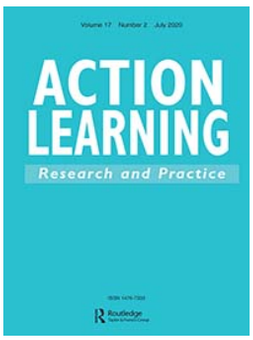

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Transforming traditional views of school leadership for school-community collaboration: a PALAR approach

Bruce Damons [a] and Lesley Angelina Wood [b]

[a]Education, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth South Africa; [b]Education Studies, Faculty of Education Sciences, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Schools in poor working class communities in South Africa face a myriad of equity challenges that impact negatively on their ability to achieve basic school functionality. Yet, within such communities, there exists a wealth of valuable local knowledge and support that can be mobilised to assist school leaders, not only to bring about school improvement but also to reimagine effective schooling. However, the process of integrating such support into a school requires a reconsidering and repositioning of traditional views of school leadership. As a school leader, I embarked on a research journey, with 15 community volunteers, to understand how to integrate their work into the daily functioning of our school. I share my learning from the process of action learning with the community volunteers. I use the seven guiding principles of participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) to validate my claims to knowledge. The key findings indicate the value that PALAR holds for the development of a reflexive school leadership praxis that supports community agency towards school and community development. The conclusions drawn contribute to educational leadership theory by providing an evidence-based example of how an action learning process can facilitate collaboration between school leadership and community members.

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Introduction

School leaders face the difficult task of leading and managing a complex organisation in challenging times. Such complexity is amplified in schools located in socio-economically challenged communities, such as in South Africa, where many of them struggle to perform to the standards expected by the Department of Education (Spaull 2012). The daily socio-economic challenges confronting these communities impact directly on the ability of schools to achieve the levels of basic functionality required by the Department of Education (DBE) (Ngcobo and Tikly 2010). Witten's (2006) notion of a school-based complementary learning framework, recognises the involvement of the community in which the school is located as an essential resource to bring about improvement in schools; Green's (2018) review highlights that such involvement also enables the school to support community development. According to South African policy, functional

CONTACT Bruce Damons bruce.damons@mandela.ac.za
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schools should be able to perform effectively and efficiently in the nine focus areas of the Whole School Development Policy (Department of Education 2001): basic functionality of the school; leadership management and communication; governance and relationships; quality of teaching and educator development; curriculum provision and resources; learner achievement; school safety, security, and discipline; school infrastructure; and parent and community involvement (Department of Education 2001). Community involvement in most schools situated in poor working-class communities has not been sufficiently explored, yet we argue that it has the potential to support improvement across the other focus areas if it is done in a relational, sustainable way. This paper contributes to knowledge in the field of educational leadership by providing an evidence-based example of how school leaders can facilitate effective and sustainable community involvement if they adopt a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) approach to engagement. It is the first paper, according to our knowledge, to provide an example of how PALAR can be applied to improve volunteer involvement in under-resourced community schools for mutual benefit. The development of collaborative relationships requires a change in how school leaders view the potential role and value of community involvement, and we explain how this can be done through a process of participatory action learning.

In South Africa, the term community involvement in schools is typically taken to mean the academic support parents offer their children, which is indeed beneficial for the improved academic progress of learners (Green 2018; Vinopal 2018). The South African Schools Act (SASA) (Republic of South Africa 1996) regulates this parental involvement through school governance, without providing guidelines for how parents, and the wider community, could become involved in other ways to support schools. An extensive body of research is emerging to indicate that schools, especially those located in socio-economically marginalised communities, do benefit from community involvement. This collaboration enables schools to offer holistic support to learners, which leads to improved discipline (and thus, school safety) and learner achievement. Improved discipline encourages teachers to adopt a more learner-centered approach, and thus the quality of teaching and educator development is also enhanced (Damons 2012, 2017; Green 2018; Unicef 2014; Whitman and Aldinger 2009). In short, authentic, relationship-based school-community collaboration contributes powerfully to school functionality. However, despite this evidence, community collaboration with schools is not commonplace (Prew 2009) since most school leaders traditionally do not adopt a reflexive, democratic approach to leadership. Incorporating community involvement in the operation of the school, thus requires a change in attitude, mindset, and leadership style (Damons 2017; Nojaja 2009).

The school leader is the obvious initiator of community involvement since their support for any initiative is a strong determinant of its success or failure (Nojaja 2009). However, such action requires critical reflection on own leadership practices, as the style of leadership either encourages or deters community involvement. For most school leaders, this involves a reframing of the view of the school being primarily the professional domain of educators, a perspective that poses a challenge for the engagement of community members. Lemmer (2007) suggests community members should no longer be seen as passive participants whose sole purpose is to support the professionals in their academic work, but as valuable partners within a mutually beneficial relationship. We contend that

school leadership in socio-economically marginalised communities must be willing to move from mere involvement with the community to mutually reciprocal engagements (Damons 2012, 2017), out of which a strong sense of solidarity can eventually emerge. This willingness to work in unity with the community for mutual benefit requires recognition of the voice and agency that the community member brings to the school (Freire 2007; Zinn and Rodgers 2012), resources that few school leaders have previously acknowledged.

The notion of a self-critical, reflective school leader in service of the community is foreign to most school leaders, who tend to have been orientated in an authoritative style of leadership, focused primarily on the pursuit of academic achievement (Christie 2010; Prew 2009). We contend that a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) approach enables critical self-reflection on the question, 'How can school leaders improve their practice to enhance collaboration with community volunteers towards mutually beneficial outcomes?' We do this by presenting a case example to explain how the first author, who was a principal (head teacher) in a socially-economically challenged community, came to understand how to close the ontological and epistemological gap between school leader as school manager (who operates from a hierarchic relationship base and grounds practice in the theory of leadership), and school leader as a participatory activist researcher (who aims to develop democratic relations and acknowledges the value of local knowledge to add to theory). In this paper, he uses the seven guiding principles of PALAR to validate this claim to knowledge. This experience of participatory action learning provided valuable insights that not only guide his present praxis as Director of a Centre for the Community School but also contributes to the theory of educational leadership by providing guidelines to enable school leaders to similarly employ an action learning approach to improve their collaborative relationship with the community for mutual benefit.

Leadership in the community school

We proceed from the stance that a community-school[1] located in a challenging socio-economic environment should be a beacon of hope for the community, an inclusive space where they feel welcomed and where they can gain knowledge, skills and support that will improve their home life – a 'school in the home, and a home in the school' (Damons 2017, 172). Since 'inequitable community conditions' (Green 2018, 487) ultimately impact negatively on the functioning of the school, the leadership should seek ways to support the community in which it is situated (Berliner 2006). The leader of a community-school thus has to embrace the idea of being a change agent, willing to mobilise the resources at their disposal to be responsive to the contextual realities of the community.

School leaders, therefore, have to be mindful and critical of factors such as language, race, class, and gender, which influence how individuals interact with the environments in which they function (Baxter and Jack 2008). Due to the century-long historical oppression of the non-white races in South Africa, poverty is entrenched in these population groups. Although South Africa is now a political democracy, the majority of the population still suffers the mental, social, and material consequences of years of degradation.

Understandably, community members may have negative connotations and experiences of school and schooling, as education was a powerful tool to advance the myth of white superiority. School leaders and teachers, irrespective of their racial classification, are perceived to be middle class and better educated by the community, giving rise to skewed power relations that deter collaboration (Wood 2020).

School leaders must be aware of how their formal education and personal life experiences might influence how they view and are viewed by community members (Green 2018). Academic training of school leaders tends to perpetuate the traditionally hierarchic and authoritarian leadership practices common in South Africa, particularly in township and rural schools (Moorosi and Bantwini 2016). Despite attempts to introduce more distributed notions of leadership and close the theory-practice gap through initiatives such as the Advanced Certificate in School Leadership (Bush, Kiggundu, and Moorosi 2011), action learning is not explicitly included in professional development programmes for school principals. Ongoing, critical self, and group reflection becomes vital to understand how to navigate the relational complexity of collaboration necessary for the collective buy-in of all stakeholders to support the vision and mission of the community-school (Maxwell 2012). Participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) (Wood 2020; Zuber-Skerritt 2011) provides an appropriate methodology to navigate this complexity.

Participatory action learning and action research

Participants in a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) (Wood 2020) project could be seen to be what Hunter, Emerald, and Martin (2012) call Participatory Activist Researchers (PA^{t}R). The academic researcher, in this case, the school leader, has to position themselves as a full participant in the study, committed to attaining personal and organisational development through living out the life-enhancing *Ubuntu* values of tolerance, respect for all and recognition of the interdependence of all human beings. It is this positioning, coupled with the objectives to work collaboratively with co-investigators by creating a humanising space for the engagement to occur, which makes participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) (Wood 2020) an appropriate paradigm and methodology to guide research with community members. PALAR develops action leadership (Zuber-Skerritt 2011), the foundational principles of which are collaboration, openness to learning with and from others, democratic decision-making, and respect for the voices of all, especially those of a dissenting nature. It involves critical reflection on action and a commitment to change where necessary. Action leadership enables all (and not just those with a formal position) to become leaders in their spheres of influence. PALAR, like other action research designs, follows a process of iterative action and reflection by participants who form an action learning set to lead the project. In the case used as an example here, the first author as Principal had initiated a community volunteer programme and it was from this pool that he recruited 15 volunteers to join him to develop a model to inform the recruitment, support, and retention of community volunteers for mutual learning and development. Although this group was large, the value of inclusivity meant that he could not exclude any who volunteered. Details of this process, which is not the focus of the current article, can be found in Damons (2017).

Method

For this article, the first author draws from data recorded in his personal reflective journal in which he critically reflected on his learning about collaborative leadership as he grappled with the often contradictory roles of principal, researcher, and participant. The aim of the paper is to show how an action learning process aided the conceptualisation of principles of leadership to foster community involvement in socio-economically marginalised school environments. He used the seven principles of PALAR, abbreviated to the 7Cs by Zuber-Skerritt (2011), to structure his critical reflection: communication, collaboration, commitment, competency, critical reflection, and coaching to build character as an action leader, operationalised through three processes (3Rs): reflection, recognition and relationship building. This data was supplemented by transcripts from the various engagements in the action learning set (ALS) and other secondary data sources, which had a direct relation to the leadership phenomena discussed in this paper, including photographs, observation notes, leadership artefacts, and relevant policy documents. To triangulate the data, it was analysed independently by both authors, who then reached consensus on the interpretation. Author two was the academic promoter of author one and thus had critical insight into the study over several years. Ethical approval for the larger study was attained from the university ethics committee (H15-EDU-ERE-006). In the next section, the first author reflects, in the first person, on his learning to develop theoretical principles for how school leaders can use PALAR to promote community involvement for mutual benefit.

Embodying the principles of PALAR to aid school leadership to promote community-school collaboration

Here, I reflect on my attempts to embody the principles of PALAR to enhance collaboration with the community members in my project to develop principles for the leadership of a community-school. It is important to clarify upfront that at the time of this study, I was the Principal of the school, male, had tertiary qualifications, and was living a middle-class lifestyle. Although I was classified as coloured in the apartheid system, and thus have experienced oppression on many levels, my situation was one of power and privilege in relation to the community members I was working with.

Fostering symmetrical communication

> The principle of communication kept me accountable for creating the space which would build democratic, participatory relationships where all voices were listened to (PJ 7/3/14).

To ensure symmetrical communication and acknowledgment of the input of all members of the action learning set, I first had to recognise how the multi-lingual reality affected participation (Gawlewicz 2016). Critically reflecting on the lack of participation of some members, I realised they might not feel comfortable engaging in the large group, given that we spoke mostly in English (because of my limited language skills). I then decided to ask other members to lead smaller action learning groups in their language, which seemed to improve participation:

> This immediately encouraged quieter voices to participate in the dialogue and I observed the animated debate in the smaller groups and the freer use of isiXhosa in the discussions and

> more active participation by all. This really seemed to open up space for honest critical engagement (PJ 11/9/2015).

Although Gawlewicz (2016) also points out that translating back into English might lead to some distortion of meaning, in this case, I felt it was worth the risk to encourage participation. The translators in each group were very careful to check out their translations with members, who did all understand English, even if they lacked the confidence to speak it at times.

Nojaja (2009) emphasises the need to develop an effective communication strategy if schools want to engage with the community. My poor communication within the organisation was made clear during the focus group with the School Management Team (SMT) when I learned that not all SMT members understood what the community volunteers were doing in the school. Also, they pointed out that a lack of proper communication was the primary reason that there was tension at times between the teachers and the community volunteers. Management and communication are regarded as one of the primary focus areas in the Whole School Evaluation policy (Department-of-Education 2001). The reflection in and on the various engagements helped me to move away from a hierarchal approach where the school leader determines what, how, and when communication occurs, to begin to listen and respond to the communication of others. To equalise power relations in communication, I suggested that the community volunteers not use the formal title of 'Sir' or 'Mr. Damons', but rather that they call me by my first name. This led to some fun, but also created some tense and awkward situations for the older volunteers, who had been brought up to defer to authority. Since a founding principle of PALAR is respect for diverse cultural practices and norms, we agreed that they could use whatever mode of address individual participants felt comfortable with. – these included 'Bruce', 'Mr. Damons' and 'Tata (Father)'. It is unlikely that ingrained power relations, reinforced by the use of formal titles, would change in the short term. However, I felt that showing a willingness to be addressed by my first name, or by any title that the participants felt comfortable with, helped to begin to disrupt unquestioned assumptions about the power relations.

Participation in the action learning set also taught me the importance of creating dialogical spaces in other areas of my work. I became more open to (often dissenting) views from different stakeholders in the school and this flow of communication enhanced the management of the school. Majiros (2013) argues that the ability to create space to share ideas is a vital component of good leadership.

Willingness to collaborate

The dialogical space created in the action learning set led to the fostering of community and the desire to work for change collaboratively. I realised that by supporting one another, we were not only fostering high-quality relationships (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005) but also creating synergy among ourselves. Through the development of these relationships, participants displayed the willingness to perform multiple roles within the action learning group. These roles included facilitation, setting up and preparing our venue, and preparing meals for the meeting. I, too, was assigned tasks, and no task was regarded as too menial for me to do. In some of the meetings I prepared the coffee and tea and in the final cycle of our engagement I made notes of the discussions, while

the facilitation tasks were divided among the other participants. By volunteering to do such work, I embodied the value of equality within our collaborative relationship. In the action learning set, I was no longer the Principal, but a peer who was willing to contribute to the common good, in whichever way the group decided was best.

Collaboration also extended to the emotional realm. As unanimously agreed, we started each session with a prayer, led by whoever wanted to go first. As we began to trust each other, members used this time to voice personal prayers for the challenges they were experiencing. Given the adverse conditions that characterised their daily lives, this emotional support was essential to them. It also made me more sensitive to the difficulties they faced in just surviving and increased my empathy for their problems.

I learned that a leader has to '*convey the sincerity of my quest for democratic relationships with community members*' (PJ 6/9/2015). Creating this collaborative environment, however, requires a high degree of commitment from the school leader.

Commitment to solidarity and reciprocity

A school leader who leads a school located in a community faced with so many challenges has to display an understanding of the material conditions of the community, and stand in solidarity with community members in their quest to improve their quality of life. I was proud to position myself as a Participatory Activist Researcher (PAtR) (Hunter, Emerald, and Martin 2012), committed to working in unity with community members for mutual benefit. However, this view of myself was challenged when one member reminded me that even though they recognised my contribution towards attempting to improve their lives, I would never fully grasp their challenges because I did not live in the community. This reminder of my privileged position spurred me to develop a deeper understanding of how the daily hardships of community life impacted on issues like school attendance and community engagement with the school. This emerging understanding enabled me to commit to a high level of solidarity as we worked toward the mutually beneficial outcomes of school improvement and community development.

Even though I have now left the school, in my new position at a university, I still use the services of the community members to train other schools in community-school collaboration, allowing them to earn an income. Such commitment to solidarity was not always easy or comfortable, as many times I had to take action without the approval of the Department of Education. I was called to explain my actions on different occasions. Still, my commitment to reciprocity (Sherr 2008) empowered me to persist in supporting the community where possible on both a personal and institutional level.

On a personal level, engagement in the PALAR project required us, as a school leader and community volunteer, to balance the research with the requirements of our other professional and personal commitments. In Cycle 3, when the funding did not come through for a validation workshop, I had to host the meeting at my home and provided the required catering. We had two children with us, one a three-month-old infant, whose mothers could not afford a babysitter. My commitment to reciprocity was also strengthened through the example of the community members. On one occasion, we had a meeting scheduled during school holidays, and even although it was pouring with rain, and meant walking through mud with little protection against the elements, 14 of the 15 participants still came.

Another key element needed for effective leadership is the need for patience. I realised this as we developed competencies to navigate the research journey and provide the necessary support to participants who were learning at different paces. This included finding a way to deal with the complexity of working in three languages, all the while being mindful of our primary commitment to the wellbeing of all participants. As a school leader, I had to model a commitment to show that I was serious about supporting the community volunteers by practicing what I preached.

Coaching for personal development

The opportunity to serve as a coach occurred throughout our period of engagement. By coaching, I mean supporting the community members by providing training and guidance where needed in a manner which enabled them to learn for themselves. I reflected, '*The coaching was facilitated by learning from one another in dialogue, discussion and asking ask fresh questions*' (PJ 10/8/2016). Because this was the first time that any of the participants had taken part in this kind of group, coaching through questions had to be combined more directive capacity development of research skills. It was during these, sometimes playful, sessions that community members learned how to use dictaphones, video cameras, and role play interviewing techniques. Such training was a necessary pre-requisite for participants to be able to engage confidently in the action learning group:

> I had to learn patience and persistence in order for this to realize. I had to train the participants on how to generate, record and transcribe and analyse data and how to prepare presentations. The lesson here is that one cannot expect community participants to participate equally if you do not first provide training for them to feel competent to do so (PJ 10/8/2016).

Ideally, school leaders should take the lead not only in identifying the skills needed by willing community members to serve the school, but also be prepared to offer them personal development opportunities. Such individual development contributes to whole school improvement since it capacitates volunteers to render services across the nine focus areas of Whole School Development (Department-of-Education 2001). I also needed and appreciated the coaching I received from people outside of the action learning group

> My learning did not occur only within the action learning sets; a great deal of my learning resulted from the feedback I received from external sources, such as the academic learning set I was part of. Participation in such groups should be a required part of a principal's job to enable reflection on their practice. The creation of communities of practice among principals, especially those interested in the model of the community-school, could go a long way in assisting principals to engage about matters related to the creation of such schools (PJ 4/10/2015).

As I listened to and coached the group members, I, in turn, learned so much about their lives and the adversities they face, which brought insights that increased my empathy and better enabled me to understand why children and adults acted in ways that I had previously labelled as disruptive and non-collaborative. With this knowledge, I could then influence my teaching staff to change their attitudes towards community members and learners to encourage better communication and collaboration in the interest of the child.

The need for critical (self-) reflection

Key to PALAR is the ability of participants to critically reflect both individually and collectively to enable the growth of self and organisation. The iterative nature of the process meant that I, as the initial facilitator, would summarise the data captured in the previous action learning set meeting before we commenced with new business. I had to be willing to accept that I might not have captured the true essence of the discussion:

> I was challenged when I presented the customary feedback on data that I captured during the first action learning set of Cycle Two. One participant contended that it did not represent the views expressed during the discussions. The set members confirmed her assertion, and I had to do a correction and present it at the next meeting (PJ 25/3/16).

I was also challenged by one of the members who was acting as the transcriber of the meetings. It seemed to her that my voice was dominant in some of the recordings. She felt that I also caused confusion in some of the sessions, which might result in the data being compromised. We then agreed that the final sessions of Cycle 3 would be facilitated by the key advisory group, made up of three participants chosen by the other members of the action learning set. A planning session also preceded this cycle of data analysis and validation with the advisory group. This learning underpins the importance of critically reflecting on the interaction within such groups, and of being willing to listen and accept critique with an open mind, and change where needed. Due to the language, cultural and power barriers that potentially impeded open communication in this context, the suggestion by the to form a key advisory group, was a creative response to enable them to participate more freely that resonated with the communal values of Ubuntu.

I was fortunate to have several 'critical friends', which included international scholars who made sure that I remained grounded in the methodological process. The reflections I was required to write as a member of this other action learning group ensured that I steadily worked on developing my competencies. Self-reflection was important not only as a member of the research project but for my practice as a school leader. One of my mentors, a retired academic and social activist, frequently reminded me during our Sunday morning walk and talk of the importance of my research contributing towards the broader social justice issues confronting society. The need to continually reflect made me a more reflexive practitioner, not only in my role as a school principal but also in my subsequent leadership roles, and my relationships.

I noted how:

> All participants, including myself, critically reflected how the emerging data confirmed and sometimes contradicted existing practices. The participants reflected on the volunteer programme at the school and managed to identify ways in which it could be improved and to develop an action plan to do so. I learnt that my critical reflection was facilitated by the writing up of summaries after each meeting, which allowed me not only to reflect on the process critically, but gave me an opportunity to think about my practice as a principal. For instance, the participants suggested I was partly to blame for some of the tensions which helped me to see that I could have been more proactive in creating multi-stakeholder spaces before vacating my post. I think that school leaders, in general, will benefit from this sort of reflection on a daily or weekly basis (PJ 21/5/2016).

The reflections cited here support the claim that improving my capacity for critical reflection allowed me to be open to ideas for improvement, both in my leadership and in school functioning.

Building competency for collaboration

Leading such a research project proved challenging to me as a school leader who was also expected to perform many other roles, ranging from instructional leader to social worker. Reflecting on my competence to manage these multiple roles, I learned that building relationships with volunteers is challenging and requires the ability to prioritise commitments. Although there were many challenges along the way, it helped me to approach every experience as a learning experience – even those we considered to be failures and that these 'failures' allowed me, and the community volunteers, to reflect on what went wrong and how to try another approach. Reaching levels of competency to manage a community-school effectively requires patience and the willingness on the part of school leaders to enhance the capacity and skills of all stakeholders, themselves included.

The principles of the PALAR process are operationalised through reflection, relationship, and recognition of learning. The process of action learning discussed above allowed me to emerge as a reflexive leader. Although the journey was messy, exciting, and confusing at times, it forced me to take a critical look at my leadership and the systems of operation in the school. This personal look at self and system meant that I was able to encourage other stakeholders to do the same. I also came to learn healthy relationships is one of the key cornerstone for engaging the community to support school improvement.

These relations have to be grounded in strong values, and the school leader has to be able to exemplify these. The action learning process revealed to me that as a researcher, especially an activist researcher, one has to be committed and sincere to the goals and objectives jointly constructed with participants. The willingness of the school leader to be vulnerable to self and other stakeholders further assists in the building of healthy relationships. Vulnerability should be coupled with humility by recognising that as a leader, you cannot ensure the basic functionality of your school without recognising and celebrating the role of all stakeholders in achieving this task. Beyond the recognition of the material challenges volunteers face, it is also important to recognise the value that the volunteers add to the school. Each year, we had a recognition function where community volunteers were celebrated by the whole school and invited other community members who were not part of the volunteer programme. The recognition of all stakeholders, including teachers, learners, and community members is essential to build community within the school. This is particularly true in communities faced with so much adversity. The recognition of their adversity and the commitment of the school to stand in solidarity with the community enabled me to become more empathetic, patient, and understanding of volunteers. By embodying the 6 Cs and 3Rs as explained above, I was able to build the character (7th C) of an action leader (Zuber-Skerritt 2011).

Key implications for school leadership in a community school

For the PALAR process to be successful and to support character building for school leadership, it needs to adhere to the '6Cs', discussed above. Values critical to such a process include integrity, trust, honesty, and respect for diversity. These values facilitate openness

to new perspectives, opportunities, and innovation – all key traits of action leadership, and essential for principals leading community-schools. The adverse socio-economic conditions confronting many schools in South Africa and globally require leaders to be resilient despite these conditions, and willing to embrace the complexity that such adversity brings. They have to be open to looking at new ways of approaching schooling as present models are failing the majority of the South African population. Specifically, the school leader has to:

- Create space for open, honest, and transparent communication between school and community. This may prove challenging for school leaders because of their positioning as figures of authority. However, it is essential to foster reflexive dialogue for community members to feel that their voices are recognised, valued, and acknowledged. Such acknowledgment fosters a sense of belonging and encourages them to be involved in the processes of change (Zinn and Rodgers 2012). The commitment to symmetrical communication is thus vital for participatory leadership praxis.
- Be brave enough to embrace tensions and emotions within the group, as well as to challenge policy imperatives and practices that hamper collaboration with the community.
- Demonstrate solidarity with the lived experiences of the community. This requires going beyond the usual remits of a school leader, to take action to support the physical, material, and emotional needs of the community.
- Learn patience and be willing to act as a coach/mentor/trainer when required. The commitment to develop the community volunteer must extend beyond only presenting opportunities for growth that will support school improvement. In essence, they also need support in bringing about meaningful change in their lives.
- Be willing to learn from and with others, for instance, in a community of practice.

Conclusion

In this article, we have indicated the value that PALAR, as within the South African context, holds for the advancement of a reflexive leadership praxis to support community action towards school and community development. The key lessons highlighted contribute towards the development of a theory of how action learning, within a PALAR process, can enable school leaders to change their practices to effectively collaborate with community for mutual benefit. The PALAR requirement to develop democratic, inclusive relationships, to value community knowledge and experience, and to base the process on mutually embraced values, enables the emergence of solidarity in community-school collaborations. The PALAR process, although messy, challenging, painful, and confusing at times, allows the school leader to make personal adjustments towards a more democratic, inclusive leadership style that shifts community-school interaction from mere involvement towards an end-point to one where they stand in solidarity with their community. The conclusions we draw in this paper contribute to the scholarship of school leadership within challenging socio-economic context and provide a theoretical framework for the application of action learning in community settings. The knowledge emanating from this paper guides the school leader on how to reconsider traditional approaches to leadership

and develop a collaborative, reflective, democratic, and relational alternative more suited to partnering with the community in the quest for school improvement – and community development.

Note

1. Community and school is hyphenated to emphasise the importance of the link of the community to the school and the school to the community.

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Notes on contributors

Bruce Damons, Ph.D., MA, STD is an appointed Lecturer and Director of the Centre for the Community School, an engagement centre of the Faculty of Education, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa. He has extensive experience in the schooling sector, having served 16 years as a principal in a community-school. He is an emerging school scholar in school improvement and the fields of critical participatory action research.

Lesley Angelina Wood is a Research Professor in the Faculty of Education at North-West University and Director of a research entity, Community-based Educational Research. She is an NRF rated researcher whose interests lie in researching participatory ways to facilitate psycho-social wellness within various educational communities with a particular focus on action research for professional, institutional and community learning and development. She has received international recognition for her work in action research and HIV and AIDS, having been awarded an Honorary Doctorate in 2014 by Moravian College, Pennsylvania, USA. She has published widely and has received several internationally funded grants for her projects, as well as holding various honorary research appointments at international institutions at various times.

ORCID

Bruce Damons http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3395-4789
Lesley Angelina Wood http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9139-1507

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