2019 NATIONAL IMBIZO

Exploring partnerships between Schools-Communities-Universities

Briefing Document 1: Education, Engagement, Scholarship

We believe education is a public good and that in a democracy, part of its purpose is to inculcate and socialize the young into the ideals and the practices of democratic life. We understand that the purpose and practice of education extends beyond schools and schooling, is concerned with personal as well as societal development, and is irrefutably linked to the conditions within which is it located. We believe that schools are not separate from communities but should be owned by the communities they serve. What does this mean in a country with the highest Gini coefficient?

The democratic imperative of a single curriculum for all, especially given our racialized, unequal history, was a necessary condition upon which to build an education system in post-apartheid South Africa. However, the failure to keep in mind the continuing inequalities and injustices of our past has meant that the various well-established crises in education are disproportionately felt by the most vulnerable and marginalized people, schools and communities. So, while we recognize the need to work in education, schools and communities in general, our responsibilities lie in supporting those that benefit the least from the current societal and educational arrangements.

To this end, in order to achieve functional schooling, we advocate for the mobilization of all stakeholders within the school community, believing that they should play an active role in the school and that the school should benefit the community around it. As a public good, those with a vested interest in education should have space to debate and engage, share, mobilise around relevant issues, and take local action. We recognize this by defining engagement as *a mutually beneficial and collective process which recognises the multiple voices present. The social, political and economic context of communities provides the catalyst for this praxis to occur. It is an iterative process which is messy, contradictory and not linear, that acknowledges and attempts to minimise power differences*. It is this form of engagement which we recognise will foster teaching and learning which is*, organic, co-constructed, and multifaceted which values the diversity of knowledge across various*

contexts. The products of these engagements must be shared and interrogated for it to be mutually beneficial for all who are engaged in the process.

This way of attempting to critically understanding the realities of educating children in poor rural and urban communities in order to make educational and social change is a departure from the dominant forms of scholarship that dominates universities. Praxis is wholly concerned with the development of theory which is built from grounded knowledge and lived experiences of people. This in turn is interrogated through processes of dialogue, action, contestation and co-construction, mindful of relations of power and the internal and external limitations.

Situating schools and schooling within communities allows people to link educational struggles with broader struggles waged by workers, women, youth etc. As an educative process it builds democratic practices and cooperation by harnessing greater social participation and democratic public engagement. Our agenda is to build alternative models of the community school that are not simply ameliorative but contribute towards educational and societal change.

Questions for consideration:

1. Can we work critically for change without an analysis of the interlinking and complex ways in which communities are linked to global ideologies and struggles?
2. Do we understand the ways in which communities (including school, university communities) feed into broader global forces through the exploitation of their labour (in a broad sense of the word, not simply 'work'), their land, their knowledges?
3. How do we avoid supporting models, processes, and policies that use the progressive language of participation, engagement, empowerment, etc, yet ultimately aid the transfer of resources and knowledges away from people and communities that need them?
4. How does a culture of silence affect people's individual and collective agency? How are social relations shaped by socially-attributed power? And how do we structure dialogue to overcome these?

Briefing document 2: Engagement and scholarship

A number of universities in South African, and globally are beginning to engage more actively with local communities as part of their social responsiveness and engaged scholarship agenda. However, we believe that there is a great deal of work that still needs to be done – both in terms of how we think about engagement and scholarship; how they are positioned in relation to each other and their practical application across different fields of knowledge.

The disconnect that continues to exist in most universities between engagement and scholarship functions to reinforce a separation between knowledge and practice. This delineation is problematic for at least three reasons:

1. Locating expertise within a single domain reinforces the perception that universities are the seat of power. This reproduces current hierarchies of knowledge, and assumes that knowledge generated within the university is valued above local forms of knowledge, and can therefore be externally applied to address particular problems within the broader society.

2. The implicit distinction between academic knowledge/scholarship on the one hand, and community-based knowledge on the other positions the "community" as singular, homogenous and separate - often reducible to historically disadvantaged and marginalised groups (Badat, 2013).

3. The notion of community as external to the context inhabited by the university reinforces the separation of social, cultural, historical and institutional knowledges and practices. Such constructions of separate knowledges and expertise highlights a normative problem-solving approach, often applied by universities in the ways in which they engage with communities – and in how they think about scholarship.

Broadening our understanding of knowledge as complex and multifaceted and acknowledging that knowledge exists beyond the borders of the university requires an awareness of patterns of exclusions and marginalisation which have historically been part of the colonial project. Universities need to acknowledge in their partnerships with schools and communities that teachers, principals, parents and learners are the co-constructors of knowledge, and should therefore be integral in processes of knowledge generation.

The drawing together of theory and practice is critical in equalizing their individual and collective value. Just as theory informs practice, so practice informs theory. The bidirectional flow between engagement and scholarship – knowledge and practice - opens new dialogic spaces through which to critique normative notions, such as those highlighted

above, and to explore new interconnections through which voices that have been historically marginalised are centered.

The idea that knowledge is co-constructed, situated within a particular context/s, and exists in multiple forms, suggests that processes of knowledge production can take place by bringing together diverse perspectives. Through communicative interaction between the university and community partners, multiple forms of scholarship can be generated. It is these processes of coming together that requires the conceptualisation of a new, more nuanced language of engagement.

It is hoped that the Imbizo will offer one such opportunity for communicative interaction and dialogue, through which participants are able to critique conventional practices by examining how processes of community engagement might contribute to knowledge generation and application. We therefore hope to foster opportunities for participation and inclusion in co-generating knowledge – and in re-conceptualising a language that describes the work we do with more clarity.

As we move forward, we need to ask how community-school-university partnerships might play a joint role as 'creative catalysts' (Benson, Harkavy & Puckett 2007) for transformation and social justice. The *university-school-community* triad needs to be explored as a platform for universities to reposition themselves in relation to the communities they serve. Re-imagining the role of the university in terms of broader community engagement and social responsiveness has implications for how we think about scholarship, and how we engage with our partners. A move towards establishing clearer models of research without boundaries (Wilson, 2018) acknowledges the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and has direct implications for how we think about scholarship.

The leveling out of expert knowledge requires ongoing processes of collaboration, interdisciplinarity, critical reflection and interaction so that "conceptual coherence and contextual coherence" come together in relevant ways. As Fataar (2018) points out, this is not an either/or proposition. Scholarship is constituted in a specific way depending on the interplay between concept and context. The multiple positions from which knowledge is generated therefore suggests that through these interactions, knowledges are co-produced relationally and contextually, and that through dialogical exchange, partners are able to collaborate in co-producing knowledge as they work towards building empowerment, solidarity and relevant scholarship.

Questions for consideration:

1. How can we frame our work in ways that can simultaneously take account of the different contexts of schools, communities, and universities but also provide a way of talking both across and from within such partnerships?

2. How can we reimagine the role of the university in terms of broader community engagement and what could this reimagined space look like?
3. How might we think about scholarship within this reimagined space?

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Briefing Document 3: The 'Politics of pedagogy'[1] - Teaching and learning in the context of university-community-school partnerships

Universities and schools exist in broader ecosystems or systems of joint activity – 'activity systems' (McMillan 2011) - that serve to put pressure on their practices; to shape their roles and commitments; and, in turn, provide much of the impetus for their existence, in ways that both enable and constrain. These activity systems, which are both internal and external to the institutions and involve engagement with many communities, consist of multiple actors, practices, tools, all with their own histories. In the context of university-community-school partnerships, these activity systems intersect in complex ways in multiple spaces, and as such, often exist in tension with each other.

The space where these systems intersect has been referred to as a 'boundary zone' (McMillan 2011), the space where actors and practices intersect in multiple challenging ways through participation in joint activities. Teaching and learning are examples of such activities. University, community and school educators can be viewed as boundary workers, a challenging role in which they need to understand multiple systems simultaneously and do a lot of 'translation work' across different spaces (ibid:2011). This includes understanding that teaching and learning takes place in many different spaces, where multiple ways of knowing and doing interact. Therefore, and linked to the purposes of this project, it might be useful to shift our thinking about teaching and learning towards a framework that locates teaching and learning along a continuum including formal (accredited), non-formal (formal and organised but not accredited) and informal (daily interactions, peer learning etc.).

In the service learning field, much literature focuses on the formal learning that takes place in either universities or, in the case of partnerships with schools, in schools as well. It also draws historically on learning theories that focus on individualised experiences of learning. Given that the nature of partnership work as inherently social, this leaves a gap in the ways in which we can understand teaching and learning in partnership contexts. To fill this gap, anthropologist Jean Lave's (1996) work on learning in apprenticeships, which makes visible a view of learning that is social, contextual and relational, is very useful here.

From her deep, immersive and longitudinal observations of different apprenticeship practices across a range of contexts, Lave argues that that it is 'imperative to explore ways of understanding learning that do not naturalise and underwrite divisions of social inequality in our society'. This in turn requires a reconsideration of learning as a '*social, collective, rather than individual, psychological phenomenon*' **(**pg. 149; emphasis added**).**

[1] Carpenter (2015) – see full reference at the end of this piece.

Popular education, one such approach to teaching and learning, which draws off the work of Paulo Freire (1970; 1973), is often used as an overarching term in adult education work aimed at social change; it is 'popular, in that it is rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people, overtly political and critical of the status quo committed to progressive social and political change' (Amsler et al, 2010: p.16). In addition, such practices are 'committed to and often located in communities, have a curriculum stemming from 'the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle'; share a collectively produced pedagogy; and seek to link education with social action (ibid: p. 7). It is because of these connections to 'the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle' that we need to take seriously the potential of popular education in our work in university-community-schools, partnerships.

While popular education has been developed and used in spaces outside of the university, critical pedagogy has been developed in and for universities. In order to counter the very dominant neoliberal global paradigm in education, critical pedagogy seeks to 'challenge the dominant ways that education has been explicitly imagined, and to inject–sometimes against every grain of possibility—the value and legitimacy of alternatives' (ibid:7).Bringing these two approaches together creates a potentially useful framework for re-imagining teaching and learning practices university-community-school partnerships as together, they offer the possibility 'to create learning and teaching environments in formal and informal educational spaces that facilitate dialogue, reflexivity and connection to real life needs, that in turn [can] enable the creation of methodologies encouraging and realising more democratic practice's (ibid: 2010: 12-13). This in turn, this opens up the possibility for valuing multiple ways of knowing as well as multiple possibilities of who or what constitutes *both* learning *and* teaching.

While much of the literature on teaching and learning in community engagement often only pays lip service to these more critical approaches (Mitchell 2008), Carpenter (2015), argues that the potential for critical reflexive and transformative learning is there. She tracks the history of community engaged learning and its intersections with popular education and argues that if practiced through the approach of popular education, community engaged learning 'is a disruption to the traditional way in which we think about teaching and learning in higher education and the purpose of experiential learning specifically. It is a disruption because it takes up, explicitly, the *politics of pedagogy'* (pg. 4; emphasis added).

Perhaps the challenge to us in this work is to heed Carpenter's argument and take up the *'politics of pedagogy'*.

Questions that might assist us in such a project could include:

- How can we develop approaches to teaching and learning which can serve to disrupt, unlearn, or interrupt previous conceptions of how teaching happens, who the teachers are, how learning happens and who the learners are?
- How can we develop learning and teaching practices that connect to the real lived experiences of students (university and school), teachers and community members themselves?
- If educators in university-community-school partnerships are boundary workers, navigating across multiple activity systems, how can best support them? What can we learn about boundary work from this project that might be equally relevant across other teaching and learning contexts?

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