areas in which the community volunteers were active (library, administration, teacher assistants, caregivers for orphan and vulnerable children, grounds and security personnel, toilet, clinic, garden, volunteer project manager), and the chief motivators for their involvement, support from the school and experience of the school as a humanising space (see Damons 2017 for further discussion of these). Finally, the outer circle represents the core values that should be present in the interaction between the school and the community. This representation envisions that the "integration of school and community serves the purpose of creating the desired mutually beneficial relationship between community volunteer and school, in pursuit of the creation of a positive learning environment for the community and its children" (Damons 2017, 169).
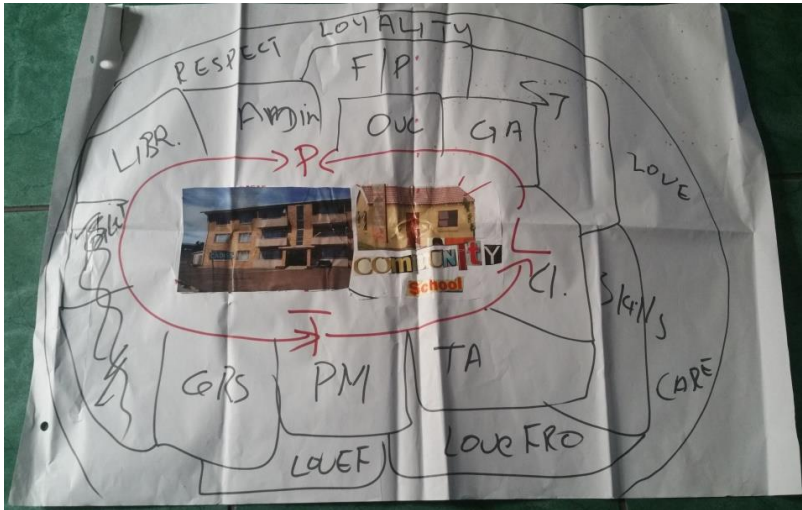
Figure 1: Participants' visual representation of a community school

This shows that a community school is not only a place of learning and holistic development for the learners, but should serve to enhance the well-being and hope of the surrounding community. From the participants' discussions, Damons (2017) concludes it was important that a community school should play a meaningful and nurturing role in the community during and outside school hours. It should be available not just for the children, but for all community members who need assistance. Again, one of the co-researchers, who had volunteered for more than 10 years in schools, described that a community school was seen to be "a school that works to involve the community, e.g. when something happens in the community, the school opens the doors for the community. And also it is a school that opens the gates even after school for the children, even during holidays" (Damons 2017, 167). Thus, a community school provides opportunities for all community members to learn and better themselves. According to another community member with several years of volunteering experience, "[a] community school helps old people to learn new language. A community school is a beacon of hope. Allows everybody to come in developing capacity. … Community school combines parents, learners and teachers to work together" (Damons 2017, 168).

Another way for a school to foster a stronger relationship with community members is to initiate a volunteer support programme. In describing the success of the community volunteer programme initiated at the school featured in his study, Damons (2012, 127) states that it was the exchange-based relationship that was a key factor:

> The community volunteers were exposed to a variety of opportunities that included training programmes from the institution of higher learning, on site job experience,

job creation opportunities and eventually all of them receiving a monthly financial allowance through a government sponsored programme. In return, these community volunteers offered a broad range of support to the school that varied from nutritional support to teacher support in the classroom.

By providing community volunteers an opportunity to work at the school, Damons (2017, 190) reflects that the participants "were motivated when the school expressed an interest and willingness to support and develop not only their spiritual, physical and emotional needs, but also the needs of the broader community as well". It became apparent that the volunteers saw the school as a space in which they could develop their skills as well as their perceived value in the school and community, both through experiential learning from the voluntary services they were rendering and through other programmes offered in the school by external stakeholders. Discussions around the stakeholders of a school usually include the learners, their parents, staff members and the management teams; however, Damons (2012) emphasises that the feeling from the participants in his study was that everyone in the community must share in the ownership of the school and thus should benefit from it. While some literature has focused on how schools can create an enabling learning environment for the learners to achieve their full potential, there is little mention of how schools could enable the development of the community as a whole (Damons 2017).

Finally, the community of the school can be served through beneficial partnerships between the school and external agencies. By virtue of its nature as a subsidised government service, a community school is in an ideal position to leverage key resources for the community through external stakeholders outside of the geographical area of the community. This can include health and social services, further education and training, as well as NGOs, business organisations and external funders. Damons (2012) reflects that the school not only benefited from various donations from, and associations with, external organisations, but that he and his staff also reciprocated by making presentations acknowledging this support. Further, the school was able to extend the core values driving its own success towards a funder who was struggling to get another community involved in its project. This reciprocal sharing of resources and knowledge further strengthened the school and the community it serves. The school also developed a relationship with a public university, providing a space for research and engagement opportunities that served to both expose students and researches to what the school has done, as well as add to further improvements in the school such as improved ICT infrastructure, Grade R assistance and training, and book donations. Such relationships also provide government departments and other stakeholders access to communities through the school as a gatekeeper, ensuring holistic services are delivered to the members of the community.

Discussion: Nurturing Hope and Possibility through Community Schools

From the observations presented, it can be argued that a values-driven community school creates an enabling environment for learning and development, and fosters mutually beneficial relationships and solidarity with its internal and external stakeholders. This led Damons to the idea that such a community school could become a beacon of hope, promoting transformation within the school and community. However, to frame his understanding of how hope might be operationalised in a school context, he turned to Cherrington's (2015) work on hope in the South African context.

Hope as a construct of positive psychology and well-being is often described as a positive human virtue associated with an expectation of goal attainment (Snyder 2000), and a necessary state of being for enduring adversities and finding meaning and purpose in life (Frankl 1984). According to Snyder (2000), hopeful actions require not only a vision of a desired future but include an individual's constant self-appraisal of his/her capability to pursue these goals and what pathways and resources are available. Therefore, concepts such as agency and perceived self-efficacy play an important role in shaping an individual's hope, thinking, and behaviour. We subscribe to the notion that hope is "as much a process as an outcome" (Larsen et al. 2014, 10). Similarly, Stephenson (1991, 1459) defines hope as "a process of anticipation that involves the interaction of thinking, acting, feeling and relating, and is directed towards a future fulfilment that is personally meaningful".

Other authors such as Marques and Lopez (2011) have expounded on the benefits and virtues of building hope in individuals (see, for example, Marques and Lopez 2011). Elevated levels of hope have been linked to a developing sense of self-efficacy, belonging, and identity (Yohani and Larsen 2009). Attributes of hope include goal-setting, perceived competence, and self-worth, which in turn lead to better problem solving and resilience in facing life's difficulties (Scioli and Biller 2010; Snyder 2000). High-hope individuals demonstrate better academic performance (Maree, Maree, and Collins 2008), pursue healthier lifestyle choices (Scioli and Biller 2010), and present fewer psychological problems such as depression and anxiety (Snyder et al. 1997). Viewed as a universal human experience that can be influenced by multiple contextual, personal, relational, and systemic factors, it can be said that hope can be shaped, built, and maintained by purposeful interventions and actions. Thus, it is believed that hope can be injected and cultivated in a school setting to create an atmosphere of motivation, caring, and cohesive functioning (Cherrington 2017; Lopez et al. 2009; Marques and Lopez 2011).

Our discussion is guided by Cherrington's (2015) description of hope as experiencing a better life on a contextual, personal, relational, and collective level. Her study with rural South African children highlights that "building and fostering

an individual's hope in the context of an Afrocentric worldview[1] is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional experience", which means that hope can be intentionally enacted at the personal, relational, and collective levels of human engagement and functioning (Cherrington 2018, 510). The notion that hope exists and can be developed on multiple levels connected with our reimagining of the concept of a community school and provided the groundwork for thinking how hope might be enacted by the school in service of its community. Such conversations resulted in a new understanding of how community schools could become beacons of hope in the community. We present these ideas as three key propositions for guiding schools towards operationalising hope.

Proposition 1: A community school that creates an enabling and supportive environment for personal growth for its learners, staff, and community members is able to foster Personal Hope

On a personal level, being hopeful means taking responsibility for building one's own hope by making positive life choices. This includes planning for a better future and actively engaging in activities that develop the individual physically, cognitively, psychologically, and socially. Thus, being hopeful is central to one's identity and character, indicating that hope is located in a person's self-concept (Cherrington 2018).

According to Skovdal and Campbell (2010), individuals form hopeful identities when they are encouraged to see the world and their communities in a way that gives meaning to their circumstances. This could be seen in the comments from the participants in Damons' study (2017) about their personal experiences of being part of the school in a time of transition. Their own value and the value they attributed to the school shifted positively when they began to see possibilities of a better future for themselves and their community. By being a part of the school community that was caring and supportive, the volunteers stated that their sense of self-worth and agency increased. However, Rodriguez-Hanley and Snyder (2000) have argued that self-efficacy itself is not necessarily sufficient for individuals to engage in meaningful actions to improve their life. The missing component for enacting hopeful actions lies in external motivation and the belief that personal actions would be supported and encouraged by people in one's environment. Snyder and Lopez (2007) opine that collective self-efficacy and agency can develop in groups or communities where individuals believe that by combining their efforts and working together they will be more likely to accomplish shared goals.

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[1] The term "Afrocentric worldview" was first presented in Molefe Kete Asante's book *The Afrocentric Idea* (1989). In this article it is guided by the following: "Afrocentricity is a paradigmatic intellectual perspective that privileges African agency within the context of African history and culture transcontinentally and trans-generationally" (Asante 2007, 5).

School culture lays the groundwork for enabling hope; therefore, establishing an environment of care and trust is key to nurturing hope-enabling schools (Cherrington 2015; Marques and Lopez 2011). This notion is also presented by Barr and Gibson (2013) who explain that to build a culture of hope in schools requires enriching optimism and opportunity through encapsulating what they term four key "seeds of hope": a sense of optimism, a sense of belonging, a sense of pride, self-esteem and self-confidence, and a sense of purpose. When these seeds of hope are nurtured, they lay the foundation for positive transformation in schools. Such seeds can be created through a welcoming environment, an atmosphere of respect and safety, an emphasis on success, high expectations, and community-wide celebrations of positives and achievements (Barr and Gibson 2013). According to Scioli and Biller (2010), creating a sense of belonging is a crucial first step in fostering a hopeful environment.

This mirrors the sentiment of the community members in Damons' study (2017) who described the community school as a "home" in the community. Further, it has been shown that schools that provide opportunities for goal-setting and focus on building competence, creative problem solving, and teamwork can transform classrooms, playgrounds and staffrooms into hope-enhancing spaces (Lopez et al. 2009; Marques and Lopez 2011). Finally, engaging all school stakeholders in taking responsibility and ownership over the success of the school and community instils a sense of purpose, which builds autonomy and pride (Barr and Gibson 2013).

Being hopeful can be viewed as a self-generating process, which, once initiated, is able to grow and sustain itself in a nurturing context. According to Stephenson (1991), once the momentum of hope is activated, people report feeling invigorated, full of purpose, renewed, calm, and encouraged. When people take action towards building their personal hope it energises them to effect hope in their context. In Damons' study, participants expressed that the act of volunteering at the school gave them purpose and value and thus sustained their hope in a better future for themselves and their community. For example, a teaching assistant shared how becoming a volunteer at the school had improved the quality of her life, stating that in the act of contributing towards the success of the school she developed a sense of purpose, which she did not have previously as an unemployed member of the community. Being part of the school made her hopeful (Damons 2017). It seems that because they were a part of a hope-enabling school culture, the community volunteers began to feel motivated and energised to contribute more towards the school and felt they were making a positive difference not only in their personal lives but also in the school and community. It can be said that their personal hope had been activated, which nurtured a positive outlook and motivated them to develop a sense of pride and purpose.

Proposition 2: A community school that is driven by—and lives out—the values of care, support, trust, respect, and loyalty promotes Relational Hope

It has been noted that hope exists, develops, and grows in a person's interactions with other people. It functions on a relational level (Jevne 2005; Scioli and Biller 2010; Scioli et al. 2011; Snyder 2000). According to Cherrington (2018, 10), hope is "relational and generative, and therefore, to build, maintain, and foster one's own hope, an individual needs to engage in hope-enhancing positive interactions with others". Snyder (2000) notes that hope's value increases when it is shared; thus relational hope refers to the acts of *doing* hope with others (Cherrington 2018). Cherrington (2015) further posits that hopeful actions have reciprocal value, meaning that by sharing and enacting values such as love, care, trust, and respect with others, an individual is also simultaneously strengthening his/her own hopefulness.

Hope hinges on experiencing trusting relationships and a sense of belonging with others (Yohani and Larsen 2009). Thus, according to Scioli and Biller (2010), hope can in turn be passed on to others through secure attachments and positive interactions. Hopeful thinking almost inevitably arises in the context of other people who teach and enact hope (Snyder 2000). This level of hope could be said to have been demonstrated in the volunteers' statements in Damons' (2017) study: the more they interacted positively with others, the more they began to feel respected and valued themselves. Experiencing a school environment that promoted and enacted positive values yielded positive relations and interactions between the learners, staff, and community members, to the benefit of all. Further, similar to the findings of Vézina and Crompton (2012), the volunteers at the school supported the notion that there is a connectedness between a sense of purpose and making a difference on a broader societal level.

When looking at schools in socio-economically marginalised South African communities, it is important to consider that from an Afrocentric worldview, which espouses collective-oriented and relational principles, foundations of care, respect, and trust within the family and community contexts strongly guide an individual's sense of meaningfulness and purpose in life (Cherrington 2018). Skovdal and Campbell (2010) argue that for children, hope-related coping is influenced by the value frameworks within their school and community. This carries meaningful implications for a community school in terms of actively fostering positive interactions among stakeholders (both within and outside the school premises). The value-enabled space of hope is further confirmed in Damons' later study (2017, 134):

> An SMT [School Management Team] member in the focus group felt that it was because of that welcoming environment … the warmth that they as volunteers received, the participants seemed to suggest, imbued them with hope, and the various programmes offered to the volunteers further increased that hope.

Proposition 3: A community school that understands that the holistic development of the child and the success of the school lie in the well-being of the community is able to promote Collective Hope

According to Jacobson et al. (2013, 6), the community school's "integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities". Similarly, we argue that when the school becomes the heart of the community, working collaboratively with all stakeholders, everyone benefits and grows. Hope also exists in the level of cohesion and caring experienced within the community. When members of a community are striving for a better future and engaging in hopeful actions, it contributes towards collective caring, compassion, kindness, and motivates personal and relational hope within individual members of that community. This is described as the collective level of hope.

For schools to become hope-enabling spaces for learners and staff, they need to foster positive and meaningful support from the school community through mutually beneficial relationships. Naidoo (2007, xxi) emphasises that in marginalised settings "community participation is fundamental to the success of schools". The members in Damons' two studies were adamant that a key function for a community school should be to build and maintain caring, supportive and respectful relationships between itself and the various community stakeholders. However, the key premise was that such connections have to be bidirectional, and beneficial for both the community and the school. The community itself was seen as a valuable resource for the school, even when members described their own community as disadvantaged or challenged (Damons 2017). Similarly, Jacobson et al. (2013), in their study of successful community schools in the United States, have found that inherent in the strategy and functioning of community schools were valuable community partnerships that supported the core of the schools' work. These partnerships went beyond mere involvement to shared responsibility and ownership for ensuring quality education and services to the learners and community. According to Damons, hope evolved in the community volunteers as they were being nurtured in fulfilling their own potential in a value-filled space of interaction with others in the schools. Such hope-enabling interactions "created a sense of belonging for the community volunteer rendering a service to the school and, in return, volunteers played a major role in supporting the basic functionality of the school" (Damons 2017, 169).

Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2007, 1) state that an individual's well-being "cannot be fostered in isolation from the organisations that affect our lives and the communities where we live". An individual's well-being is critically tied to the level of well-being in his/her environment and community. Hopeful actions promote harmony, togetherness, a sense of belonging, and mutual respect. Cherrington and De Lange (2016) demonstrate that active participation, collective learning and shared reflection can create spaces for fostering hope and collective agency towards active

citizenship. However, in line with Nieuwenhuis (2007, 72), we also caution that "creating, nurturing and advancing values does not simply lead to human rights culture and democracy; it must be managed and leadership must be provided". A community school could become a source of hope and support to all when its management is proactive in establishing a collaborative relationship with the community and encouraging holistic development of the learners, their families, and the broader community.

Nieuwenhuis (2007) asserts that socio-political and economic realities strongly influence learners' behaviours and their motivation for learning, as well as parents' interest in school involvement. We agree with his sentiment that trying to enforce positive values in the classroom without addressing the larger social ills that affect the learners in their home and community is futile (Nieuwenhuis 2007). According to Lopez et al. (2009), when hope flows from one person to another it can alter each person's perspective on the world, what goals they set for themselves, and how they go about pursuing these. They believe that building hope within a school has the potential to ripple out into the school community. To spread hope in an educational community they suggest that perceived barriers to learning and systemic challenges to pursuing a better future must be identified and addressed. Schools can do this by providing resources and services within the community to support members' personal and collective development and growth. Provisions from the school that could be extended outwards towards improving the well-being of the larger community include access to meal provision, access to and use of telephone and fax facilities as well as access to the library and ICT resources for skills development. Schools and management teams can demonstrate resilience to adversity by generating alternative pathways for addressing obstacles in their community, providing stories of success and perseverance to community members.

A community school can also foster collective hope by ensuring open channels of communication between the school and its multiple stakeholders. We argue that when a community school can provide key services to community members through its partnerships with external stakeholders, the community members in turn become more active in supporting teaching and learning within the school. This can only happen if the school extends the core values of care, love, respect, trust, and loyalty towards its community, establishing an enabling environment for mutual growth and success for all.

Contributions, Implications and Limitations

This article is intended to make a theoretical contribution by reimagining community schools as beacons of hope in their community. We posit that a community school thrives by promoting hope and well-being on the personal, relational, and collective levels. The following characteristics of a learning school described by Nieuwenhuis (2007, 74) mirror our reimagining of a community school as:

- having a clearly defined vision with a purpose rooted in collectively agreed values;

- constantly searching for quality in teaching and learning by continuously undertaking self-evaluation and professional development;

- seeing itself as publicly accountable to the local community for the service that it renders to the learners, and the example that educators and parents are setting for the learners;

- placing a high premium on its relationship with—and the involvement of— the broader community. All members are valued as complementary to the educators.

As Nieuwenhuis (2007, 74) so succinctly states, "learning schools never give up on their children but offer hope for the future". We believe that our reconceptualisation of the key characteristics of a community school in the South African context contributes towards a shift in the present discourses on school improvement and quality education. This will require a rethink of the purpose of schools as currently defined in regulations such as the South African Schools Act, shifting the primary focus from only academic delivery to one that includes broader societal transformation. It would also require deeper critique on the required skills and competencies of teachers and principals, as well as support needed by schools to fulfil this mandate. Further, while the importance for schools to foster positive relationships with parents and to encourage parental involvement in learning has been well covered, there is a paucity of literature looking at the generative connection and meaningful relationship-building between a school and its community. Putting guidelines in place to promote such partnerships would further require a review of current education policies on the roles of parents and communities in school improvement, and how schools could be more responsive to the needs of their communities.

While schools and teachers are often associated with providing hope, there is very little support or instruction on how hope can be operationalised and developed as part of their daily functions. We would like to advocate that the concept of a community school should be synonymous with a place for nurturing a sense of community, modelling positive values, and engaging all community members in pursuing a sense of purpose and hope.

The arguments we have presented in this article can also inform educational policy and programmatic decisions on school improvement, allowing for reconsideration of the whole school development policy (DoE 2001). We propose that a community school should be defined and enabled by the community in which it functions. The "one-size-fits-all" approach to basic school functionality, as defined by the Department of Education (2001), is further challenged when community voices are not given an opportunity to shape and inform the quality of education their children

have access to. There is a difference between promoting community members' involvement in the school and the school's involvement in the community, which is where we are proposing the emphasis should be. According to Damons (2017, 203), quality schooling is "not only about results, but about changing the lives of learners and communities. The implication of this is that if the community participates and is supported, they will then support the contextual definition by making themselves available to help the schools."

According to Nieuwenhuis (2007, 69), policy makers "often seem to have a myopic vision that education should be able to solve all societal ills. This is an unrealistic and narrow view which places responsibilities on the education system that it cannot meet." We realise that our discussion here somewhat indulges a utopian view of schools and communities. While we promote a cohesive and collective picture of a school, we are aware that many schools in socio-economically challenged communities experience many internal tensions and challenges to achieving such a culture. Schools as political systems are fraught with challenges, and many South African communities are very diverse and struggle to maintain cohesion, unity, and a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that to adequately provide quality education in the current South African context stakeholders in schools need to re-evaluate their role within communities, and to find ways to engage with all school stakeholders to open possibilities for a better future for all. Consequently, we sought to challenge prevailing deficit definitions of the community school in current South African education discourses by proposing a more progressive definition that actualises community schools as beacons of hope and possibility in socio-economically marginalised South African communities. We advocate that to meaningfully pursue the notion of providing quality education, public schools in South Africa should encompass the three key characteristics of a community school and be guided by the three propositions to foster hope and possibility within their communities. In positioning themselves as places that foster and nourish hope on the personal, relational, and collective levels, these schools can become more responsive to the socio-economic challenges faced by their learners, staff and community members, which in turn allows for open dialogue, the promotion of positive relationships, and collaborations towards improved education for all. Ultimately, we believe that it is through collective action that schools and communities can make a meaningful impact on the education of their children, and through this possibly also meaningfully improve the trajectory of their own lives and that of the community as a whole.

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