FACILITATING ALUMNI SUPPORT FOR A LOW-RESOURCED HIGH SCHOOL USING A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH

CHERYL DAWN RENSBURG

188644820

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR A DEGREE

DOCTOR PHILOSOPHIAE IN EDUCATION

AT THE NELSON MANDELA METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

PROMOTER: DR AJ GREYLING

JANUARY 2017

PORT ELIZABETH

I dedicate this thesis to the loving memory of my father, teacher and mentor, Michael Stephen Simon, who passed away on 6 December 2016 to be with the Lord for eternity, who believed that all people have the potential to acquire knowledge in order to improve the quality of their lives.

I, Cheryl Dawn Rensburg, 188644820 hereby declare that the thesis *Doctor Philosophiae,* in Education is my own work and it has not previously been submitted for the assessment or completion of any postgraduate qualification to another university or for another qualification.

_____

Cheryl Dawn Rensburg

Official use:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have made this study possible and I owe them all a debt of gratitude. I would like to acknowledge the enormous support and encouragement I have been given to keep going when quitting seemed the easier option. I would like to give particular thanks to:

My supervisor, Dr AJ Greyling, for her belief, encouragement and support during difficult times. I am grateful for her academic guidance throughout this research journey. I feel honoured to be her student.

Professor L Wood for her guidance as facilitator of the NRF learning set. Her sound academic leadership has been invaluable. Many thanks to the NRF learning set for the academic, emotional and moral support by means of monthly reflections.

The NRF for providing a grant that enabled me to complete the research as well as affording me the opportunity of attending conference that have contributed to my academic development.

I thank the principal, staff, alumni and learners of Arcadia Secondary School, for motivating me to complete this research. Thank you for your unwavering support in generating valuable data that will serve the school in maintaining a sustainable alumni practice.

I am indebted to my family for all their support and patience, in giving me time and space to research and write this thesis.

I am grateful to Marthie Nel, a linguist and language editor 'par excellence'. She has the incredible ability to enhance the quality of any text. I thank her for a piece of work that is a testimony of her tremendous skill.

My gratitude to Martie Gummow for her excellent skills in formatting my thesis. I commend you for a task well done.

Finally, and most importantly, to God Almighty for the grace upon my life, enabling me to exercise patience and determination to complete this research under trying circumstances.

ABSTRACT

Title: Facilitating alumni engagement for a low resourced high school using Participatory Action Research methodologies (PAR)

Keywords:

Alumni support, assets, collaborative research, under-resourced schools

South African public schools in disadvantaged areas are experiencing serious levels of under resourcing which negatively impact the educational experiences of learners. Attempts to lessen such negative impact include involving alumni who know the school's context, history and ethos. Unfortunately, the concept of alumni support in terms of mentoring and motivating learners is not the norm in many under resourced schools.

This research focuses on fostering partnerships with alumni using participatory action research (PAR), because it is holistic, relationally driven and inclusive. Embedded in complexity theory that views the school community as a nonlinear system of different interacting parts functioning to improve the school context, the research follows action-reflection cycles of a group of ten past pupils and five educators from various backgrounds, levels of education and expertise collaborating with and mobilizing other alumni. Data were generated using drawings, photo voice and interviews.

Thematic data analysis was used to build patterns and form categories. The following themes emerged namely, the importance of establishing a collective vision for sustained alumni engagement for alumni's personal and professional aspirations to serve the vision of the school, the importance of creating an alumni culture that reinforces the concept of 'paying it forward'. Lastly, establishing a sustainable alumni association through sustained actions and interactions and by creating an organisation of excellence

The newly developed alumni structure as a 'resource fountain' generating and cascading energy around the school emerged as an anchor for sustainability. The cascaded energy evolved into a structured 'Alumni Week' providing ongoing motivation for current learners to sustain alumni engagement.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AA: Alumni Associations

P: Participants

PI: Parental Involvement

SD: School Development

PALAR: Participatory Action Learning and Action Research

PAR: Participatory Action Research

AR: Action Research

AL: Action Learning

LAL: Lifelong Action Learning

M: Matriculant

SGB: School Governing Body

SMT: School Management Team

DoBE: Department of Basic Education

CAPS: Curriculum Assessment Programmes System

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTEXT, PROBLEM STATEMENT AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

Page

CHAPTER TWO

POSSIBILITIES OF ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT AT HIGH SCHOOL

CHAPTER FIVE

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

CHAPTER SIX

INFERENCES, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

ANNEXURES

APPENDIX A: ETHICS APPROVAL FROM NMMU

APPENDIX : Letter to the Department of Basic Education

Letter to the principal of the school

Consent letter to the participants

Letter explaining the research methodology

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER ONE

CONTEXT, PROBLEM STATEMENT AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

1.1   INTRODUCTION

The term 'alumni' refers to an association of former students of an institution (Hearth, 2005, 25), that fosters a spirit of loyalty and promotes the general welfare of their alma mater. Alumni, who are usually associated with post-matric academic institutions, support the vision and mission of their institution, and strengthen ties among members, the community and the educational institution concerned (Barnard, 2010). However, in the context of this study, in an Eastern Cape high school situated in a poor socio-economic environment, the term alumni is an inclusive term referring both to those who have and those who have not completed their high school education at this specific institution.

Against the background of under-resourcing, poor infrastructure and the overcrowded classrooms experienced in many South African schools, alumni associations are ideally positioned to provide essential support in promoting the general welfare of their former high schools. In this regard, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) states that respect for and engagement with local communities, as well as participatory governance and management, are key elements of successful educational practices (UNESCO, 2012). For these reasons, the role that alumni associations can play in promoting the welfare of their former schools cannot be over-emphasised. As such, alumni could offer a variety of services that may benefit their former educational institutions and significantly establish and foster a more positive mindset among learners, which could guide and shape their dreams for the future.

The World Bank Policy Paper (2012) holds that Sub-Saharan African countries, together with other low-income countries, face a major challenge: to provide basic education to a growing population. Many countries, South Africa included, are struggling to meet the goal of providing quality basic education to all school-age

children by 2025. According to the Public Education Network (2008, 1), a non-profit organisation founded by the Ford Foundation and dedicated to quality public education, educating all children to high standards, is a collective responsibility that requires the ongoing engagement and support of the community.

1.2   CONTEXT

The context of the research is a South African school, situated in a disadvantaged community in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, where the involvement of all stakeholders, especially alumni, is deemed essential for providing crucial support in motivating learners to not only improve their learning, but also dream of a better future. Despite being under-resourced for many years, this school was the recipient of academic awards from the Department of Basic Education (DoBE), for consistently achieving an above 80 percent Matriculation pass rate. However, since 2011, this pass rate deteriorated to such a degree that the DoBE was compelled to implement an intervention strategy. As a result and due to the consistent involvement of a number of stakeholders, who contributed in various ways, the school's Matriculation pass rate once again improved: from 56 percent in 2011 to 66 percent in 2012, and then from 70 percent in 2013 to 80 percent in 2014. It became clear that specific intervention strategies such as a greater degree of timeous and effective remedial measures, including monitoring absenteeism and increasing parental participation, could influence and increase learner motivation and discipline. Research indicates that as stakeholders of schools become increasingly involved in learners' needs, an increase in positive attitude towards their school and relationships with educators is usually observed (Norwood, 2013, 1). I believe that alumni, as an important stakeholder group, could assist in various ways in motivating learners to believe in themselves and increase their dedication to a task, which may ultimately result in improved learning outcomes. Furthermore, I believe that alumni support in terms of mentoring and volunteering as motivational speakers could serve to increase learner self-esteem, focus learners' interest and assist learners in forming a positive personal vision for their future.

In my opinion, the intensive and collaborative efforts of educators, parents and past pupils can facilitate and improve not only the matriculation results, but also enhance

educational opportunities for all learners. Based on the current forces and social ills caused by drug abuse and violence, which are undermining the educational fabric in South African schools, an alumni association, whose members have the collective will to contribute their time, skills, experience and resources, could change the current situation around problem behaviour such as absenteeism, under-achieving and high incidences of early school drop-out, prevalent in schools in disadvantaged communities.

1.3   RATIONALE FOR STUDY

The goal of this study was to facilitate alumni involvement that would benefit the learners and the school. In this context, the aim was to engage alumni to volunteer their skills, time and resources to provide a wide variety of support to their alma mater. I am of the opinion that alumni represent untapped potential that needs to be channeled back to their former high school; alumni can serve as a support base for many of the projects and undertakings within the realm of Whole School Development (WSD) (Trialogue, 2013) that strive to improve the functionality of schools by creating environments where community stakeholders can take an active role in supporting school programmes. In this manner, socio-cultural, structural and even academic support is provided to schools situated in poor socio-economic communities.

I am impassioned by Paolo Freiere (1970, 30), who states that humans have the capacity to actively exceed their experiences and reconstruct their world from a critical and moral viewpoint. I believe that for transformation of human conditions to take place, society must go past evaluating the reasons and results, but individual awareness must be demonstrated in tangible action in society (Dale & Hyslop, 2010, 59). Hence, involving alumni in various school development practices seems to be an important avenue to explore. Through this study, I aimed to show how a community encompassing people with different levels of education and social status, yet sharing a particular history and political basis, is uniquely placed to provide support, for the general benefit of their former high school.

The purpose of such an alumni association would be to address issues of practical and immediate concern, adding value and encouraging innovation and, as concerned stakeholders to act as a voice for their school community (Mainlay & Tan, 2012). Through this research, I aimed to encourage alumni to challenge the status quo, so that each learner could have the benefit of enhanced educational experiences.

Through alumni activities, this research proposed an interrogation of the traditional perception of success, which is essentially based on the premise that academic knowledge is gained through formal schooling only. When alumni become involved in school development, they may develop a critical consciousness of their own cultural beliefs, norms and standards, which could further create a more humanised platform for new learning experiences, as elucidated by Dale and Hyslop-Margison (2010, 75). In this regard, the participants and I critically reflected and challenged the traditional understanding of learning in the formal sphere, broadening the understanding of learning in the informal domain, or the "University of Life" (Damons, 2012, 12), which is considered to be as important as academic (formal) learning. I believe that every alumnus (see definition in 1.8.1), irrespective whether he/she had completed his/her formal education up to Matric level, can add value to his/her former school, and ultimately the surrounding community.

1.4   PROBLEM STATEMENT

Research indicates that in South Africa, there are many signs that show that there is a crisis in education (Nyoka, 2011, 4). With high enrolment rates each year, and increasingly poor Grade 12 results, it is clear that more concentration needs to be focused on the quality of education. In addition, of the number of learners enrolled in Grade 1, only half make it to Grade 12. It has been established that the following factors are contributing to poor outcomes in education, namely parents' lack of participation in their children's education, overcrowded and ill-equipped classrooms, with limited resources and under-qualified and unqualified teachers (Modisaotsile, 2012). The above factors, contribute to a high school drop-out rate, and low literacy and numeracy levels. In addition, violence in schools remains a key issue, while

sexual abuse, pregnancy and poverty are factors increasing the drop-out rate in secondary schools.

Since the onset of a democratic South Africa in 1994, a number of policies have been implemented and legislation has been pronounced to create a platform for transformation in education and training (Department of Basic Education for All, 2014). Among others, the South African Schools Act (SASA, 1996), Act 84 of 1996, is leveled at ensuring that all learners have the right of access to quality education without discrimination, and makes schooling compulsory for children aged 7 to 15. In addition, in 2011, the government of South Africa developed a national plan called the National Development Plan 2030 (NDP). The NDP contends that quality early childhood development, basic education, further and higher education are required to build national capabilities and proposes urgent action to improve the quality of the education system. Education received R232.5 billion, the biggest slice, of the country's R1.06 trillion of the National Budget in 2013. South Africa spent more than R23 billion on upgrading school infrastructure and increasing the number of no-fee schools (Department of Basic Education for All, 2014).

Although South Africa invests a substantial proportion of its national budget on education, poor educational results persist from year to year (Nyoka, 2014, 2). A report commissioned by the Centre for Development Enterprise (CDE) indicates that of each 100 learners that start Grade One, 50 will drop out before Grade 12; 40 will pass the National Senior Certificate (NSC) exam; and 12 will qualify for university (Spaull, 2013, 6). Research suggests that South African learners acquire learning deficits early on in their academic careers, disadvantaging them and causing them to fall behind the curriculum, which makes remediation in high schools difficult to address. In November 2011, the National Planning Commission (NPC) released its Draft National Development Plan (NDP), duly acknowledging the critical role that education, training and innovation play in achieving the country's long-term developmental goals by impacting on the elimination of poverty and reducing inequality, and laying the groundwork for a more equal society (NPC, 2011, 261). Research indicates that good school performance is linked to the participation of all stakeholders in education. The NPC proposes a 'National Education Pact', which envisages stakeholders (political parties, the government, unions, the private sector,

professional bodies and subject specific associations, student and alumni associations, governing bodies and community groups) coming together to provide input in the creation of a more professional education bureaucracy (Nyoka, 2014, 3).

Despite numerous reforms and policy implementations, formerly disadvantaged public schools situated in poorer socio-economic areas in South Africa are still experiencing serious levels of under-resourcing, which negatively impacts on the educational opportunities these schools are able to offer learners. Notwithstanding the onset of 'free education' at 'no school fee' schools, where learners daily receive a free meal from government (www.thutong.doe.gov.), the educational opportunities in poorer communities are of an inadequate nature. Because poor communities are often the host of social ills, such as alcohol and substance abuse, teenage pregnancy and high-risk behavior, research suggests that expanded community involvement and reciprocal engagement in the life and well-being of learners and schools can improve educational outcomes and lower drop-out rates. A report commissioned by the CDE (Spaull, 2013, 9) concludes that poor school performance in South Africa reinforces social inequality, which leads to a situation where children inherit the social status of their parents, irrespective of their motivation or ability.

I believe that the problem of under-resourcing at disadvantaged schools, manifest in, for example, the lack of adequately qualified educators, a school library, sport fields and so forth, are aspects an alumni association may choose to address, as the afore-mentioned shortcomings could impact on learner motivation and success. As a stakeholder group, alumni understand the ethos of the school, its context and history and are therefore deemed to be the most suitable entity to promote the school in the community in order to support and motivate learners.

The voice of the aforementioned stakeholders is heard when, for instance, they organise campaigns of advocacy for safer schools. In the same way, alumni are able to reframe the social challenges facing their former school (as discussed in the literature chapter) by becoming agents of change for their institution; they often become fundraisers and motivational speakers, positively influencing the school community in their thinking and acting when facing challenges (Torres & Torres, 2007, 267). Despite the negative reports and comments, having to navigate an

environment influenced and controlled by gang activities, a school programme interrupted by boycotts initiated by parents because of serious teacher shortages, a lack of resources like textbooks and seriously overcrowded classrooms, with the support of alumni, we managed to remain positive in offering the learners good educational experiences.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the problem statement, I devised the following research questions:

1.5.1 Main research question:

How can alumni be engaged to support their alma mater to enhance the educational experiences of learners?

1.5.2 Sub-questions:

- How might a participatory methodology be employed to create contextualised strategies (an alumni programme) for improving learners' experiences at school?

- How could contextualised strategies be implemented to add value to their alma mater?

- What recommendations could be made for enhancing learners' educational experiences?

1.6 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

The primary aim of the research was to facilitate alumni engagement, towards enhancing the educational experiences of learners. The particular objectives towards achieving this aim are given below:

- To undertake a literature review on the roles and value of alumni;

- To create collaborative opportunities to engage alumni in supporting the school programme;

- To generate relevant and contextualised strategies for engaging alumni through a participatory action research approach;

- To generate guidelines on how such strategies may be implemented in a school system; and

- To make recommendations for alumni engagement and support in a relevant and contextualised way.

1.7   CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

1.7.1   Alumni

The term *alumnus* stems from the Latin words *foster son or pupil*, and is derived from the verb 'to nourish' or 'to be nourished' (Merriam-Webster Online, 2013). The New Oxford Dictionary (2014) elaborates on the definition by describing an alumnus as a person who has attended or has graduated from a particular school, college or university.

1.7.2   Engagement

Engagement is an individual's participation in any school related activity that occurs after his or her matriculation or leaving school (Hall, 2016, 1). Activities include, but are not limited to, attending events, joining the alumni association, making a contribution to the school, following or interacting with the school's social media(Facebook, Whatsapp, etc), and volunteering in some capacity at the school (Horseman, 2011; Farrow & Yuan, 2011; Weerts & Ronca, 2008).

1.7.3   Low-resourced school

Low-resourced schools in the context of this study refer to those schools characterised by gross inequalities during the era of apartheid education in South Africa. Although there have been incremental improvements since 1994, these have been insufficient to address the huge backlogs that continue to exist (Veriava, 2012).

1.7.4   Voice

In this study, the term 'voice' is used as a collective to capture and present the participants' perceptions, opinions and experiences by using their actual words in the generation and reporting of data (Stage & Manning, 2015, 15).

1.7.5   School development

The World Bank Policy Paper (2012, 1) states that quality education, as a result of school development, refers to a system that should prepare learners for a constantly changing and challenging economy; offers a curriculum designed within the context of a knowledge economy; and includes the process of providing educational opportunities that will equip learners to understand changing work patterns and provide democratic access and approaches to knowledge. For the purpose of this study, *school development* will focus on additional opportunities that the designated school, with the support of alumni, can offer its learners, with the purpose of enriching their educational experiences.

1.7.6   Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Participatory Action Research (PAR) involves participants as active researchers and agents of change in collaboratively generated knowledge through a process of actions and critical reflection, in order to understand and improve the research context (Loewenson, Laurell, Hogstedt, D'Ambruoso & Shroff, 2015, 33).

1.8   RESEARCH APPROACH

I elected to use a qualitative approach to ensure that the research efficiently encapsulates the participants' understanding, lived experiences and the aim of the research. Punch (2009, 115) states that qualitative research is multidimensional and diverse, highlighting the social world of the participants, their ideological framework and the authority and powers within their social context. Denzin and Lincoln (2011, 3) maintain that qualitative research is more than a unified set of principles; it is largely defined by a series of conflict, inconsistencies and indecisions.

Qualitative research portrays multiple views of reality and is therefore an *interpretative* view of the world (Cresswell, 2013, 44). There is more than one truth; the researcher's point of view is only one of many (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, 3). For this reason, I stated my epistemological and ideological stances in the previous paragraghs (Creswell, 2013, 53; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, 406).

In this study, my role was that of staff member and researcher, facilitating and participating in a process of sustainable alumni support for the identified school community. The aim was to harness the collective resources of the alumni to address the material and cultural needs of the school community, culminating in the development of a practical model, as suggested by Zuber-Skerritt (2011, 4). Through this study, I aimed to create dialogue among alumni and other stakeholders of the school community; moreover, to create synergy between members, despite the differences in their social, academic and economic standing. According to Ellison, Vitak, Gray and Lampe (2014, 856), the motivation behind the facilitation of alumni support is to build networks and bridges beneficial for the mobilisation of social resources, sharing the collective and diverse perspectives, experiences and wisdom of the alumni in order to serve the vision and mission of their alma mater. I chose a participatory action research (PAR) design, which will be briefly discussed below (and in more detail in Chapter Four).

1.9 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design is a plan that accounts for the epistemological and theoretical framework on the one hand, and the methodological paradigms and methods on the other hand, to be used in a research study (Cresswell, 2014, 204; Pitcalis Qancea, 2014, 75; Birks & Mills, 2011, 175). The research design, therefore, describes the nature and pattern that the researcher intends to follow, and includes aspects such as the research methodology, approach and techniques.

A research design highlights the relationship between different aspects of research, such as the ontology, epistemology and methodology (Arthur, Waring, Coe & Hedges, 2012, 15). The ontological stance adopted for the purpose of this study was that of a researcher in relationship with the participants, seeking to create a platform for knowledge generation by interrogating dominant ideologies of power in society towards transformation, as explained by Nagy, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, 21). In this study, knowledge was viewed as something that would be generated in collaboration with alumni, through a process of observation, action and reflection, in line with a PAR approach.

Alumni and teachers of the school who were willing to participate in the study were invited, especially based on their understanding of the school context and their interest in the study. Data was generated during two iterative action-reflection cycles. Cycle one focused on facilitating alumni engagement by establishing relationships with and among alumni and auditing their collective skills to support their alma mater. Cycle two focused on how the support strategies and action plans were deliberated, formulated and implemented to add value to the research context. The goals and course of the alumni actions emanated from discussions among participants as they gained consensus before the implementation of actions, in anticipation of auspicious outcomes.

1.9.1 Paradigm Informing Study

A paradigm may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs or a world view that defines how one views the world and one's relationship with it, explain Guba and Lincoln (2011,

10). Kuhn, in Arthur *et al.* (2012, 17), refers to a paradigm as a world view, constructed and shared by a community of practice. A critical paradigm as epistemological approach to this study was adopted for addressing inequalities, a participatory approach for strengthening communication and mutual respect, and a transformative paradigm for improving the research context.

1.9.2 Epistemological paradigm

Freire contends that humans are often exploited and dehumanised in unequal social situations/relationships (as was the case in the relevant community with limited resources in Port Elizabeth). The research was situated within the critical paradigm, because of my belief that the relevant school community was capable of changing its own lived realities; as the community members act upon the world, they are capable of changing their identities and positions from that of being oppressed to emancipated (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010, 112). The departure of this research was therefore based on how to engage an association of alumni through human agency to facilitate progressive social transformation and improve the educational opportunities of existing and future learners at their alma mater.

In this regard, Zuber-Skerritt (2011, 81) maintains that, through personal life experiences, people develop a personal lens through which the world is appreciated. People are further shaped by personal values, world views and lived experiences which, in turn, determine and guide choices and behaviour. Therefore, in relationship with the participants, I continually identified, endeavoured to understand and developed the conceptual framework for this context and study.

Denzin and Lincoln (2008, 404) explain that a critical researcher moves from the assumption that power relations are socially and historically founded; that facts cannot be separated from values; that certain groups within society are privileged over others, and that there are many facets to oppression. The implication is that such oppression or discrimination is bound to be at the expense of another group or class. Within a critical paradigm, the study had at heart emancipating community members from circumstances that inhibit them, while examining the social reality of collaboration in the community, as explained by Hartas (2010, 45). This research

furthermore favoured a critical paradigm, because such a paradigm dictated the acknowledgement of diversity within the school community, while respecting the different historical, political and socio-economic backgrounds of the participants. The research constituted social inquiry, which started with the participants' knowledge and understanding. The critical approach seemed to be the most appropriate paradigm to explore sustained alumni participation in education, because it 'brings diverse opinions, methods and theories into peaceful co-existence (Hartas, 2010, 45).

1.9.3   Methodological paradigm

In order for the participants to challenge the traditional opinions of alumni participation in education and to interrogate the term 'quality education'; based on academic achievements only, this study needed to explore the wealth of vocational skills and experiences that could add value to a school community from which approximately ten percent of the school leavers achieved qualifications at higher education institutions. The reason for using a participatory methodological approach was to include both the elite and the dispossessed, the rich and the poor, the old and the young; to be unified by an empowering approach for the enhancement of education for all in the community, as proposed by Zuber-Skerritt (2012, 2).

Using a participatory approach served to establish a dialectical relationship among community members to improve the educational experiences of learners. Pursuing dialectical relationships, it allowed resonance of conscious and unconscious meanings (*Ogden* in Spelman and Thomas-Salo, 2015, 124); thus acknowledging and honouring multiple voices in finding solutions to the problems in this context (Montgomery, 2008, x). In order to answer the research questions on how action learning and action leadership could facilitate improved leadership and participation among alumni, I listened to the voices of the former learners who had walked the corridors of the identified school, sat at its desks and played on its playgrounds, believing that alumni could become agents for change, creating actionable knowledge, with an overriding commitment to the holistic well-being of learners. Fine, in Gitlin (2004, 20), maintains that when the voice of the community is heard, existing opportunities for generating scholarly interest and the critical analysis of knowledge

can be undertaken, even amidst dissenting and contradictory perceptions, because further dialogue is inspired. For this reason, the varied and reflective elements of a participatory action research (PAR) approach, accommodating the different perspectives and experiences of participants, would be an appropriate methodology for my study.

The study followed a participatory design, because PAR requires individual and collective responsibility, more critical and deeper thinking skills and knowledge, towards positive social change (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). This study collaboratively engaged alumni in cycles of action and reflection to explore the 'burning issues' hindering development at the selected school and to find solutions in innovative ways.

Additionally, Cammarota and Fine (2008, 2) expound that PAR has 'de-parochialised' research by taking it out of the hands of an exclusive group of specialists and professionals and giving it a much more general, basic, practical and inclusive dimension. I believe, therefore, that a PAR approach could enable alumni, as a stakeholder group, to develop skills of critical inquiry in order to transform their alma mater and enhance its profile as an institution whose learners dare to dream and aspire for a future beyond matric.

Participatory action research (PAR) synthesises the concepts of collaborative action learning, focusing on problem-solving, on the here-and-now, and is committed to learning that emerges as participants work together (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 6). Furthermore, its aim is to extend the reach of knowledge created within the group to beyond the immediate research context. This universal element of PAR, which always follows a participatory and collective approach, is constantly influenced by the personal values and beliefs that influence one's behaviour and strategies was considered to have the capacity for adding value to this research context (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 6).

PAR, which represents methodologies and procedures for improving practice, also encompasses facilities for formal and informal learning and leadership development, which makes it the opportune method for exploring how alumni can offer support to

their alma mater. This approach created iterative cycles of action, reflection and intervention, and provided the means for alumni to collaborate with others, for the benefit of the school community.

The principles of PAR enabled the participants in this study to become 'co-investigators', as they experienced a greater awareness of their own value, making this research a starting point for a process of cultural action and liberation for all the participants, as explained by Noffke and Somekh (2009, 459). This methodology additionally provided a pathway for actionable research, which may influence policies and practices that will encourage learners to develop a variety of personal skills and abilities. Furthermore, PAR provided cutting-edge opportunities for collaboration with peers and supportive adults, as alluded to by Powers and Allaman (2012, 1). PAR furthermore enabled the wide range of participants in this study to mobilise to improve their civic efficacy in their roles as involved citizens in a democratic process. As participants were empowered to influence the attitudes and thinking within the school community, as explained by Zuber-Skerritt (2011, 45) such far-reaching benefits of PAR compelled me to use this methodology to explore how to engage alumni to enhance the educational opportunities of learners at the identified school. The following diagram depicts a PAR design, as presented by Zuber-Skerritt (2011, 83):
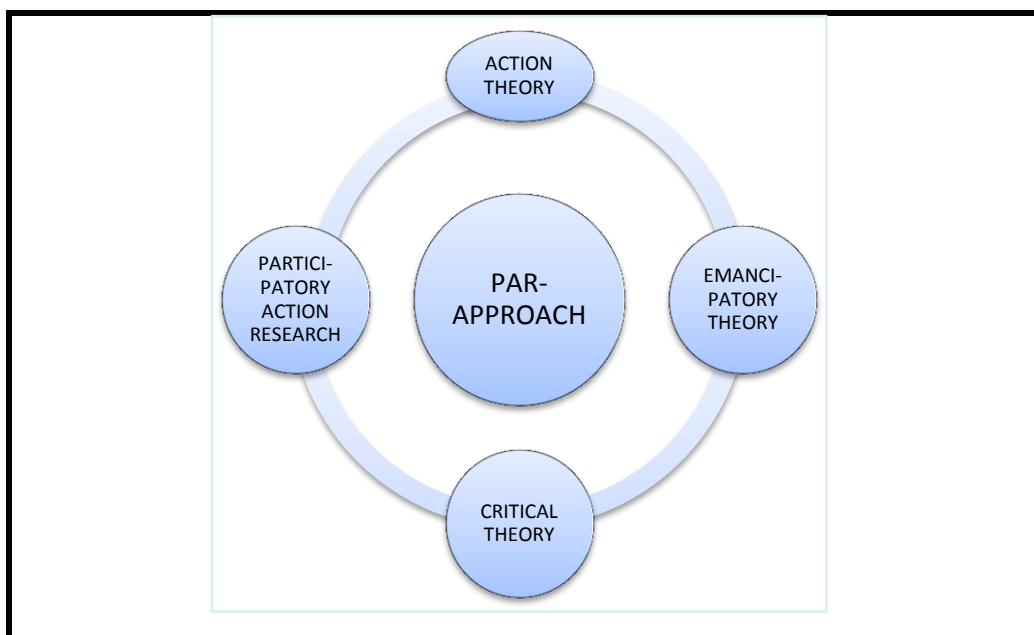
FIGURE 1.2: PAR approach

A PAR approach was selected for this research, because it encompassed the theories of action research necessary to change the existing school practice into an improved practice (Schmuck, 2006), providing the necessary tools for alumni at the school to explore the collaborative actions needed for action learning. It was within the framework of emancipatory action research that the alumni participating in this study were able to explore the root causes of challenges within the school community, thus going beyond the symptoms to the structures from where these inequalities emanated (Ledwith, 2007, 597). The key values of PAR, namely integrity, commitment and inclusion, assisted the participants in focusing on sustained engagement, as prerequisites for progress. The commitment of the group to the school was a unifying factor necessary to complete the project, as the participants were coaching and learning from one another in authentic dialogue. Using a PAR approach required the participants to adopt a critical and self-critical attitude and encouraged them to reflect on their action. This reflective process enhanced their competence while they worked together and ultimately resulted in character building (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012, 217).

The research comprised two cycles:

Cycle One of the research: The aim of this cycle was to facilitate alumni engagement by building relationships, mapping alumni participation and skills.

Cycle Two of the research: In this cycle, strategies and actions were devised and implemented to establish an alumni programme for the school.

1.10   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.10.1   Participant selection

A purposive sampling procedure was chosen, as the selection of participants was criterion-based, chosen for their socio-demographic characteristics, specific experiences and roles (Richie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2014). The total population of this study comprised alumni, educators and learners of the school who

volunteered to participate as a group. This ensured that the research topic could be explored and include diverse opinions. The participants who could, met on a monthly basis and became the core research group of alumni, engaged in discussions and planning strategies, while a larger group of alumni committed to the research by supporting the implementation of these actions.

1.10.2   Data generation techniques

Qualitative data generation methods provide rich textual descriptions of how participants experience a given research issue (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey, 2011). Using participant observation, interviews and drawings in this study provided information about the 'human' side of the research problem. As qualitative methods can highlight contradictory behavior, beliefs, opinions and relationships; they were effective in this study for obtaining context specific information, as the research participants were familiar with the school.

Multiple methods and varied sources of data can be used to generate data and to evaluate it for qualitative research. Qualitative methods were used in this study, which ensured observable and descriptive, rather than measurable data; each implemented method produced detailed narratives of the perceptions, experiences, motives, plans and insights of the participants (Hartas, 2010, 60). Multiple methods of data generation supported the triangulation and verifying of empirical materials, perspectives and observations to enhance accuracy and lend breadth, complexity, richness and depth to this research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, 5).

❖   **Observation**

Observation in social research is a systematic technique for collecting and analysing information about how people behave (Arthur *et al.,* 2012, 165). Participant observation particularly occurs when the researcher interacts with participants in activities in which they naturally engage, contends Springer (2010, 389). The advantage thereof was that the participants were at ease, thus facilitating the generation of rich data. Springer (2010, 389), however, cautions that the interactivity of participant observation can also unwittingly bias the results, especially when the

researcher introduces sensitive topics, which may inhibit the participants' openness in providing comprehensive feedback. Because PAR requires the building of relationships based on democracy and respect, the participants in this study felt comfortable expressing their opinions.

In this research, the focus of observation was on how a particular alumni association developed and formed a network of support for specific projects; for example, fund-raising with specific developmental goals in mind, motivational talks and career coaching. This process constituted the first phase of the research project, and subsequent data generation techniques were dependent on the information garnered during this initial phase. The rationale was that participant observation would enable me as researcher to continue being an active member of the alumni, as it gave me an overview of the context.

As observations proceeded to a more specific phase, patterns in behaviour that included reasons why participants displayed specific actions were recognised (Arthur *et al.,* 2012, 167). When the final phase of observations was reached, the selective stage was entered into, and pointed questions were addressed, clarifying and illuminating the relationships among the research elements. Saturation was reached when the findings were consistently replicated and accounted for.

❖ **Drawings**

Drawings as a cultural-specific human construction (Thomson, 2009, 9) make points of the self and levels of development visible (Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith and Campbell, 2008, 19); and are used to explore conscious and unconscious issues and experiences (De Lange, Mitchell and Stuart, 2007, 1). Because drawings can relate subtle messages and obscure realities better than text-based research (Desai & Potter, 2008, 238), they were effectively used to encourage and understand the voice of participants through an approach that was considered to be empowering.

Using drawings with alumni presented an inclusive and interactive element, and granted participants a more horizontal strategy of participation, presenting their roles in the research process. In this regard, Literat (2013, 12) explains that drawings

enable participants to frame their own realities in an expressive and personally relevant manner. In this study, drawings were used during a development workshop that offered a safe environment for the alumni to express strong feelings about critical experiences and events in their school community. Therefore, drawings had a collective efficacy (Appendix B), as they stimulated the empowerment of individual participants, and the school community, through a process of self-facilitation (Literat, 2013, 12).

❖ **Interviews**

Semi-structured Interviews were conducted with the alumni and educators, as through these purposeful interactions I could learn what participants knew about the topic and discover and record their experiences, thoughts and feelings about alumni engagement (Arthur *et al.*, 2012, 170). Furthermore, the interviews created the dialogue necessary for addressing the research questions (Hartas, 2010, 61). As qualitative interviews are collaboratively created, the interviewer could use her skills to elicit the interviewees' experiences, insights and knowledge, with immediate clarification, when and if needed (Arthur *et al.*, 2012, 166). During interviews, questions appropriate to the research topic were asked in order to elicit further discussion; thus forming the ideal platform for generating analytically relevant data (Hartas, 2010, 63).

❖ **Focus group technique**

The focus group technique is considered an effective qualitative method for obtaining ideas and perceptions in group contexts (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012, 36). Focus group interaction encourages informal discussions around a particular topic, in which the researcher does not ask questions, but each participant, in turn, facilitates discussions around the central topic (Silverman, 2011, 208). For the purpose of this study, the focus group technique was deemed valuable for exploring interaction among alumni, studying attitudes and forming a synergy of ideas.

Another advantage of the focus group interview is that it offers unique insights into the possibilities of critical inquiry as a deliberate, dialogic, democratic practice that is

already engaged in and with real-world problems (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, 547). Furthermore, the participant-to-participant dynamic minimises the researcher's influence on data generation, thereby bringing forth the authentic voice of the participants. Hartas (2010, 234) elucidates that the focus group technique motivates participants to think deeper about a topic and challenge each other's views, resulting in a broader understanding of the topic. In this study, the alumni were encouraged to talk to one another, ask questions, exchange anecdotes and comment on each other's experiences and points of view. Additionally, the focus group technique was used to examine how and why alumni thought about a topic the way they did (Appendix C).

❖ **Photovoice**

Photovoice, a technique embedded within the participatory research paradigm, uses image-based talk as an empowering tool (Arthur *et al.,* 2012, 179). De Lange, Mitchel, Moletsane, Stuart and Buthelei (2008, 45) put forward the relevance of visual texts as modes of investigation, methods of illustration and modes of propagation, because the picture, the narrative behind the visual text, and the story that is captured in the picture, are all possibilities worth exploring within the realm of photovoice.

One application of this research method entailed photographs taken by the alumni of different aspects that needed to be addressed at the relevant school. The purpose of the image-based discussions was to stimulate the communication process among the alumni. Photographs were mounted on story boards and photo journals were kept, both eliciting information rich discussions. From the imagery, projects for improving school conditions were identified and prioritised as important for improving the school context.

❖ **Narratives**

Denzin and Lincoln (2011, 332) state that narratives constitute the empirical material that researchers need to understand how participants create meaning from events in their lives. Researchers need to view participants as individuals with 'a voice', who

have a story to tell, an opinion to express, and an experience to share. Denzin and Lincoln (2011, 332) further suggest that a narration becomes successful when the narrator experiences himself/herself in a position of power over the interviewer, captures his/her attention, and arouses curiosity and the desire to learn more about the subject.

Because narrative inquiry can advance a social change agenda (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, 749), this study employed this tool for the alumni, allowing others to hear what the school meant to them, how the school allowed them to dream and how they advanced those dreams into careers. Alumni who were not comfortable with dialogue wrote about their school experiences (Appendix C), and their narrations were shared in public spaces like the school's website and Facebook page, and during Alumni Week. The narratives created an opportunity to develop individual and collective stories that created a site for wider participatory discussions of the alumni's different realities. This type of activity contributes to the development of a shared understanding of the multiple perspectives and reasons why alumni feel an affinity with their alma mater (Butler-Kisber, 2010, 127).

❖ Research journals

Research journals, often called reflection diaries, constitute the researcher's subjective perspective which needs to be triangulated with other perspectives (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 38). In this study, the purpose of systematic diary writing was to facilitate and capture how the alumni created new knowledge as they interacted with others and also to make the researcher's subjective knowledge evident. Journal writing was encouraged among the alumni, particularly to make their thoughts explicit and to create learning opportunities when reflections were shared among peers, as it also provided a platform for reflection-on-action.

My personal reflective journal allowed me to 'dialogue with myself' about the questions, issues and insights that arose during the research process (Butler-Kisber, 2010, 20). This tool allowed me to interrogate and monitor my own assumptions and subjectivity about the participants and the research context, what beliefs I brought to the study, and how I arrived at those beliefs (Appendix D). My personal reflective

journal became 'chronicles that captured this temporal path' (Butler-Kisber, 2010, 20), and was used to enlighten, interrogate and critically scrutinise how the data related to the research questions.

❖ **The Nominal Group Technique (NGT)**

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is an effective tool for collecting feedback from a group of participants (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012, 43). The NGT was used to assist alumni in determining ways they could add value to their former school by serving as a "think tank" for exploring the alumni's ideas, conducting a needs analysis, and collecting feedback for evaluating their projects. This technique was used to enhance the efficacy of alumni activities and give structure to the research project. The alumni wrote and shared their reflections, in order to improve their insight, which provided a further basis for strategic planning and execution (in action-reflection-cycles).

1.11 DATA ANALYSIS

De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport (2003, 344) espouse a spiral form of analysis that encompasses context, categories and comparisons, and requires a sharp responsiveness to the data. This form of analysis focused attention on, and added openness to the delicate, unspoken nuances within the alumni association, as well as within the school community.

Due to the cyclical nature of action research, data analysis started early in the research design, because reflection is embedded in the process of understanding how new insights contribute to knowledge (Coghlan & Brydon-Muller, 2014, 239). Throughout the research process, the participants and I reviewed all the data to make sense thereof and organise it into categories or themes that cut through all of the sources used in data generation, as suggested by Cresswell (2013, 45). Inductive methods were employed (working from particular data), seeking patterns and themes from the database before organising data into abstract units of

information. Cresswell (2013, 52) also recommends a deductive approach, in terms of which evidence is gathered to support the themes and interpretations, as was done during the second cycle of data generation to confirm the validity of the interpretations of Cycle One.

In action research, data analysis is also a cooperative practice, because themes are negotiated by participants (Arthur *et al.*, 2012, 74). It was therefore deemed important for alumni to discuss and concur about themes at the end of each session. In this way, data could be revisited before being analysed and coded. Coding as an analytical tool is important in order to provide an explanation and develop a clear understanding of the data. Codes can be short explanations, definitions or words extracted from the texts, can be arranged in columns, and can be rearranged as patterns for categories to emerge (Arthur *et al.*, 2012, 74).

The data analysis was performed using Atlas Ti, a computer software program specifically designed as tool for storing and retrieving qualitative data, attaching notes, and offering an overview at various stages of the research process (Friese, 2014, 1). When researchers work in digital format using a digital data analysis tool, it increases the study's trustworthiness and the transparency of the process, depending on their skillful coding ability.

1.12   TRUSTWORTHINESS

The question of validity is referred to as the "truth value of a study" (Lincoln & Guba, 2011, 290). Therefore, the overarching goals are that the research shows an improvement in educational practices; that the process results in an increase in knowledge that improves the overall educational environment; and that there is a definite indication of participation in decision-making. Denzin and Lincoln (2009, 315) refer to 'the isomorphism of findings with reality', or the manner in which the findings authentically represent and reflect the reality that has been studied. In this regard, Hartas (2010, 74), considers the validity of a study as the meaningfulness thereof.

The democratic validity of this research was enhanced when the research findings were made accessible to the research participants to ensure that the multiple

perspectives of all the participants would be represented. Dialogic validity was achieved as support was provided for alumni to work collaboratively, and enabling participants to share with others what they had learnt from one another and from reflecting on the problem (Simon, 2011, 1; Springer, 2010, 504). Descriptive validity, namely the process of triangulation of information among different sources of data, receiving feedback from participants and from experts in the field of PAR, ensured that data were checked for errors of fact and errors of interpretation (Simon, 2011). Furthermore, the results of the research were made understandable and usable, because they positively impacted on learners at the identified school. Outcomes validity was therefore achieved, as the actions emerging from the results of the study helped address the initial challenges at the school. The usability of the data increased, because the participants were involved in ensuring the suitability of the data generation techniques and strategies (Springer, 2010, 505).

Furthermore, the validity of research is confirmed when it is credible and dependable (process validity), pointing to a refined understanding of the phenomenon, in order to help confirm the general findings (De Vos *et al.*, 2003, 353). Ary *et al.* (2006, 504) add that research is credible when the participants who shared their experiences recognise the description of events and experiences, because their actual words and narratives were used. Through critical conversations with experts in the field of PAR and as the study was subject to peer review within the learning set, the research elicited commentary that helped increase dialogic validity (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Woolcott, 2005).

1.13   ETHICAL MEASURES

The biggest challenge in conducting a study of human behaviour is not selecting the right sample or size, but ensuring that it is done ethically (Bernard, 2010, 22). Gordon (2008, 64) suggests the following ways of ensuring that ethical issues are addressed: asking whose interests the research is serving; whether ethical concerns permeate the study; what the agenda of the researcher is; and whether the researcher is collaborating and embracing the concerns and values of the participants. De Palma, in Sikes and Piper (2011, 11), argues that ethically sound

research is concerned with creating safe spaces for research participants, and with pursuing equality and social just practices.

Throughout the research, I ensured the worthiness of the study, as it had to be relevant and benefit the participants: a letter of consent was issued to each participant explaining the research aims; and the cost and benefits to participants were carefully negotiated, because throughout the research, consideration was given to ensuring that expenses were minimal (Punch, 2012, 50). Furthermore, issues of harm and risk, honesty and trust, intervention and advocacy, research integrity and quality ownership of data and the use of the research results were dealt with as we continually evaluated and strategised. Throughout this research, the ethical requirements of 'authentic' participation was adhered to, as participants were constantly aware of their reality; collaboratively creating context specific knowledge as we dialogued on horizontal levels in relationships of mutualism (Noffke & Somekh, 2009, 458), translating this research into a legitimate practice.

I adhered to the ethical guidelines stipulated by the Ethics Committee of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, delineating and respecting the rights of the participants and seeking consent from the District Director of Education, the relevant school principal and participants. The legal framework and requirements, including codes of conduct for ethical research, the protocols of the University Ethics Committee (Ethics clearance number) and letters of consent were adhered to in order to conduct the research (**Appendices A; A1; B**).

1.14   LIMITATIONS

Cresswell (2011) defines limitations as the boundaries of a study, the narrow scope, the time-frame, location and sample – all of which are controlled by the researcher. This study might have been limited by the small number of participants who were involved, due to electing a PAR approach that does not focus on large, random samples. Only one school was selected for the purpose of this study; therefore, the experiences of the participants in this study may not be generalised or be valid for alumni at other schools.

1.15 POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION OF STUDY

Research on facilitating alumni engagement for a low-resourced school will make a contribution to the knowledge of alternative models of engaging alumni in an inclusive manner. Though affluent schools generally have well-established alumni associations, there are only anecdotal reports of alumni associations from low-resourced schools. Although several doctoral studies were conducted in other countries, only a few doctoral studies conducted in South Africa could be found in the literature. The knowledge generated through this research may benefit low-resourced schools in the South African context, as it provides practical guidelines on how to proceed with ways to motivate and involve alumni to add value to the schooling experience of learners at their alma mater.

1.16 PROPOSED OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

The study is presented as follows:

In **Chapter One**, a presentation of the background, reasons for and purpose of the study is given. The chapter also contains an overview of the study methods employed, as well as a brief outline of the study.

The literature review, in **Chapter Two**, focuses on the importance and functions of alumni associations for providing support for educational practices. Through the relevant literature, an in-depth study is conducted of alumni practices for school development. Such study of literature uncovers and presents previous research findings, which served to focus this study.

Chapter Three provides a theoretical framework for the research, which articulates the philosophical underpinnings of the study. This chapter demonstrates how a school and its alumni association can function as a complex system in which the different interacting parts can lead to changes in the functioning of the institution and contribute to its success.

In **Chapter Four**, a framework of the study within the assumptions and characteristics of a specific genre of qualitative approach, namely PAR, is explored. The research approach within the critical paradigm concentrates on participatory action research (PAR) methodologies and strategies. This chapter provides a rationale for employing specific data generation tools and techniques and addresses validity concerns and ethical considerations.

The research findings are discussed and analysed in **Chapter Five**. Emphasis is given to the 'voice' of the participants, who shaped the study through their commitment to improving aspects of the school environment. This data has been captured, analysed and presented as it happens and evolves in the different cycles.

Chapter Six provides an evaluation and gives an account of how to facilitate alumni support to improve school development, with the focus on developing a model for effective and sustainable alumni involvement at high schools.

1.17   CONCLUSION

This chapter aimed to illustrate the context that gave rise to the research problem, articulate the research questions, and define the research aims. A discussion of the research design delineated and rationalised the use of PAR as research approach. PAR as research approach, the theoretical framework, encompassing my personal worldview, and how I was going to engage with research participants, were explained.

The purpose of this chapter was to outline and explore ways in which the alumni of a school could foster a spirit of loyalty and promote the general welfare of their alma mater. This chapter charts a journey of alumni engagement, exploring the literature and current practices underpinning alumni engagement, and delineates the research philosophy underpinning this study. Furthermore, the research design and the methods of data generation that could best answer the research questions are presented. Issues concerning the trustworthiness and validity of the knowledge creation are also discussed. This chapter concludes with a statement on the ethical considerations adhered to throughout the study, as discussed in **1.13**.

The literature review in Chapter Two will provide a foundation, justification and inspiration for the research. It presents a relevant body of current knowledge, and an analysis and synthesis of research in the field of alumni support for their alma mater.

CHAPTER TWO

POSSIBILITIES FOR ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT AT HIGH SCHOOL

> *'We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give'.*
> *Winston Churchill*

2.1   INTRODUCTION

A literature review can be perceived as a conversation between the researcher and the relevant literature, which provides a description and critical evaluation of works in relation to the research problem being investigated (Sutton, 2016, 10). This literature review offers an understanding on how alumni associations have developed in the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK), and how the knowledge has been adapted to schools in the South African context, presenting examples of international and national alumni traditions. The study of relevant literature served to address the research questions and assisted in providing more clarity in order to fulfill the aims and objectives of this research.

2.2   VALUE OF ALUMNI

Alumni are considered as among an institution's most valuable assets in terms of their potential financial, strategic and social contribution towards its standing and sustainability. As the products of the institution, alumni could be seen as the most important manifestation of the institution's excellence (Jacobs, 2010, 10; Barnard, 2008, 1); as alumni establish themselves in society, they also represent their alma mater. It is therefore important for schools to recognise the valuable asset alumni represent and appreciate the support alumni can render in achieving specific goals.

Alumni associations have a long and illustrious history in the USA and the UK. As early as the 1800's, alumni cultivated a spirit of loyalty towards their alma maters by establishing alumni associations, starting publications, launching cultural and sport

clubs, hosting reunions, raising money and recruiting members (Bethell, Hunt & Shenton, 2004, 15). In this regard, research indicates that most alumni are motivated to contribute towards various causes, based on economic, psychological and behavioral factors, such as the purpose of the campaign, how the money will be utilised, and their level of pride in the institution. According to Weerts and Ronca (2007, 1), alumni are inspired to give to their alma mater when they are convinced that the institution really needs their financial support, that the project is worthy of support, the cost to themselves measured against the rewards of giving, and their emotional attachment to the institution. In the context of this study, it was considered that alumni might be motivated to support the initiatives of an alumni association considering that the school was situated in a low socio-economic area and because establishing an active alumni chapter might be seen as a worthwhile project to support, as learners would benefit from alumni involvement and contributions to the alumni chapter.

In recent years, alumni associations (AA) have reshaped themselves to deliver market-focused programmes and tactical communication approaches in order to build and foster relationships with alumni (Shailin, 2011, 1). Many AAs are employing internet-based media like blogs, podcasts, video and mobile communications, text-messaging, interactive websites, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to engage their alumni. In this regard, Shailin (2011, 1) remarks that: "alumni are organising themselves in groups without forming structural organisations". The electronic media are connecting alumni by means of newsletters and blogs, thereby improving the services provided and the way in which information is disseminated to its members. Electronic engagement will not, however, eliminate personal contact. In fact, research suggests that both printed documentation, such as newsletters, and personal interaction with alumni should increase in order to ensure consistent, sustainable and lifelong benevolence to their alma mater (Bashow, 2011, 3). Furthermore, in low-resourced schools in South Africa, alumni contributions have developed a unique character. Many alumni study or work abroad and participate in networks with businesses, institutions and families, which have in turn formed partnerships with local schools and villages, resulting in the exchange of cultural and community knowledge, mentoring, and often also academic and material support.

Unfortunately, in many schools in low socio-economic areas, the quality of teaching and learning is often compromised due to the wide array of socio-economic factors that renders the schools disadvantaged. These factors include a shortage of educators, teaching and learning material, transport problems, and poor school infrastructure. In this regard, Wood and Govender (2012, 1) suggest that under-resourced schools in South Africa should look beyond their daily challenges to envision and capacitate themselves to find solutions to their problems. Therefore, schools should consider their alumni as an untapped resource to enhance the educational experiences of learners. It is important that schools consider building relationships with their alumni, improve the degree of alumni involvement in school programmes, and ultimately benefit from the significant contribution this mostly untapped resource can make both to the school and the learners.

Amidst the economic recession, joblessness and scarcity of resources, there is an urgent need to facilitate dialogue and action among all stakeholders of a school community, of which alumni comprise a large segment. Research indicates that partnerships between a school and its community improve student learning forming stronger family units lead to healthier communities (Anderson & Minke, 2007, 311). Zuber-Skerritt (2012, 3) suggests that drastic economic, social and political change requires reflective thinking and engaging people constructively to find solutions to problems. I believe that alumni, who are already familiar with the school's history and know its ethos, are ideally placed to serve their former school and that their experience, skills and resources could help fulfill the vision of the school. In this regard, Lippincott (2011, 1) indicates that amidst fierce competition for limited resources, alumni relations and support can be considered a valuable asset of the institution. Khosa (2011, 1) refers to international research, which indicates that educational improvement requires a process of greater community involvement as well as social intervention, based on a shared understanding of those who are involved in the transformation process.

2.3   SCHOOL COMMUNITY

The diagram below depicts a school community and how alumni can partner with the school.
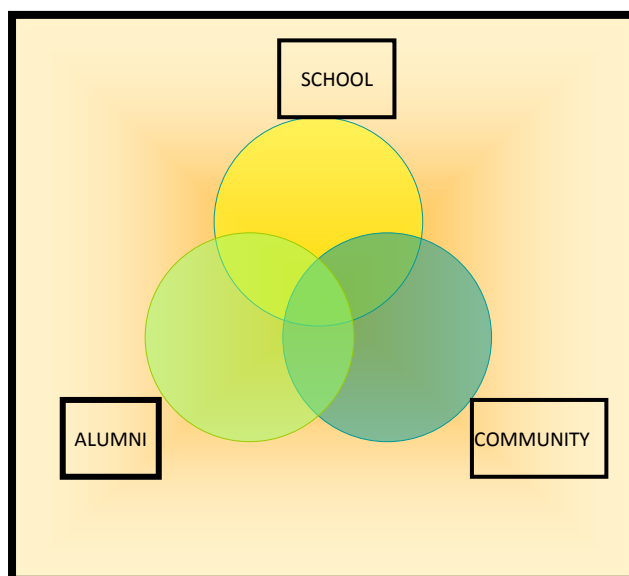
FIGURE 2.1: Integrated stakeholder construct of a school community

Communities are actively constructed by their members, rather than merely arising from local circumstances (Gilchrist, 2014, 1). Cultural traditions and symbols are used to assert community identity, expressed in daily activities and upheld in customs, music, religion, dress codes, hairstyles, language and so forth. These symbols reinforce community boundaries and define connections and relationships within communities. Furthermore, within communities exist informal networks, which enhance people's ability to cope with difficulties and disasters, keep hope alive and bolster a sense of well-being amidst crises, explains Gilchrist (2014, 4). It is in these informal networks within a specific community where this study proposed to mobilise an alumni association (AA), because it was identified that therein resided local, flexible and efficient ways for delivering support and practical help for this particular school.

According to the Institute for Educational Leadership (2014, 1), a "community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between a school and other community resources"; focusing inter alia on health, social services for the youth and community development. Research pertaining to community schools, which originated in the United States of America, confirms that community engagement leads to improved student learning, strengthens family relationships, and creates functional communities. In such communities, 'a personalised curriculum is developed by the

communities, emphasising real world learning and addressing community members' challenges. In such a scenario, schools become community centres that are open and accessible to the community, where facilities are made available to community members and students alike in order to create a hub for community activities (Lawson & Van Veen, 2016, 12; Eleven8Chicago, 2014, 1).

The community school concept functions successfully in developed countries, such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom. However, research in South Africa and other developing countries, for instance Mali, Malawi and Burkino Faso, has established that community schools in the developing world operate differently than in the USA; the focus is on school-parent involvement rather than on pedagogical issues, explains Prew (2009, 824-846). In developing countries, the focus is more often on full community involvement in the school, from building the structure to financing and managing the institution, with or without assistance from government (Mungai, Oulai, Sankale & Mujidi, 2004, 11). An example of such an initiative is called Tanzanian Development Support (Thurmaier, 2010), which was initiated between an alumnus and a Tanzanian community school, the goal being a cohesive sustainable development that emphasises personal connections that will sustain relationships between institutions and communities. In this regard, Thurmaier (2010) says: *'Together with community volunteers and students at the school, we poured concrete floors and passed about 12, 000 bricks along work lines to begin building. We learnt that integrated development is essential'.*

Similarly, Prew (2009, 824) suggests a school development plan (SDP) based on full involvement of the local community. This plan, which was created by and implemented in 96 township schools in South Africa (Prew, 2009, 824), was highly contextualised for the post-apartheid period, which was characterised by a lack of infrastructure, violence, lawlessness and low resources. This plan, which had to be the most cost effective one for each school, was created and determined by the needs and input of local communities, in order to create efficient schools. According to Prew (2009, 826), effective schools aim to adapt to their environment in order to make the best strategic choices according to structure and culture.

The following are outcomes reported since the implementation of SDPs in some township schools in South Africa: the schools' functionality improved, because teachers and learners were generally more motivated; the community was involved in determining developmental priorities; the project linked schools and communities in a creative and productive relationship; and the focus was on resourcing, rather than staff development (Prew, 2009, 826). These examples of successful community involvement in schools strengthened my understanding that alumni could function as part of the school system, ensuring that a much wider repertoire of social and economic resources are employed to enhance the educational opportunities of learners. Though they may not function as a community school in all respects, there are elements that can be implemented at low-resourced schools in the Northern Areas of Nelson Mandela Bay and similar areas towards build a core of support among parents. This can be achieved by involving parents in school programmes, keeping parents informed of successes achieved, and providing systematic feedback to parents about learners' progress (or lack thereof). In turn, the school can participate in local community activities highlighting the plight of the unemployed, homelessness, violence in the community and so forth (Daresh & Lynch, 2010, 83).

2.4   ALUMNI CULTURE

Allen and Jewell (2002, 241) describes the American cultural ethos that embraces the conviction that even the poorest American can achieve greatness through talent and hard work. A culture, particularly an alumni culture, is a 'powerful web' of rituals and traditions, norms and values that affect every corner of school life (Peterson & Deal, 2011, 11). Therefore, an alumni culture can influence what people focus on, how they are committed to their school, how motivated they are to support their school, and the degree to which they are productive in supporting the goals of their alma mater.

Culture finds expression in the way it sharpens the focus on what is important and valued in institutions; it builds commitment to and identification with core values, rituals and traditions, ceremonies and celebrations, which build a sense of community within and around institutions, elucidate Peterson and Deal (2011 11). Furthermore, culture creates a positive philosophy and improves the effectiveness

and productivity of organisations, consequently, a positive culture amplifies motivation, as the achievements and efforts of all stakeholders are recognised and valued. Considering the above, I believe that all schools are capable of creating a culture of valuing alumni contributions, honouring and celebrating alumni achievements, including the selected school, which has the capacity to create a culture wherein a good education can be a vehicle for closing the doors on poverty and deprivation and opening the doors to prosperity.
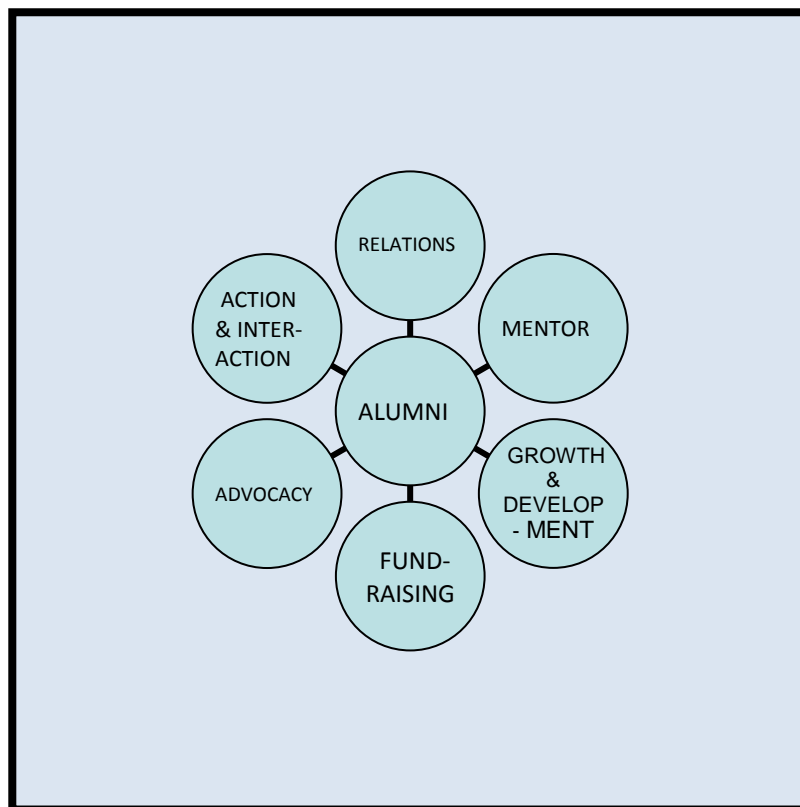
FIGURE 2.2: An illustration of alumni roles (Author's construct)

The diagram above indicates the various roles alumni can fulfill in order to improve the educational experiences of learners at a school. History attest of the active and influential roles alumni have fulfilled by "challenging the policy of faculty hires, board appointments and petitioning for greater representation of the negro race as teachers (Cohen, 2008, 28); and as lobbyist raising the admission standards of their institution, and as volunteers maintaining a mailing list, collecting dues to support activities and producing publications (Dolbert, 2002);

2.5 ALUMNI ROLES

Research indicates that many alumni are giving back to their alma maters in various ways (SACS, 2013; SAWIP, 2011; Teach South Africa, 2009). In the South African context, some alumni reported the opportunity to teach at rural schools, while other alumni commented that assisting their alma mater was an exhilarating journey as they were surrounded by people zealously enhancing learner growth and improving the quality of education. Moreover, research indicates that alumni involvement could be extensive, ranging from monetary contributions to mentoring, leadership development and community service, as well as professional services in real world contexts (Teach South Africa, 2009). These examples of alumni involvement bodes well, particularly for this study, which aimed to facilitate alumni involvement in an under-resourced high school. Additionally, this study could possibly serve as a benchmark to other under-resourced schools of what is possible when alumni are fervently committed to serve their alma mater.

- **Building relationships**

Alumni can be viewed as cultural wealth (Gilchrist, 2014, 4) because their foundation is social networks; social relationships and resources are embedded in a social structure that is accessed through purposive interactions (Lin, Cook & Burt, 2001, 2). Prew (2009, 840) proposes that alumni involvement is a two-way relationship that should be mutually beneficial to both the institution and its alumni (CASE, 2011, 1). Furthermore, amidst the often strained economic resources, fierce competition and digital communities, alumni relationships should be valued as critical to the success of a high school (Lippincott, 2011, 1).

Alumni relationships have value because they can increase access to knowledge, serve as a source of external knowledge, and enhance the capacity of schools to address their challenges (Ichijo & Nonaka, 2007, 70). In this research context, the alumni of the identified school was active in different spheres of society, namely in the Department of Education as teachers; in the Justice Department as prosecutors, advocates and policemen; in the Budget and Treasury Directorate as accountants and clerks; in the Department of Health as doctors, dentists and nurses; in the

religious sector, as church leaders; and in the business sector as entrepreneurs. Although these alumni were able to reconnect their alma mater to the broader community, in reality this was happening in a limited way only. Building new coalitions, explain Kretzmann and Mcknight (1993, 209), could recognise and serve the best interests of the institution, alumni and the broader community. In fact, from these partnerships, a healthy community, who can support excellent education, could grow. Moreover, schools should therefore, in this context, be seen as the best assurance for the advancement of communities.
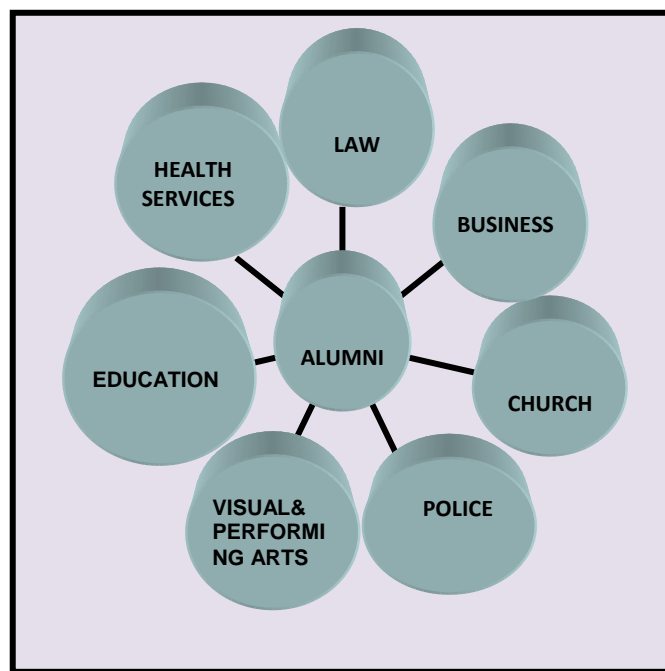
FIGURE 2.3: Representation of alumni participation in a community

Figure 2.3 above illustrates how alumni are represented in various spheres of society and indicates that alumni has the potential to render support and practical help where it is most needed within a school community. The above depiction of alumni representation captures what Gilchrist (2014, 4) describes as cultural wealth, which bonds and bridges, linking people and organisations when a community's collective survival is threatened, thus providing a strong sense of endurance and enablement. When people with a strong sense of commitment and similar interests come together, they form bridges that link people beyond status or class. These links or networks are influential in recruiting resources beyond the regular bounds (Gilchrist,

2014, 8). Networking with people by means of bridging interests and linking resources makes community cohesion possible, enhances participation and increases the capacity of alumni to support their alma mater.

Collaboration between the schools and parents is unsatisfactory, as both blame each other - parents blame the school for not involving them when the implementation of curriculum 2005 started, while the schools blame parents for moving far away from the school, and for not attending meetings to which they are invited (Maluleke, 2014, 2). Because of the poor collaboration between the school and community, low resourced schools often find themselves isolated from communities who do not contribute to the strengthening of the school's capacity. However, alumni can play an important role in revitalising the relationship between the school and community, in a manner in which both parties benefit, establishing a forum for ongoing commitment for success in the school and in the community (Unicer, 2004).

A growing body of research indicates that when a school curriculum is more contextualised and relevant to a student's everyday life, it can have a positive impact on attendance, promotion, student achievements and post-secondary enrollment decisions (Dickman, 2000, 1). It was, therefore, necessary for the school's leadership to allow stakeholder groups, such as present and past pupils, teachers, family members, and the community, involvement in decision making, and supporting effective communication for the improvement of education (NASSO, 2004, 6). Alumni, as such a stakeholder group, are in a position to help with fundraising projects, serve as positive role models and mentors to learners, share their professional and practical skills, and address educational challenges (Geswindt, 2013, 37). I believe that by building relationships of reciprocity wherein knowledge, skills, values and positive experiences are exchanged among the stakeholders in education, the quality of education in South Africa can be improved.

In this regard, relationships are considered the most important conduit of tacit or practical knowledge, which is contextually based, interdependent and non-codified especially when these relationships are formed in its own context (Ichijo & Nonaka, 2007, 72). Moreover, the aforementioned authors suggest that tacit knowledge is also effective for meaningful dialogue in a personal relationship, especially as people

develop a shared context and interest. When alumni reconnect with one another through their alma mater, a platform is created for discussions about school activities, where a larger group of committed individuals can contribute to discussions on how to improve the *status quo* at school, with a collective decision on how to address real challenges.

Personal and strong relationships, as developed through alumni networks, can also provide access to explicit knowledge that is important to a school (Ichijo & Nonaka, 2007, 73). Furthermore, when multi-layered and flexible relationships with alumni are established, the school's capacity to access knowledge or skills can be increased, as it connects colleagues, tools and techniques in a variety of areas of expertise. In this regard, schools can serve as training sites for sports coaches, offer mentoring and networking opportunities, while others can volunteer for administrative and maintenance tasks or plan fundraising events, because the DBE does not provide funding for sufficient administrative staff.

It is important to note that such alumni relationships can assist the school in achieving its mission, especially when alumni represent and market the school's philosophy in the community (Barnard 2008, 36). In this regard, alumni can become living ambassadors for their alma maters when they visibly support school activities in order for the following generation to participate in school programmes and also engage in a life-style of learning and support. However, the aim of building relationships with alumni is not only to fulfill the vision and mission of the school, but to foster and build the capacity of the school community (Gottlieb, 2008, 1), thus increasing community input and involvement in whole school development initiatives. It is therefore important to ignite awareness of the alumni programme before current learners leave the institution, by making senior learners aware that they are "the future alumni" who can benefit while still at school and later contribute to the sustained development and support of learners at the school. In this way, a foundation for a lifelong relationship is laid.

- **Offering mentoring**

The aim of mentoring is demonstrating, supporting and encouraging people to manage their own learning in order that they may maximise their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the people they want to be (Parsloe, 2013). Alumni should be seen as powerful developmental and capacitating mentors because they may be in a position to assist learners in finding suitable career opportunities. When an alumnus partners with a learner (mentor and mentee), who is interested in a similar field, the alumnus may be eager to guide by example, share knowledge and experiences, and network wider support for the mentee. When alumni mentor high school learners, they are equipping these learners with the tools they need to access the knowledge, networks and experience of a wider support network (Fu, 2013). Data from a sample of high school students in the USA showed that adolescents in a natural mentoring relationship are more likely to report less risk behavior (i.e. gang affiliation and violence), score higher on psychological well-being and report more positive health behavior (i.e. physical activity and contraception use), and be involved in completing high school, attending college or work, than youth who reported no natural mentoring relationships (Black, Grenard, Sussman & Rohrbach, 2010). Therefore, this research was aiming to facilitate relationships between alumni and learners at school because they can help build the resilience of learners at risk.

In this regard, there are benefits for all three partners (the mentor, the mentee and the school). The mentor gains a sense of satisfaction and may develop greater patience, insight and understanding, as well as a deepened sense of citizenship. Robert and Baldwin (2007, 1) report that mentors often volunteer, because they aspire to improve their understanding of the life-worlds of others and to live out their own values. Additionally, the leadership and communication skills of mentors are enriched. For the mentee, the relationship with a mentor creates the opportunity for academic help, learning new skills, particularly social skills, discovering a wide range of options and opportunities, as well as learning to set definitive goals for the future. Medvec (2014) reiterates that alumni serve as role models who often motivate students to realise their potential and fulfill their academic goals. The school, as part of the partnership with alumni, benefits when learner-alumni relationships are

established, as school performance usually shows an improvement and the school enjoys the advantage of additional support services. Stronger relationships are forged with institutions for post-matric study and/training, which also has a positive influence on collaboration with community groups and parents. Figure 2.4 illustrates the network of support that can be achieved through mentoring.

- **Providing growth and development**

Lippincott (2011, 1) considers alumni associations to be the foundation of progress in education. In this regard, alumni associations are much more than bodies of past pupils, but should rather be considered as rich sources of skills, experiences, resources and values. Alumni throughout the world have impacted on society through their economic, political and socio-cultural participation (Winstel & Gazley, 2015, 4). These aforementioned assets alumni contribute can be utilised to the advancement of their former high schools. It is therefore important that high schools consider their alumni as appreciated assets who are in a position to create access to a network of professional, social and cultural connections.

Because alumni associations foster growth and development, such associations can provide a platform for programmes and activities that may connect alumni in geographical, career and educational groups (UBC.com). In this particular study, such an association may create opportunities for all alumni, whether or not they have completed matric or accessed tertiary education, to initiate activities and programmes to expand the prospects of current learners. Additionally, alumni who have become entrepreneurs and artisans may inspire learners through their example and use their skills to mentor a learner at their workplace or assist in maintaining or improving the infrastructure of their alma mater (Hart, 1010, 1).
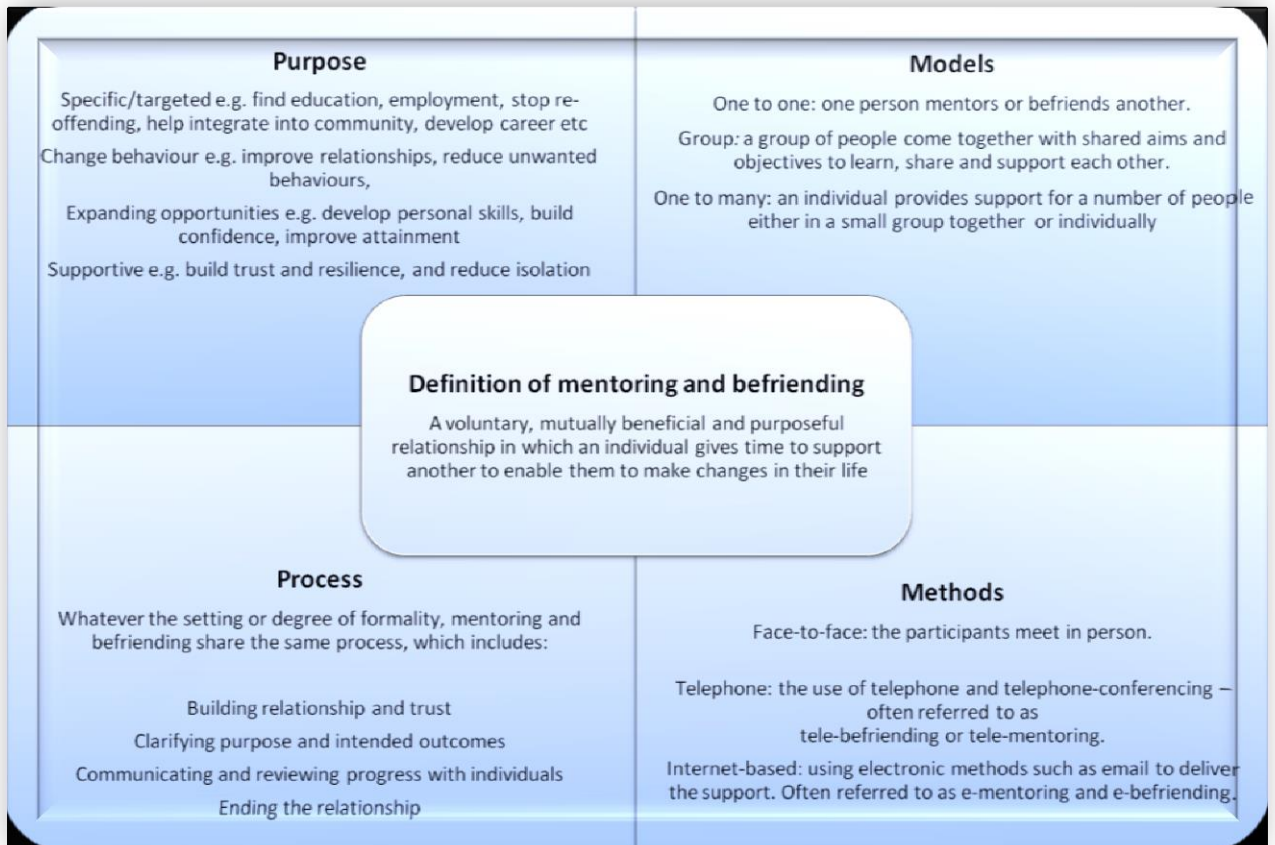
FIGURE 2.4: A Model for mentoring (Parsloe, 2013, 2)

Literature indicates that when the quality of the alumnus's academic or social experiences has been positive, their predilection to give becomes stronger (Ruskay, 2000, 115). It would therefore be provident to attempt to track past pupils who played sport or participated in cultural events and who had used the opportunities that the school had to offer, because these alumni would most likely want to give back by offering their services to their former school. Ruskay (2000, 116) maintains that alumni are likely to highlight any challenge of their former school and serve to become change agents for their school community. In this regard, Weerts and Ronca (2007, 3) note that material donations by alumni are usually influenced by the age and life cycle of such individuals, as their employment status and income levels mostly determine their monetary giving, as well as the type of charities they choose to be involved in. It is however, important not to reject the gifts of time, energy and whatever skill alumni might be able to offer.

According to Khosa (2011, 7) South Africa's public education system is performing poorly, thus diminishing the opportunities of millions of learners, and hampering national growth and development. Furthermore, Khosa identifies the afore-mentioned problem as systemic, therefore requiring a systemic solution. The process of improvement necessitates a partnership between the state, the private sector and civil society. This suggestion is supported by international research (ICSU, 2011; Griffith, Maggs & George, 2007, 9), which identified the need for social intervention by stakeholders in the well-being of schools and communities to seek solutions. In this regard, Ruskay (2000, 116) notes that an alumni association can generate systemic change on two levels; namely by transforming itself into a network of support and, secondly, through providing intensive service so that a model for growth and development may emerge. Senge (2006, 69) confirms that when people view themselves as part of a group, they usually become active participants in improving the group's context as well as, unintentionally their own.

Additionally, alumni networks usually aim to support an institution to achieve its mission (SSRN, 2010, 1). Barnard (2008, 38) suggests that for alumni networks to become strategically collaborative networks, a "network friendly" infrastructure should be created and be proficiently managed. In order for the aforementioned to be realised, it is vital for a school to establish and maintain good relationships with alumni who are or will become willing to build skills and share their knowledge and time, and who, by their association with their alma mater, could make a meaningful difference to how the institution is perceived in the community.

- **Alumni bestowing gifts**

"Neoclassical microeconomic theory makes the following three assumptions in regard to giving to their alma mater: individuals have preferences for outcomes; utility was maximized by individuals; and that individuals act independently based on full and relevant information (Sun, Hoffman & Grady, 2007, 307). Public good theory focuses on the collective interest of the donor and the done, while social exchange theory accentuates the donation process when both the donor and done find their reward attractive. Equity theory assumes that society rewards individuals for the

equity in their interaction with each other (Sun, Hoffman & Grady, 2007). This study consequently formulated the following hypotheses namely; student experience significantly distinguishes alumni donors from non-donors; alumni experience significantly distinguishes alumni donors from non-donors; and alumni motivation significantly distinguishes alumni donors from non-donors. The results indicated that satisfaction was greater among alumni who believed that the alma mater contributed to their education; and alumni who were more satisfied with their previous student experiences were more inclined to give. Another theory postulates that individuals are motivated to give due to social pressures, while another theory lists altruistic motivations why people donate to institutions to help others. A last theory lists that alumni make donations, because it can benefit their social standing or because they can possibly receive preferential treatment. All the above imply that alumni make donations for various reasons, but the overarching reason is that they want to help students through their giving. Sun, Hoffman and Grady (2007, 330) indicated that the most frequent response alludes to alumni feeling obligated to give in order to help current students. This result validates the altruistic externality theory, which states that people make donations because they want to help students through their giving (Sugden, 1982, 4). This result is consistent with other research, which indicates that alumni feel connected to their alma mater and want to fulfill an emotional need and nostalgia by giving to charity (Merchant, 2005, 3) and/or the fact that alumni who have been out of school for longer periods are more likely to give (Weerts & Ronca, 2007, 7).

Research conducted by Alumni Matters (2012, 4) by means of an online questionnaire illustrated that 1767 alumni out of 2570 invited respondents expressed that the main purpose for alumni networking was to facilitate friendships and business connections and foster collaboration between peers and their school. This survey also indicated that less than ten percent of the participating alumni believed that their main purpose was essentially fundraising for their school. Some indicated that they were unsure where to make the donation, while only ten percent indicated that they had made a financial contribution to their former school. It is therefore necessary that alumni associations carefully market the fundraising aspect in order to be successful in this area of alumni support (Crisp *et al.,* 2010, 5). Despite the overall decline in financial contributions of alumni, the literature (CASE, 2014, 1)

suggests that an institution is able to successfully increase its alumni's giving by following a designated practice of making alumni participation in fund-raising events a priority. Because alumni donations are not a natural occurrence, institutions have to make an effort to elicit donations from alumni by informing them what difference their contributions are making in the lives of learners at the institution. It is therefore important for the institution to honour alumni contributions by indicating the specific need that such contributions are fulfilling, as this simultaneously serves as acknowledgement to the donors.

- **Advocacy**

Advocacy, according to the Coady Institute (Gladkikh, 2012, 1), refers to strategic action focusing on inducing positive change in communities and societies. Alumni can speak on behalf of their alma mater, for example, by participating in government budget discussions, which directly impact on education staffing, administration, scholarships and other resource requirements (ucd.alumni, 2012, 1). In this regard, Johnson (2011, 1) states that alumni networks are agents for raising the visibility of their alma mater and reinforcing the benefits of an educated workforce for the economy. Alumni can serve as the voice of their alma mater, as they apply their experiential learning and indigenous knowledge in collaborative action groups (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 64), highlighting existing challenges concerning the safety of learners and educators, the threat of gangsterism, bullying and many other factors that are affecting the attendance of learners and their learning outcomes. In this way, alumni may simultaneously be building their own practical skills through the sharing of ideas and experiences, while exploring opportunities for ongoing lifelong learning (Barnard, 2008, 36).

When collective action is taken around issues of common concern, greater capacity to influence public opinion is generated. Therefore, alumni should be encouraged to campaign for their former high schools, mobilising public opinion and interacting with stakeholders in the community about negative issues and societal problems such as those mentioned above.

- **Action and interaction**

Dunphy, Benveniste, Griffiths and Sutton (2000, 103) elucidate that service work is people-centred and powered by people for people; it is therefore important to conceive innovative ways of working together. Alumni action has to be built on developing communication skills, based on trust. The Coady Institute (2012, 2) underlines the importance of interaction among alumni as they participate in an institution's activities, showing appreciation for their shared experiences as well as for their differences. Gladkikh in McKnight and Kretzmann (2012, 2) eloquently describes the power of interaction in the following way:

Collaboration helps participants "see" the invisible power in their heads and how to develop it; referring to collaborative actions as knowing and doing according to your beliefs, faith and power. In this way you grow your confidence through trial and error. Furthermore, the flexibility of this process "is like running water" – when human leadership and capital is involved, capacities can be developed.

Social interaction enables participants to learn from one another in ongoing processes of change which are guided by community values and beliefs until new knowledge emerges. Therefore, communities must be capacitated to effectively address their challenges. In this regard, Lagae (2012, 6) states that it is through interpersonal interaction that the identity of a community is determined, and through the collaborative actions of alumni, that the unique character and essence of the school community may be reflected. The elements of this unique character of alumni collaboration may be reflected in stories of hope and potential; it may be the fuel that mandates alumni to participate and offer encouragement for learners to excel; it may be their anecdotes that speak of a proud school community heritage, personal abilities and the will to survive; it may be an expression of alumni achievements and a distinct resourcefulness amidst strife, poverty and lack, that endurance is demonstrated (He & Phillion, 2008, 5).

2.6   SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

School development (SD) encompasses planned and sustained efforts by the school for its improvement, focusing on formal and informal practices, processes, standards and constructs (Moolla & Lazarus, 2014, 01). The focus of SD is on prospering the life of both the individual as well as the organisation, with the common goal being promoting educational goals. In South Africa, the focus of SD is on individuals and organisations within state departments, as well as the non-government sector. However, it has become crucial for different sectors to network and to form partnerships so that SD can be co-ordinated and facilitated collaboratively to enhance effectiveness and maximise opportunities for exploiting resources and expertise from various sectors. In this regard, alumni as important stakeholders in education can render effective support and empowerment to schools in their function of providing quality education. Because SD is the responsibility of all involved in education, the Education White Paper 6 emphasises the importance of interdisciplinary work, through which practitioners should collaborate, as challenges in education cannot be addressed in isolation (Moolla & Lazarus, 2014, 1).

According to SAJE (2006, 15-26), the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 requires school governing bodies to develop school development plans. These plans serve as frameworks for schools to function as integrated systems, especially where change in one area can affect another area. Therefore, school development planning should be a methodical, collective and continuing inclusive and progressive process, undertaken to promote whole school efficacy, staff development, and effective resource utilisation (Xaba, 2006, 6). In this regard, Matthews (2013, 1) elucidates that whole school development (WSD) is an approach geared to strengthen the overall functionality of a school and improve its mechanisms for delivering education in the classroom as well as the broader school environment. Therefore, an alumni association could support such WSD plans in a meaningful way, without getting directly involved in classroom teaching strategies.

In terms of a model for growth and development, Schraven, Eguavoer and Manske (2009, 1-59) suggest that the successful development of capacity at institutions in developing countries is a complex process that should be pursued by professionals

returning to their previous academic environments as mentors, coaches, motivational speakers, educators and so forth (alumni returning to their alma maters) to strengthen the quantity and quality of educational opportunities offered. MacGilchrist in Prew (2009, 824) similarly notes that school development should be identified with shared ownership and purpose, which can elicit a broad and constructive role for the community. Prew (2009, 826) points out that School Development Plans (SDPs) found in developed countries are of schools not always performing as successfully as they could be because many schools concentrate on staff development within a personal empowerment paradigm, rather than on a holistic school plan. Additionally, these SDPs predominantly follow a top-down approach whereby government authorities make decisions on behalf of schools and schools are viewed as separate entities from school communities and neighbouring schools. In most schools situated in disadvantaged areas, opportunities for and the practice of shared community involvement, practical knowledge and community resources are lacking (Vargas, 2013).

There is evidence that this is not always so. Prew (2009, 8300) noted that in South Africa, however, SDPs have developed characteristics unique to their contexts, with the focus on a variety of areas in the school, with staff development a low priority area and a clusters of schools being developed, rather than isolated schools, explains Prew (2009, 830). Entry-point-strategies, which refer to any critical issue within the context, like poverty, absenteeism and so forth, are used to get the community mobilised. Unfortunately, the success of a SDP is still largely dependent on the functionality and level of involvement of the Department of Education (Prew, 2009, 831). The outcomes of the aforementioned research indicate that the functionality of schools improves when different entry-points are utilised. Research further indicates that when the community is invited to co-determine developmental priorities, schools and the community are linked in industrious relationships, as the focus is on school maintenance rather than on staff development.

When local communities devote themselves, their resources and efforts collaboratively, substantial school development can occur (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996, 25). The key for schools is to recognise and locate their assets, capacities and abilities so that when combined, they can multiply the power and effectiveness of

their initiatives. Alumni as skilled workers, entrepreneurs, professionals and responsible citizens should represent the cornerstone of advancement for schools. Lippincott, (2011, 1) views alumni as an asset that has the potential to grow every year. Lippincott argues that within the structure of alumni associations, resources become more accessible and there is more opportunity for action, which is to the advantage of the alma mater, as alumni partly represent human, social and financial assets that already exist in the community that can be harnessed to engage with and strengthen the relationship with other insitutions in order to drive school development (McKnight & Kretzman, 2012, 1). It is, however, a reality that some alumni hailing from low resourced schools in disadvantaged communities do not naturally engage with their alma mater, probably because they feel disconnected from their former school and community (Stewart, 2017, 191). In order for alumni to consider the wealth of their resources and the opportunity for 'paying forward', a culture needs to be generated where each alumnus will seek out opportunities to invest some of their time and skills to improve the lives of a future generation.

In order for school development to succeed it is essential to make community engagement a priority and creating infrastructure to support the process (Reform Support Network, 2014, 3). McKnight (2009, 1) describes community engagement (CE) as an emerging worldwide movement of citizens who choose to live in a democracy, recognising their power as they are connected in relationships where they can become dynamic and productive. In this research, 'community' would firstly refer to alumni of the school and, secondly, all other organisational structures willing to support the school. This CE process is based on interpersonal interaction in which respect, trust and a common understanding of its purposes are paramount (Gottlieb, 2008, 1).

According to the Family Service and Housing Framework (FSH, 2008, 9), community engagement enables an improved identification of community needs, contributes to an enhanced utilisation of inadequate resources, and facilitates an appreciation of untapped community resources. Furthermore, FSH (2008, 9) suggests that CE facilitates the development of policies and programmes that are better informed and more responsive to community needs, thus attaining higher levels of acceptance and achieving better outcomes. Additionally, CE reduces conflict within the community,

builds trust and credibility, and fosters community capacity, as its members are actively identifying and meeting their own needs.

Alumni engagement can therefore capacitate a school to produce positive and sustainable changes through enhanced levels of participation. Members of the alumni can participate and be empowered at different levels, by sharing information, consulting and planning together to improve the school community (Gottlieb, 2008, 2). However, in the South African context, a common problem identified at disadvantaged schools is a lack of community support of and household involvement in children's learning (Nojaja, 2009, 4). Conversely, schools that consistently out-perform other public schools have shown that the participation of community stakeholders and parental involvement play a significant role in determining the quality of education provided to learners (Pinantoan, 2013). As Khosa (2011, 7) articulates, in such a setting sustainable education change requires the social intervention of those who share an understanding of and an appreciation for the specific context and the passion to improve it. A study encompassing 96 disadvantaged schools in South Africa has shown that extensive community involvement in the life and well-being of schools can significantly improve the matric pass rate, as well as lower the numbers of drop-outs (Nyoka & Lefko-Everett, 2010, 1).

In terms of systems thinking (Daresh and Lynch, 2010, 29), it is essential to start thinking of organisations not as single, isolated entities, but rather as partners with all other institutions in their environment. In this regard, the South African Schools Act (2000, 17) recognises the rights and duties of all members of the community in the governance of schools, which include individuals (learners and parents), interest groups (alumni), direct stakeholders (DoE), and institutions (churches). Though Chrzanowski, Rans and Thompson (2010, 7) suggest that the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach recognises that each community possesses a unique blend of assets on which to build its future, it is vital to find a person or organisation to bring together the existing assets in a community as a connector. A connector in any community is usually a person who values relationships, relies on residents for information and recognises the gifts of people at grassroots level, and whose prime function is to ignite action within the community.

Alumni can function as 'connectors' within the school community, as they network among their colleagues, friends, clients and business. In this way, alumni may be able to bring together the necessary skills, resources and experiences to support the growth and development of their alma mater.

Though school development concerns growth, nurturing and commitment, it requires planning for diverse inputs to ensure its success, strength and sustainability (Sapungan & Sapungan, 2014, 42; Griffith, Maggs & George, 2007, 9). These SIP's require extensive input from all stakeholders of a school. Research indicates that learners thrive when their high school encourages positive learning relationships among families, educators, businesses and other members of the community (Education.com, 2011). For this reason, parents as well as other stakeholders, among whom the alumni is an important stakeholder group, should have many opportunities to visit the school, to talk to teachers and staff, voice their concerns, share ideas, serve as volunteers, and suggest ways to improve the school.

South Africa's education system prior to 1994 was characterised by racial inequality and segregation. A democratic South Africa required a new national education system which foregrounds the participation in school activities of all stakeholders including parents, educators, learners, the state and the community. The South African School's Act of 1996 states that parents, educators and learners shall promote and accept the responsibility for the organisation, governance and funding of schools in partnership with the state (South African School's Act, 1996, 4). A case study conducted during 2009 at 96 low-resourced schools, situated in previously disadvantaged communites in South Africa (Prew, 2009, 826) indicated that 85% of the schools without SIPs displayed an urgent need for parents and community members to help at the school. Conversely, those schools that had SIPs had experienced a marked difference in school functionality, with teachers and learners showing greater levels of motivation. It is therefore important for school leaders to demonstrate their competence in building relationships and partnering with their community by marketing their school and involving the parents and other community stakeholders (Department of Education, 2008, 98). In this regard, Senge (Prew, 2009, 826) states that systems thinking is concerned with a shift of mind, from seeing parts to seeing the whole, and from seeing people as helpless reactors to

51

seeing people as active participants taking responsibility for shaping their reality. Consequently, alumni working in partnership with schools could be a fruitful way of accelerating school growth, multiplying school resources, enhancing the results of projects and generally decreasing the limitations within schools.

Gilly (2013, 1) comments that highly successful schools in the United States of America have already found innovative ways to engage the community as a stakeholder group in order to fulfill their goals. Research conducted at South African schools (Prew, 2009, 826) has indicated that a school community is capable of identifying and addressing the challenges in its own context. In this regard, a policy brief (Nyoka & Lefcko-Everett, 2010, 4) has encouraged communities to become proactive citizens engaged in agency for their communities, rather than solely depending on the government for service delivery.

2.7   SUSTAINABILITY

The sustainability of an association refers to a signpost that has to be made to ensure its viability in the future. It would include activities and outcomes that will ensure the maintenance and renewability of the context, enhance an organisation's ability to maintain itself and solve problems, and maintain decent levels of wellbeing for people (Dunphy, Benveniste, Griffiths & Sutton, 2000, 6).

Furthermore, because sustainability focuses on value for the future (Dunphy, Benveniste, *et al.*, 2000, 50), for this particular project, sustainability would mean the ability to maintain and renew alumni involvement in the school. It is against the background of a low-resourced school struggling to maintain alumni motivation, to assist in serving and solving problems, and generally in supporting the school to fulfil its vision that this research was initiated.

According to the USA Bureau for Educational and Cultural Affairs, an alumni association has to concentrate on promoting consistent and diverse funding, execute rigorous budgeting and auditing policies, retain strong membership numbers, and embrace instruments for reassigning leadership responsibilities at regular intervals to new members (BECA, 2009, 16). Research suggests that it is expedient for

associations to diversify their funding sources and to seek sustainable means of procuring funds. In this regard, Gastrow (2013, 1) reports that in attracting funding an institution should follow a holistic approach that involves good governance, strong leadership and building committed relationships with supporters. The USA BECA (2009, 16) has identified four sources of income for sustaining alumni programmes, namely: membership fees, grant opportunities, donations and fundraising. Charging membership fees is a good way of securing a steady cash flow to support an alumni association's actions and events, while donations, which may not be a reliable source, may be solicited for a specific project and also has tax benefits for the donor (Iten, 2013). The USA BECA (2009) considers it important that grants be acquired through private and public partnerships and are often the result of alumni networking in their personal or professional capacities. Furthermore, when soliciting grants it is important to identify a specific project or person as a beneficiary. Additionally, the identified beneficiary has to meet the criteria of the donor institution, because businesses target specific social responsibility projects. Member donations are an important opportunity for the alumni to give back to their alma mater, especially for a specific cause that an alumnus may feel passionate about, such as a study bursary or sports scholarship, or to improve a specific facility, such as a sports field or library.

Garcia (2013, 01) states that it is important to plant the seed of willingness to give towards building an annual fund by reminding alumni about the opportunity in a progressive way, whether via mail, email, phone, in a newsletter and magazine, and through personal meetings. Garcia further suggests that one should attach a particular value option to the appeal, to create a personal and individualised connection with the institution. Furthermore, a unique value that could be attached to an appeal for a donation could be an initiative in terms of which a low-resourced school could be enabled to offer quality education to its current learners. Such an appeal could ignite a sense of community among alumni and could improve the integrity of the appeal for funds (Garcia, 2013). Moreover, fundraising events that target specific causes, like a bursary fund, assistance for orphans, or any other community plight, highlight the profile of the association and are usually successful, because such events raise consciousness in the community and appeal to the passion of alumni.

Once an association has funding, developing an annual budget becomes necessary. A budget delineates priorities and generates distinct prospects to develop, build, sustain and expand programmes over time (Dobson, 2012, 1). Furthermore, developing a budget is a means of ensuring that funds are disbursed in an efficient and responsible manner by keeping track of all income and expenditures of the association, and to accurately report to donors and members. Because resources are always finite, as opposed to unlimited, it is often found that institutions exhaust their material resources. However, some institutions have made a paradigm shift by investing in human capacity in order to sustain the supply of innovation and high performance (Dunphy *et al.,* 2000, 20). For this study, it would mean that alumni assets, skills and networks should be utilised to the maximum in order to grow the capacity of the association, as well as growing alumni numbers. Interestingly, a survey (CASE, 2012, 1) has indicated: when membership fees are high, the greater the average alumni gift becomes; when the percentage of paid alumni members is high, the larger the average alumni gift becomes, and the larger the alumni email data base maintained by an institution, the greater the percentage of alumni donors (Dunphy *et al.*, 2000, 25).Because the need for resources is ever increasing, some alumni surveys highlight the importance of growing an alumni database, keeping personal and intermittent contact, as well as stressing the importance of appealing to alumni to pay annual fees. Because membership recruitment and the retention of members are considered a vital and ongoing task of an association, a proactive strategy is required to maintain a higher standard of accountability towards their members (Jacobs, 2016).

Sunter (2002, 73) maintains that sustainability requires a great level of accountability from its stakeholders, necessitating productive engagement with donors. Shaidlin (2014) expounds that alumni need to understand that their financial contributions are critical. Therefore, the school needs to explain how essential alumni contributions are to the advancement of their alma mater. It is, therefore, necessary for an alumni association to describe what the impact of the donation will be on the school and the community.

2.8   CONCLUSION

This chapter has highlighted the ways in which alumni can render support to schools. The literature depicts a long and proud history of successful alumni associations in First World countries. However, many alumni associations are experiencing financial constraints and suggest that improving alumni relations should receive focused attention. Many challenges are experienced in low-resourced schools, but involving the community in a participatory manner could be considered necessary for achieving positive outcomes. A review of the literature has indicated that alumni should be considered as a valuable stakeholder for school development. Furthermore, when alumni engagement is facilitated from an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, and mobilises the assets of individuals in a community, participants realise that they have the ability to improve their own contexts and find solutions to their own challenges. Alumni, as members within this school community, have the skills and experience to assist their alma mater in fulfilling its vision.

Within the context of this study, alumni engagement should be considered a prime source of value. The knowledge and skills that alumni possess are vital for creating ongoing innovation in order to sustain the work of the association. Therefore, the recruitment of alumni should start with the outgoing matriculants at their valedictory service or at their farewell dinner, which has become practice at most local schools.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK INFORMING THE RESEARCH

> "Ideas are worthless except as they pass into actions which rearrange and reconstruct in some way be it little or large, the world in which we live."
> [John Dewey, 1929]

3.1 INTRODUCTION

A synopsis of the theoretical framework that guided the research process is presented in this chapter. Maxwell (2013, 39) describes a theoretical framework as a system of concepts, assumptions, expectations and beliefs that support and inform the research process. In this regard, Corbin and Strauss (2014, 26) state that a theoretical framework provides a guide that may be used to select concepts for investigation and to frame the research findings.

3.2 CONCEPTUALISING THE RESEARCH

The theoretical framework underpinning this study comprises impressions and beliefs pertinent to this research (Maxwell, 2013, 39). This framework offered explanations for certain assumptions, helped define and explain the forthcoming data, as well as set the boundaries for the research (Vaughan, 2008, 22). The theoretical framework presented for this study consists of a model, mind maps and graphics developed during sessions with research participants that formed a tentative theory that steered and informed the process of facilitating alumni support for a low-resourced school. The theoretical framework guided the rest of the design in assessing and refining the goals of the study, developing relevant research questions, and selecting appropriate research "bricolage' (Given 2008) for generating data and completing the project.
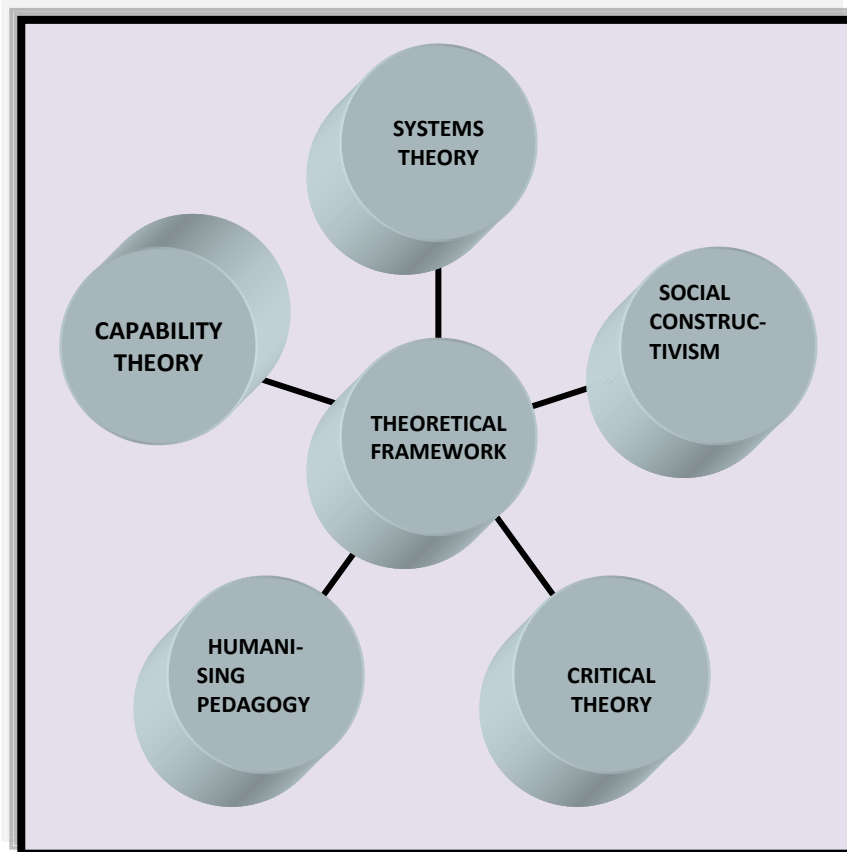
FIGURE 3.1: Theoretical framework of the research

The research paradigm I selected for this study is the critical paradigm, because the aim is to bring about changes, and challenging the participants' perceptions of under-resourcing, poverty and how alumni could support the school to enhance the educational experiences of learners. The philosophies held by George Hegel in the eighteenth century focusing on the disparities of the old order and introducing the ideas of freedom into the Western World through radical change (New World Encyclopedia); and the ideas of Karl Marx in the nineteenth century studies focusing on how oppressive forces operate in society by exposing the underlying struggles of having and not having in order to liberate society by changing the existing order, provided a lens for this study (Loewenson, Laurell, Hogstedt, Ambruoso & Ahroff, 2015). Likewise, the critical pedagog, Paulo Freire, provides a critical lens for addressing the unequal distribution of resources by underlining the role of critical understanding for addressing deprivation and injustices in society (Huber-Waring, 2010, 7). These prominent figures above focus on eliminating injustices and transforming society by address inequalities, particularly in marginalised societies.

The ontology of the critical paradigm encourages researchers and participants to dialogue, and use theory to transform (through praxis) the underlying orders of social life (Madison, 205). In applying this ontology in my study enabled alumni to identify how to support an under-resourced school to enhance the educational experiences of their learners. The axiological assumptions of respect for the participants' indigenous knowledge of this particular community assisted in problemising and interrogating the underlying community values (Madison, 2005). These values guided the research process in illuminating social struggles emanating from poverty that marginalised this community.

After examining the literature for this study, Complexity theory was selected for a critical enquiry for this study, supported by capability theory, humanising and constructivism philosophies. These theories complimented each other and synergistically worked to provide a lens to view and understand the context of the school (Reason & Rigor, 2011, 34). Including more than one theory served to expand and deepen my own understanding of the context and philosophical underpinnings of the research I was undertaking. I considered these theories necessary for providing depth and meaning to specific activities in the different phases of each cycle in the PAR process this study was following.

3.2.1   Complexity Theory

The **Complexity theory** explains an organisation as composed of nonlinear feedback loops (Burns, 2015, 36) connected to other people and organisations. Such nonlinear feedback loops are capable of operating in states of stable and unstable equilibrium, or borders between these 'states of far-from-equilibrium' in bounded instability, at the edge of chaos (therefore sometimes referred to as chaos theory). These paradoxes of stability in an organisation can be explained by, on the one hand, forces that pull towards integration, maintenance controls, the human desire for security and certainty, and adaptation to the environment on the other hand (Sundarasuradula, 2005; Marion and Bacon; 2001; Cilliers, 1998; Stacey, 1996). However, organisations are also powerfully pulled to the opposite extreme of an unstable equilibrium by the forces of division and decentralisation and the human desire for stimulation and improvement. Therefore, if an organisation gives in to the

pull to stability it will fail, because it becomes inflexibile and cannot change easily. If it gives in to the pull of instability, it will disintegrate. A successful organisation would therefore sustain the balance between stability and instability. In this research context an under-resourced school was compelled to adapt to an unstable economic environment, approach their alumni for material support to enhance their learners' educational experiences.

Complexity theory proposes a model of change that is organic, far from equilibrium, and dynamic, nonlinear and holistic in its approach (Mitchel, 2009; Sancons, 1998); a nonlinear system that is characterised by the whole being greater and different from the sum of its parts. In order to effect changes within the school, the organisation had to focus on the complex relationships between management, the educators, parents, learners and alumni. Careful consideration for this process of involving alumni had to be negotiated; and recognising the interconnectedness of the system was important, because a change in one part of the school system could have a major impact on other parts. Conversely, we realized that a lack of change in one part of the school system, for example educators who did not support the involvement of alumni in school activities, could inhibit this process of change (Burns & Worsley, 2015). Furthermore, for change to take place, the dynamic patterns of relationships need to create enabling pathways for people's agency. It is important within a complex adaptive system, like a school, to holistically understand the many interacting elements such as the role and influence of the Department of Basic Education (DBoE), the School Management Team (SMT), educators, learners and parents, because each element influences and, in turn, is influenced by the other elements in the school system, bringing forth emergent new forces (Stewart, 2010; Cohen & Stewart, 1995).

Complexity theory explains how an organism like an under-resourced school is directly influenced and responds to an environment limited by joblessness and poverty to facilitate the support of its alumni. Engaging with the environment caused dynamic and recursive change to happen (Morison, 1991, 2). Complexity theory explains how the integration and outcomes of "innumerable and daily micro actions" of educators, alumni, donors and friends of the school built relationships and

networked to support the school in fulfilling its mandate to their learners (Rahini & Geyer, 2008, 180).

Because Complexity theory is a theory of survival (change), evolution, development and adaptation, emergence and unpredictability, I believe it can explain how alumni and all school stakeholders can interactively bring driving and restraining forces to the system that can keep the school in constant flux (Lewis & Morgan, 1927). It also explains how enabling sustainable change can come about by changing the dynamic patterns of relationships within the school and enabling pathways for alumni's agency to enhance the educational experiences of learners. In this study, the research participants were the driving force, seeking political and policy change within the education system by propelling the system forward in a generally positive, but uncertain direction. However, it was the process of self-learning and self-development within this system that enabled the research participants to surmount the inevitable challenges. Furthermore, as organisations move towards greater degrees of complexity and higher order, they evolve as new properties appear at each emergent level (Lissack, 1994). In this regard, the aim of this research is for alumni to evolve from organised to self-organised in their pursuit to serve their alma mater; from mechanical actions to humanistic engagements with the learners; from following directives to empowerment and from single leaders to distributed leadership (Morrison, 2002, 11).

3.2.2   Systems Theory

Because a system is the arrangement of a number of disparate elements in a regular pattern or relationship, it is important to begin to think of the education system not as a single, isolated entity, but rather as a partner with other organisations in its environment (Daresh & Lynch, 2010, 3). Through Systems theory, I aimed to explain how within the complex relationships among stakeholder groups within the education system (Figure 3.2) and the alumni could enact change processes that could have a major impact on the school. In this way sustainable change could be brought about that could change the dynamics of the various relationships between the different stakeholders of the school (Coetzee, Graaff, Hendricks & Wood, 2001, 77). Systems theory has significance for the study in explaining how these multifaceted

intersection between a school and other segments of society, in this context the school and alumni, can function to accomplish its specific objectives, enforcing its rules and norms that govern social interaction and performance" (Bowen, 2010, 48). Furthermore, systems theory gives perspective on how an interrelated social system like the Department of Basic Education (DoBE), the school, its SMT and the School Governing Body (SGB) who are mandated to oversee the administration of South African schools and staff, regulate parental involvement and learner education, can involve alumni as a separate though interconnected and interdependent system to support the school.

In this study, the systems theory explains the relationships between the different parts of the South African education system, namely the Department of Basic Education (DoBE), which is responsible for planning and regulating schools regarding aspects such as curricula and resources from Reception Grade to Grade 12; the specific vision and mission the school should fulfill; and the establishment of a School Governing Body (SGB), tasked with supporting the principal, school staff, the parents, learners and alumni. This afore-mentioned interacting parts function as a complex system that can produce unexpected dynamics and changes within the education system because of interaction between the different components (Norberg & Cunningham, 2013, x).

In any system, including the South African education system, power and influence is not equally distributed, because some elements within the system are considered more powerful than others and can exert influence over the others. Figure 3.2 depicts the hierarchical nature of the South African education system. In South Africa, development interventions are designed and enforced by the DoBE (Figure 3.2), which claims to know what schools need and how the outcomes should be achieved. A review of several international development interventions (Burns & Worsely, 2015, 3) indicates that planners design ambitious schemes on a national level that require structural adjustments and conditional funding and expertise, are initiated from the top down and based on theoretical arguments not always supported by evidence. As a result, some of these interventions have no relevance to the real needs of schools and therefore, schools do not take ownership of the process or the outcomes (Burns & Worsley, 2015, 3). It is for this reason that I

elected a PAR approach, which is a collaborative, action learning approach (Kearney & Todhunter, 2015, 96), and a dialectical process giving the participants a sense of ownership and investment over the design and research processes, the capacity of the approach to respond to context and therefore its bottom up approach which fuels participants to continue to work towards change in the research context knowing that the outcomes are based on the decisions of the group (Kapoor & Jordan, 2009, 49).

In the context of this study, the DoBE yields power over the school, SGB, educators and parents because the education department enacts national policy that stipulates that a "no school fees school" (SCHOOLS Act 1996 amendment, 2006) cannot compel learners to make a financial contribution to the school. Because the SGB is tasked with the governance of the school, they with the educators, learners and parents are responsible for raising funds to ensure the smooth running of the school. In this regard, the teaching staff and parents yield more power in terms of decisions regarding fundraising events than other stakeholders, such as the alumni, donors and friends of the school, in a way that could possibly deter some role-players from engaging with the school. However, I believe that alumni could become part of an interrelated education system, functioning alongside the school, finding opportunities to contribute to fulfilling the vision of the school, its development and welfare.
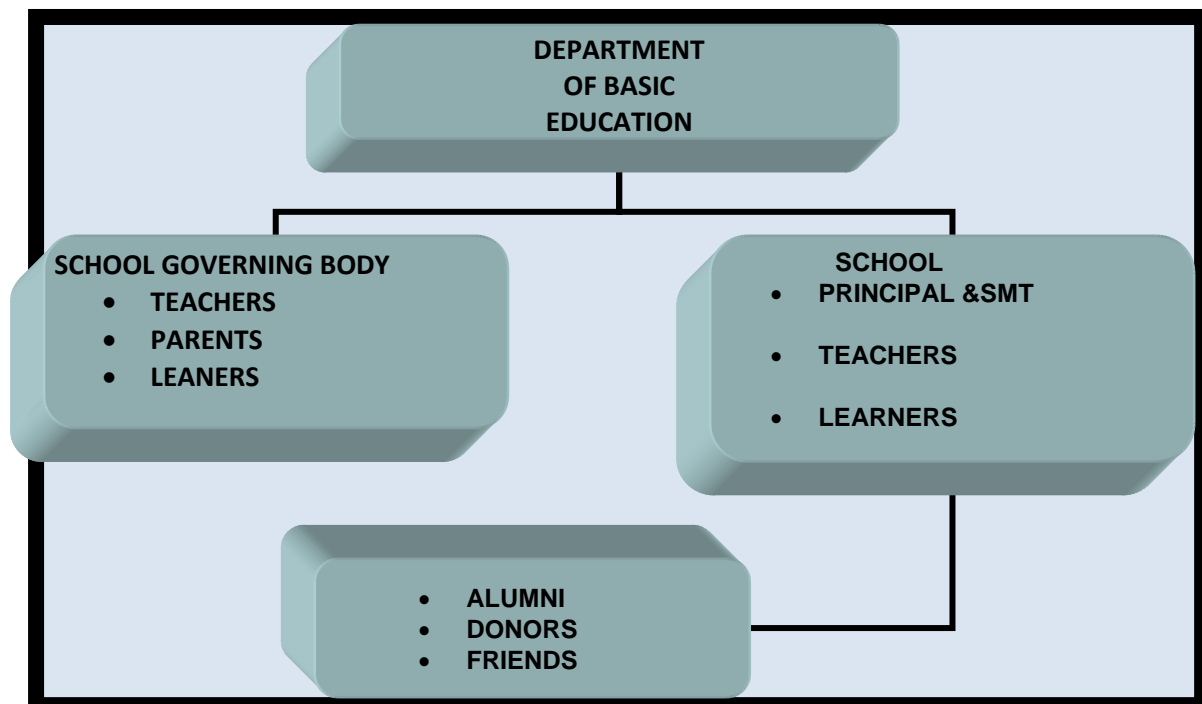
FIGURE 3.2: The school as a complex system

For a group or association, such as alumni, to evolve properly within the education system, research participants had to   problem-solve knowledge and interpret and respond to opportunities and daily challenges such as keeping learners motivated to attend school by creating a positive school environment through enhancing the infrastructure of the school (Rihani, 2002, 11). Because the power that each element within the education system yields is embedded in its particular functions, routines, structures and history, alumni is in a good position to serve the vision and mission of the school. For this study, it was important to follow a PAR approach that moves from the premise that participants at grassroots level are best at representing the needs of their community; because alumni are deemed active researchers and agents of change; as the primary source of information and the primary actors in generating, validating and using the knowledge in action research; seeking to understand and improving the research context by collaborating with those affected by problems and producing change as a means to new knowledge (Loewenson, Laurell, Hogstedt *et al.* 2014, 12).

This study was consequently based on an understanding that Systems theory views a system as composed of different parts or agents that interact in a nonlinear way, where the outcomes of those interactions could lead to dynamic changes in the organisation (Norberg & Cumming 2013, x). Therefore, changes like economic growth or decline, resulting in escalated levels of poverty and crime, could gravely impact on the motivation of the learners, parents and teachers of a school community, because these factors result in a rise in learner absenteeism and school drop-out rates. Conversely, as alumni represent multiple economic and social systems, within interrelated systems, it could ensure the transfer of valuable information for the maintenance and growth of the school, solidifying the values and building up resources in an exchange process in order to develop resilience within the interrelated systems (Stichweh, 2013, 1). Alumni, working within the school community as an interrelated system of educators, learners, parents, DoBE and SGB, could enhance the flow of input and output of cognitive, motivational and economic sources that could ensure the sustainability of the school.

Because a school is a product of the surrounding community whose needs they serve, it can be viewed as the most powerful human system (Skyttner, 2006, 352).

Furthermore, as a school aims to achieve its organisational and community goals, it operates in an integrated way that has to adapt to outside influences in pursuit of those goals (Stichweh, 2013, 1). As a result, schools are sensitive to external influences and have to organise themselves in such a way as to ensure their preservation (Toth, 2009, 121). Therefore, as a self-organising system, a school forms structures and patterns of behaviour that establishes its unique character. In this regard, a school can benefit from alumni working alongside the school as partners striving to render support to their alma mater. In this way, the school system can become more resilient and relevant as it continually faces difficult external challenges, like increasing unemployment and escalating crime rates. Alumni, who have the necessary skills and experiences, are able to suggest resolutions to learners at risk and implement them as they strive to enhance the educational opportunities of all learners.

3.2.2 A framework for catalysing systemic change

The following framework demonstrates the elements that need to be in place to actively promote system change and indicates the relationship between those elements. The underpinning elements for systemic change are participation, learning and building relationships and networks, which are discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

- **Participation**

Participation from people with varied experiences and narratives underpin the learning process which is crucial for initiating effective action (Burns & Worsley, 2015, 61). In this study, alumni engaged with the school and took ownership by raising issues that affected the school, because they felt a vested interest in the school. In recent years, the relevant community experienced increased rates of unemployment, gangsterism and violence that negatively impacted on the school and the educational experiences of learners. Alumni advocacy started with conversations highlighting the issues that resonated with them, and meetings were convened to plan and take appropriate action, which served as attractors for building relationships in the community.

- **Relationship and network building**

In a complex social system like a school, knowledge, trust and enthusiasm flow through the relationships that connect people to one another (Burns, 2014, 6). Therefore, it was crucial for the participants in this study to concentrate on building relationships and networks of alumni for creating an understanding of the school context. These networks were formed as alumni built a data base of their classmates, inviting them to monthly meetings, at times organising social events to discuss what the urgent challenges were facing the school and what strategies alumni could put in place to improve the learning conditions at the school. In this way crucial knowledge, norms and values like inclusiveness, collaboration, reflection, appreciation of diversity, and a questioning mindset, were emphasised among the participants, which served to facilitate co-operation among a wider network of alumni (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011; Keeley, 2007). These networks functioned as conduits for establishing trust and communicating norms for a learning environment among alumni, linking with the PAR approach, which foregrounds relationship building as a prerequisite for learning.

- **Learning**

The Freirian notion of critical thinking supports pedagogical empowerment that constructs the concept of learning based on developing a critical consciousness of the world and exploring perceptions to expose social and political inequalities (Freire, 1972). The learning in this study happened in action-reflection cycles, enabling the participants to assess the challenges the school was experiencing, develop theories and strategies to effect change, and then reflect and analyse these situations again. During these cycles of action-reflection, the participants met on a monthly basis to strategise, also meeting socially to connect alumni to one another, building networks for conscientising alumni of the current issues afflicting the school. This process facilitated co-operation, which served as channels for communicating norms and values for the establishment of trust among alumni (Keeley, 2007,). These networks fostered participation, which equipped the research participants, as change for

agents, with the means to generate critical knowledge about system dynamics (relationships) enabling them to make informed choices about actions to enhance the educational experiences of learners. This process of catalysing change is in line with the complexity theory, which identifies the four systemic encounters for development as, firstly: the actions and interventions implemented by alumni had to be purposeful and appropriate; secondly, they had to work well within the school programme for the benefit of the learners; thirdly, the school needed solutions and had to be enthused by the results it achieved; and finally, they had to commit and take ownership thereof (Burns & Worsley, 2015, 53).

- **Appropriate actions and interventions**

When the alumni took appropriate action, it was what they felt the school and learners needed, and it worked, because it was well supported by people who had something to offer to the situation and by people directly affected by it. Because the alumni articulated the needs of the school appropriately, the scale of the project became sustainable and possible. In this regard, the alumni created a platform for engaging with the learners who they felt should benefit from their skills by offering motivation, mentoring and coaching, organising sports events and assisting with fund raising.

- **Ownership, enthusiasm and adoption**

People adopt and organise around things that they have energy and passion for. The alumni were driven by their passion for sport; therefore, they organised sports events to build relationships and networks, while others became involved in fundraising events, mentoring programmes, motivational talks, and various other projects to build a positive school environment. This is in line with the PAR process that 'encourages and opens up communicative spaces between those involved, where inter-subjective agreements, mutual understanding of a situation, unforced consensus about what to do is reached' (Midgley, Tasler, Danaher, & Mandy, 2011, 151). As alumni took ownership of projects, because they cared for the cause, they legitimised and took responsibility for it themselves.

- **Scale**

Scale refers to the expanding, replicating, adapting and sustaining of successful practice in a geographical space, which over time reaches a larger number of people (Chandy & Linn, 2011, 4; Hartmann & Linn, 2008, 5). As the alumni designed projects, they ensured that these were appropriate for the intervention to be pursued. The alumni instituted an 'Alumni Week Programme' as an annual school event, to enable alumni to engage with learners to motivate them and guide their career choices. During this programme, the alumni were able to emphasise the requirements for specific career choices, sharing their personal challenges and highlighting success stories. Instituting the Alumni Week Programme was important for engaging alumni with the school in a sustainable way.

- **Sustainability**

When sustainable change is possible, the systems dynamics (relationships) needs to be changed. Therefore, the school had to create spaces and pathways for alumni to create programmes and projects that would complement the school programmes and serve the vision and mission of the school. Because mobilising and coordinating stakeholders is a messy and slow process, especially when following a PAR approach, systemic change ultimately depends on a sustained campaign to increase capacity and coordinate an entire system (Kania & Kramer, 2011, 4). For this study, the sustainability of alumni engagement was dependent on how well programmes were marketed for creating 'collective impact'. This meant that for social change to be effective in this community, a broad cross-sector of coordinated strategies had to be implemented, instead of isolated interventions by individuals. Selected marketing strategies included alumni and teachers wearing T-shirts displaying the alumni logo, as well as a Facebook page to enhance interaction among alumni and keep them informed of forthcoming events. The coordinated efforts of multiple alumni created a collective impact that dramatically highlighted the outcomes and improved the sustainability of the project (Kania & Kramer, 2011, 4).

3.2.3   The South African Education system

The following sections will outline the complex and interdependent relationships within the South African Basic Education system in order to create an understanding of how the complexity theory guided the study.

- **Department of Basic Education**

The DoBE has a long-term plan called "Schooling 2025', which allows for the monitoring of progress against a set of measurable indicators that covers all aspects of basic education, including the enrolment and retention of learners and teachers, infrastructure, school funding, learner well-being and school safety, mass literacy and educational quality. This Plan was devised by the DoBE to ensure that every young South African would receive quality schooling. The DoBE, however, realised that this goal could not be achieved overnight nor on its own.

The Department of Basic Education (DoBE) deals with all public schools in South Africa from Grade R (reception) to Grade 12 as well as adult literacy programmes. The aim of the DoBE is to develop, maintain and support education in South Africa in the twenty first century. The DoBE furthermore envisions a South Africa in which all people have access to lifelong learning, as well as education and training, which will in turn contribute towards enhancing the quality of life and prospering all in the country (Brunton, 2003, 2). However, a policy brief by the Africa Institute of South Africa (Modisaotsile, 2012, 1) states that in South Africa there are many indications of a crisis in education. The signs the brief alludes to include high annual learner enrolment rates, the increasingly poor quality of Grade 12 passes translating to learners not meeting university entrance requirements, and an increasing number of educators leaving the profession. In addition, classrooms are still overcrowded, low competencies in numeracy and literacy are evident there is poor support for learners and a shortage of resources, which may contribute to the increased drop-out rate.

The DoBE (2003, 5), in outlining the concept of school development support, states that schools cannot function on their own in isolation from the communities in which they are located because communities are viewed as important sources of support.

Therefore, schools and communities can and should function as partners, created to enable one another to achieve personal and institutional goals. Aveling and Jovchelovitch (2013, 34) describe partnerships as encounters that contain representations of self and others, where communication among all stakeholders is required, and which are shaped by their institutional and sociocultural contexts. These partnerships develop through critical reflection that supports institutional contexts. The aforementioned authors further suggest that critical reflection requires dialogue among multiple partners enabling a more equitable relationship, rather than a hierarchical structure of power and dependence. The latter is in line with critical theory (Hartas, 2012, 45) which aims to examine social reality and seeks to understand its structure and agency, rules and norms that encompass behaviour and challenges human oppression, with the view to achieve emancipation. Furthermore, partners bring together a variety of insights about the problem at hand and the role they can play in finding the best solution for the problem. This vision of alumni partnering with schools is influenced by Freire's critical pedagogy, as well as participatory action research, in which critical reflection is not based on the transfer of knowledge, but collaboratively creating context specific knowledge (Aveling & Jovchelovitch, 2013, 35).

- **The school**

According to the South African Schools' Act (1996) every school should have a School Management Team (SMT), consisting of the principal and heads of departments in the school, initiating and encouraging greater cooperation and collaboration in administration in order to find the most suitable ways to promote education. According to Day (2011, 117), there is greater convergence when the school and the challenges it represents becomes the focus of attention. In this regard, research by Hopkins, Harris, Stoll and Mackay (2011) suggest that improvement across the system can be advanced by strengthening networks and by leaders assuming system-wide leadership roles.

I consider a systems thinking framework appropriate in order to fuse the components and sub-components of the school into a coherent whole, meaning that successful change efforts require the individual parts of a system to come together

and form a network of connections (Daly & Fungan, 2011). Literature attests that though there are development initiatives in education, these interventions are often 'ad hoc' in nature and driven by immediate needs; haphazard and not clearly focused; and that activities are not steered by a regulatory system (Fullan 2007; Burns, 2005, 21; Department of Education, 2005, 16). Therefore, the importance of a collaborative school culture and the encouraging support of its leadership, and a sense of purpose, steered by a common vision, are important factors in sustaining school improvement.

- **School Governing Body (SGB)**

The SGB is the 'government' of the school, established under the terms of the South African Schools Act (Act no. 84 of 1990). It is mandated to set policies and rules that govern the school and to monitor the implementation of such rules. A School Governing Body (SGB) consisting of educators, parents and learner representatives, is tasked by the DoBE with ensuring that the school runs smoothly and efficiently. Such democratically elected SGBs are critical in ensuring good governance and that schools serve the interest of the community and meet the expectations of the parents.

SGBs are accountable to the school community and must demonstrate dedication and commitment to achieve quality education in schools. In terms of the trust vested in the governing body by the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Elrc (Brunton), 2003, B-12), it is mandated to meet with parents, learners and educators at the school, respectively, at least once a year in order to provide support to the school. In order to support the school, the SGB in its professional role is required to encourage the stakeholders of the school, such as parents, learners, educators, staff and alumni, to render voluntary services to the school. However, due to "poor training provided by the provincial departments, lack of resources, high levels of adult illiteracy and lack of awareness of their roles" (John, 2012, 2) are restricting SGB's from effectively executing their duties. In this regard, alumni, who are familiar with the school context and the community, have a role to play in encouraging parents to participate in their children's education and guiding SGBs in their duties.

- **Parents**

Parents have a fundamental responsibility to ensure that their children are at school, for creating an atmosphere conducive to study, and for ensuring that their homework is done. Unfortunately, this is not the case in many homes in the Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth, due to factors such as poor education and the low income levels of parents, overcrowded homes and various social problems in the community (Kakembo, 2011, 3) these factors contribute to poor attendance and high drop-out rates among learners. An extensive body of international literature supports the potential of parental involvement (PI) for improving learners' academic achievements and social outcomes (Sathiapane, Van Wyk & Wolhuter, 2012, 61; Hornby, 2010, 495; Jeynes, 2007, 82). In this regard Anderson and Minke (2010, 311) particularly mention that the involvement of parents (PI) in their children's education has been associated with positive outcomes in grade averages and increased achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics. Other benefits include lower drop-out rates and fewer retentions or special education placements. The added benefits of PI include an increased ability to self-regulate behaviour and higher levels of social skills in learners (Minke, 2010, 311).

However, research also suggests that there are notable gaps in PI planning at schools for various reasons; namely a lack of written policies on PI, an impromptu approach towards the organisation of PI, a lack of definite strategies to involve parents of low social standing due to a lack of formal education, a limited focus on parent literacy levels and general education; and a lack of training for teachers in advancing PI (Sathiapane, Van Wyk & Wolhuter, 2012, 62; Hornby, 2010, 500). This is in line with Epstein's (Sathiapane, *et. al.* 2012, 61) theory called 'overlapping spheres of influence' it implying that the most effective families have overlapping shared goals and missions concerning their children. These overlapping goals refer to (1) schools that teach families how to support their children in specific areas; (2) communicating with parents through letters, written reports/profiles, parent evenings and home visitations, (3) how parents can assist their children's learning and development by volunteering their skills at school; (4) teaching parents how to assist their children with homework and other curriculum-related activities at home; (5) forming partnerships in the process of decision-making; and (6) collaborating with

the community by identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programmes, learning and development.

Research attests that when parents participate in the schooling of their children in a sustainable manner, learners' achievements improve (Center for Public Education, 2011). This can be attributed to the fact that parents are able to articulate the needs of the local school, because they know the community, hold officials accountable for quality education, and mobilise local resources for school improvement. This means that parents are able to take command and work towards the wellbeing of their children, or remain powerless and leave their children worse off (Modisaotsile, 2012, 4).

Literature emphasises that parents participate in their children's education when they believe that they are able to make a difference; when their children want them to become involved, and when they have the skills and knowledge that will make a difference. Literature further highlights that parents are best able to teach their children school-related skills such as problem-solving skills, monitor the time their children spend on homework and developing attributes like motivation, self-regulation, independence and creativity (Anderson & Minke, 2010, 311). Therefore, schools can involve their alumni to assist parents in initiating and formulating parental involvement strategies, help parents define their role in their children's education, and determine expectations for parental behaviour and the preferred behavioural outcomes for learners. International research (Umeana, 2017; Topor, Keane, Shelton & Collins, 2010; Grolnick, Friendly & Bellas, 2009) indicates that where schools have initiated PI programmes, improved learning outcomes are reported.

- **Alumni**

According to Cohen (2006, 200), contributions from alumni should play a significant role in the life of a school. This statement is underscored by the following comments of alumni (TEACH South Africa), who promulgate the following: education is the one way of breaking the cycle of poverty; and assisting their alma mater is a moral obligation, as is creating opportunities for children, parents and communities to thrive

both educationally and personally. Furthermore, alumni contributions can cause a 'ripple effect' to encourage other alumni to give, and finally, to challenge others to tutor learners. In this regard, research suggests that schools need to proactively create healthy relationships with their alumni by recruiting current learners, organising social events, highlighting the importance of alumni, and creating a culture of social responsibility among alumni (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Khanfar, Swaidan & Mujtaba, 2009; Mcdearmon & Shirley, 2009).

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (Tacquard, 2012, 2) acknowledges that strong alumni relations are essential, because they have the potential to be an institution's most loyal supporters. Moreover, good alumni relationships should be flexible enough to allow an alumnus not only to sustain positive links with his/her institution only, but also to build positive links with a former educator, coach, peer or mentor. The relevance of the afore-mentioned research findings for this study is that these multiple links could not only be enriching for the alumnus and the school, but could be advantageous for creating a benefactor-culture in under-resourced school communities where none exist. However, research suggests that no one specific factor motivates alumni to make a gift towards their alma mater: donors are motivated to make a gift based on whether their experiences at the institution were good; some alumni define their alma mater not as a charity, but rather in a transactional manner (delivering a service in exchange for money) (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011, 337). Furthermore, if non-donors feel that a small gift cannot make a difference, they refrain from giving, while other alumni are so wrapped up in their daily routines that they do not make the time to give.

Examining the literature, I am persuaded that it is important for a school to identify and track their alumni, inform alumni on a regular basis of important events of the school, develop an interest in their alumni through communications and programming, involve alumni in the life of the school, whenever and wherever possible, and provide meaningful opportunities for alumni to invest in the school as well as in current learners (future alumni). By engaging alumni, a school has the continued benefit of these former pupils as partners, accessing their skills, experience and knowledge.

Literature purports that "some of the most valuable knowledge sharing occurs in communities of practice that are self-organised around informal roles and relationships" (Burns, 2014, 31). This aligns with both systems and critical theory that underlines the surfacing of structural dynamics for enacting transformative change. Alumni can be such a community of practice, enabling a school to function in a socio-cultural context – it is therefore within this context that alumni who are familiar with the school and its challenges can support change. These partnerships with alumni could bring together a diversity of understandings about the nature of the challenges at hand, the roles they ought to play, what constitutes best practice, and finding apposite solutions (Aveling & Jovchelovitch, 2013, 34).

Because education can change and improve society in various ways, it provides various platforms, policies and practices for meaningful discourse and debates for creating a more democratic society (Walker, 2008, 116). I believe that every opportunity should be used to advance our freedom and improve our daily lives. Gadamer reminds us that freedom is not guaranteed to us, because "if we do not know how to use the small space of freedom which has been left to us" it will cease to exist (Gadamer, 1986, 52). Therefore, I urged alumni to genuine dialogue for producing channels of cultural information. It is from this premise that I argue for the relevance of the philosophies of capability theory for this study in the struggle for equality and for social justice in and through education, because it aims for the redistribution of resources; the recognition and valuing of diverse participants; and the equal participation of all. Because the study endeavored to include the dispossessed struggling for greater social justice, the alumni made authentic choices (Walker, 2008, 117) to help increase the educational opportunities of existing learners; concentrating on their "functioning and capabilities" (Kuklys, 2005; Robeyns, 2008; Walker 2008), as the well-being of learners was improved by enhancing the quality of their educational experiences. It was within this conceptualisation that this study aimed to explore how alumni with their variety of knowledge and skills could enhance the opportunities for achievement within this school context.

- **School culture**

The concept of a school culture has been researched for many years and for various reasons. Barnes, Brynard and De Wet (2012, 69) define a school culture as "a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, values, ceremonies, traditions and myths that are deeply embedded in each aspect of the school". Cohen, McCabe, Michelli and Pickeral (2009) state that school culture is based on people's experiences and that it reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organisational structures. Gruenert (2008) articulates school culture as a set of expectations developed by a group of people who work together at a school.

School culture could therefore be viewed as an established network of rituals and practices, standards and beliefs that affect every aspect of school life. Consequently, school culture will influence what learners focus on, how people define the school, how hard the role-players work, and the degree to which learners will achieve their goals (Peterson Deal, 2011, 11). Furthermore, a school culture sharpens the focus of daily actions and intensifies the attention on what is important and valued.

A positive school culture does, however, not just happen: is established over time by educators, learners, parents and alumni who may be formal and informal leaders in the community and who encourage and reinforce the school's values and traditions. Many schools are flourishing, because of strong and passionate emotions, cultures rich in purpose and abundant in tradition and meaning (Peterson & Deal, 2011, 3). It is therefore necessary for schools to realise the possibility of alumni establishing a school culture that emphasises all their contributions. Therefore, school leadership should intentionally build and seek meaningful relationships with their alumni and develop policies and programmes that create school experiences that have a positive and lasting impact on their learners' achievements (Dickman, Cooner & Dugan, 2007, 84).

In South Africa a great deal of attention has been paid over the past decades to improving schools. Policymakers want to see quick changes and have, therefore, enhanced governance by involving parents in a significant way through School

Governing Bodies. State directives have tightened up structures and standardised the curriculum by introducing Curriculum Assessment Programmes System (CAPS) to test learners' performance and make schools more accountable. Peterson and Deal (2011, 1), however, point out that the afore-mentioned measures may pressurise schools to change some practices and temporarily raise the test scores, but do not improve the power of cultural expectations, motivation, and values of the school. According to Burns (2015, 29), the underlying culture and dynamics of a system are as important as what is obvious on the surface; therefore, change can be more easily catalysed by being perceptive to the motivating swings in attitude and behaviours that are already practised. System dynamic thinkers suggest that in order to effect change, an organisation should identify what is already happening and, secondly, identify points where things might happen (Stacey, 2010, 88). In this regard, Peterson and Deal (2011, 2) state that the solution to successful school performance is for people's minds and spirits to be imbued with a positive school culture, characterised by a sense of purpose and passion, their efforts refined to serve all learners, while transmitting a shared responsibility for learning.

3.2.4 Humanising pedagogy

To achieve deep cultural changes in this school context, humanising values were needed that placed people at the centre of this research, as we focused on critically engaging with participants within their own contexts (Galvin & Todres, 2013, 1; Hemingway, Scammell and Heaslip, 2012, 26; Rich, 2010, 1). Furthermore, a humanising pedagogy has a clear values framework that positively influenced the quality of this research process because it helped me focus on alumni as unique individuals and value participants above the task. This prevented them from being 'depersonalised and dehumanised' by protecting their 'unspecialised richness', and respecting human intimacy as opposed to a means-oriented approach where people are merely valued for their usefulness (Galvin & Todres, 2013, 30; Habermas, 1990; Marx, 1977; Foucalt, 1973).

Furthermore, humanising values enabled the alumni to critically examine the school context through authentic dialogue, using action and reflection that found self-expression in a new sense of hope and responsibility towards improving the school

context (Price & Osborne, 2000, 27). As alumni employed this criticality towards themselves and their alma mater, it affirmed their responsibility, authority and freedom to contribute to the wellbeing of the school. It is for the above-mentioned reasons that humanising values were included in this research.

This study proceeded from the premise that individuals are capable of looking at their world through authentic dialogue. This dialogue was made possible through action and reflection, as the individuals were able to express themselves. As the alumni gained new self-awareness which fostered hope and responsibility their dignity was built and their autonomy was established (HolisticEducator.com). Furthermore, it was within such a relationship of respect for the opinion of others that the participants were able to develop critical consciousness through authentic dialogue. Through this process, the participants' responsibility, authority and freedom were affirmed and entrenched. I acknowledge however, that the study was not without challenges, because there were cultural, intellectual and social dimensions interacting with and against the process, as pointed out by Price and Osborne (2012, 50). Such elements included that the alumni were of various levels of education and social status, resulting in an initial lack of trust in opinions.

3.2.5   Social constructivism

This research was conceptualised within a social constructivist framework that views learning as truths constructed by participants within their social groups (Midgely & Donaher 2013, 95). Social constructivism proposes that knowledge is created through semiotic mediation – where meaning is created through language, writing and symbols, while in communication with others (Daniels, 2012, 80). At the core of this theory is Vygotsky's belief that development cannot be separated from its social context; that learning leads to development; and that all education should encourage problem-solving and cooperative activities (Mahn & Steiner, 2012, 192). Furthermore, Vygotsky lists the benefits of collaboration as the ability to construct innovative solutions to demanding issues, as participants in collaboration are able to lighten the burden of their own socialisation, while co-constructing new approaches. Consequently, alumni, with their host of experiences and skills, are able to partake in various interactive events within the school community, as greater understanding of

the needs of the school can be created and thoughts exchanged, which could ultimately affect the quality of educational experiences of learners.

Semiotic mediation refers to mediation by means of activities representing a structure of socio-cultural relations or "interactive events of meaningful exchange" (Midgely & Donaher 2013, 80). Such mediation is inherently transitive, requiring at least two participants. Constructivist theory relates to this study, as the alumni were part of a learning set where members learned from one another; discovered new meanings and developed new insights as the interaction and exchange of ideas, critical dialogue and deep reflection provided new knowledge for problem solving.

The diagram overleaf represents the constructivist view that people learn in a social context with the active involvement of "significant others", in this study, alumni (Trembley & Gutberlet, 2010, 17). Vygotsky emphasizes that individuals create their sociocultural contexts in the ways in which they internalize interactions with their environment and other people (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2015, 2). By using the concept of the zone of proximal development Vygotsky described the gap between spontaneous everyday knowledge and academic knowledge and how by a process of mediation of socially constructed artifacts, speech and semiotic meaning is created. I argue for the relevance of social constructivism for this study because the material artifacts for an alumni culture had to be identified and understood. Alumni used language, signs and tools that reflected their social actions and encompassed their history with the school. In this regard, Vygotsky argued that human beings draw heavily on the specific features of their environment to structure and support their interactions. Because people intentionally mediate by explaining and interpreting the world around them, through a dialectical approach the alumni were compelled to work and create understanding of the school context within an interconnected and evolving system. This dialectical 'weaving together' of alumni within the social process of learning and development, and the recognition that human activity takes place in a social and historical context, was important for examining the challenges facing the school. These elements of Vygotsky's philosophy underpin the relationships maintained among the research participants and support the argument that alumni learn by mediating the meaning of community and school practices, in order to improve their own understanding of the school context. Through the above,

and within a PAR approach, a platform for building relationships necessary for the progress of this research was established.
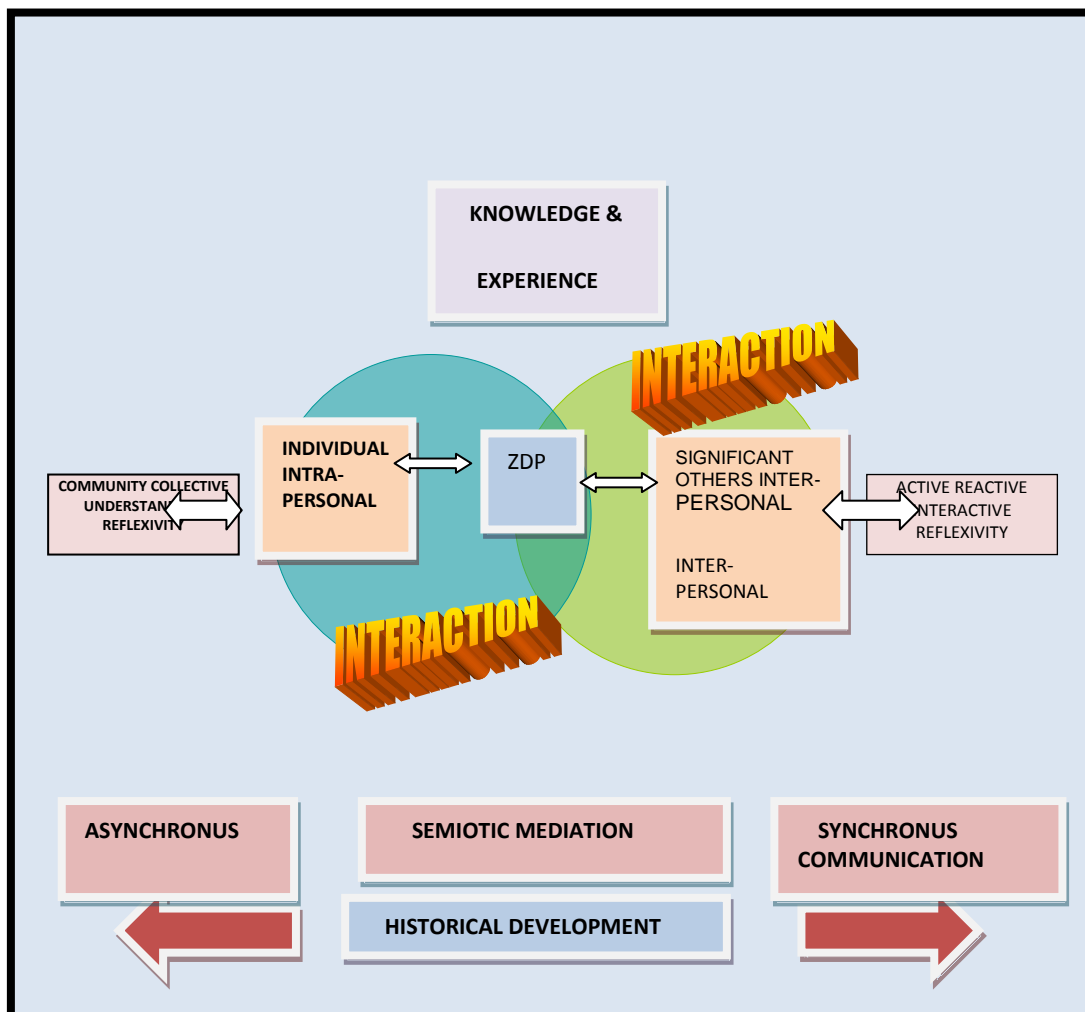
FIGURE 3.3: Relationships among research participants as "significant others"

Figure 3.3 above illustrates how the research participants established vigorous and collective social and individual processes for the construction of empirical knowledge (Midgely & Donaher 2013, 104; Cohen, Marion & Morrison, 2011, 359). This required self-conscious awareness of the effect that participants and the researcher had on the research process (He & Phillion, 2008, 275). As a result, the participants-researcher relationship became personal, ardent and focused as the participants spent their physical and emotional vitality in cohesion with their communities in order for them to tell their own stories. Because the participants (alumni) in this research represented different families, organisations and interest groups with different

cultural practices and symbols. It was essential that participants worked collaboratively to interpret and negotiate meaning as each aspired to make a contribution.

3.2.6 Critical theory

Critical theory advocates transformation, truth, justice and democracy, acknowledging civil action as part of political education for establishing a new language and set of values (Freire, 1999; Marcuse, 1955). Such action constitutes the transformative power of a critical pedagogy, deemed appropriate for this research because its aim was to create a platform for facilitating alumni support for a low-resourced school in a participatory manner. Furthermore, critical theory was deemed suitable for this research, because it is flexible, expresses injustices in a radical way, and challenges inequalities and abuses in the school context (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2007, ix).

Critical theory, as central to this project, honored practices of civic action, dialogue and methodologies which came from the head and heart, namely pedagogies of hope, love, care, forgiveness and healing, as elements of a humanising pedagogy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, x). This study encapsulates a democratic process of alumni involvement, committed to social justice for learners at their alma mater. This permitted critically addressing issues of implementation; and simultaneously mapping emergent themes for improvement, while debating the way for sustained alumni engagement (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, x).

Critical theory supports the creativity and inspirations of all people who have skills and experiences, and who are prepared to sacrifice their time to make the world a better place (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, x; Hopper, Mahao, Songca, Havenga & Pillay, 2010, 1; Murphy & Fleming, 2010, 4; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2007, ix). The use of Critical theory was therefore considered suitable in this context for conscientising and generating alumni participation by networking and providing opportunities for stakeholders to address the challenges at the relevant school. This relates to the African philosophy of "Ubuntu"; which means creating a culture in which community members are responsible for and responsive to the well-being of each other. This

research was based on the mutual understanding that participants at grassroots level would be able to address some of the economic and social challenges the school was encountering in a unique and sustainable way; using effective tools and procedures for transforming not only the thinking of the participants in this study, but also assisting them in giving voice to their thoughts concerning their alma mater. In this regard, Kashima *in* Denzin and Lincoln (2011, 218) explains that human agency and self-reflexivity are the elements that render human society and culture dynamic. This idea was significant and empowering for a group of alumni who were united by a common goal: to create new knowledge in order to improve their alma mater through collaborative reflections and actions.

Critical theory advocates behaviour that embraces the active participation of individuals and groups in changing and shaping their socio-environmental context (Koelen & Lindström, 2005, 3; Speer, Jackson & Peterson (2001, 1). In the context of this research, the interventions of alumni added value to the high school by empowering the school community to address their socio-economic challenges and solve their own problems, thus creating cohesion through participation, multiplying the action and learning based on connectedness and civic engagement (Speer, Jackson *et al.,* 2001, 1). Moreover, because the research participants were the significant executors in the process of change, they needed safe spaces for reflection, access to information and knowledge, and to be recognised as knowledge generators (Trembley & Gutberlet, 2010, 17).

This process of social action promotes participation of people, organisations, and communities towards the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life, and social justice. Furthermore, individuals feel empowered when they have a positive history of performance, when their outcomes and expectations are favourable, and when they feel that they are in control of their behaviour. This line of thinking is supported by Zuber-Skerritt and Teare (2013, 7), who are proponents of finding new educational pathways based on inclusion, self-directedness and knowledge creation.

3.3   CONCLUSION

The theoretical framework outlined philosophical perspectives implemented as underpinning an alumni culture for schools, giving coherence to the research. The theoretical framework and philosophies guided the research participants and me to make sense of and seek new meaning in the research context, in order to find answers to the research questions. This framework assisted in bridging the gap in knowledge, establishing relationships, negotiating the research process, and navigating the research landscape in a comprehensible way.

Chapter Four deals with the research design, sampling and data generation techniques adopted in this study. The chapter explicates the justification for the use of a qualitative approach, particular a Participatory Action Rsearch approach, while explaining the analysis procedures, as well as discussing the findings and interpretation of the data.

CHAPTER FOUR

A THEORETICAL DISCUSSION OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AS METHODOLOGY

4.1   INTRODUCTION

The focus of this chapter is the research paradigm that informed my understanding of how to facilitate a process of sustainable alumni engagement at a specific high school. The research begins with the premise that alumni as research participants represent a rich resource of skills, experiences, personal assets and values that, when harnessed for the school, could enhance and increase the learning opportunities of learners, especially at low-resourced schools. This research was conducted at a particular school where alumni, educators and learners engaged to negotiate a pathway for alumni support using a participatory and sustainable approach. Using a participatory approach was suitable for this study in order to involve alumni as community stakeholders to support their alma mater situated in a poor socio-economic community challenged by limited resources, high incidence of crime, unemployment and high learner drop-out rates.

Cresswell (2013, 30) appeals to researchers who have the power to engage in dialogue and use theory to interpret, highlight and initiate social action. The participants and I worked within the critical paradigm. Together we studied the topic of alumni engagement, addressing historical problems of domination and social struggles within the community and critiquing society. The historical factors of discrimination resulting in the unequal distribution of resources helped us envision new possibilities. Therefore, we had to reconstruct relationships within this context in order to develop a criticism of our own history, traditions and interpretations in order to create a more equitable dispensation (Tyson, 2015, 399). This research was located within a critical paradigm because the aim was to facilitate sustained alumni engagement by transforming the way in which under-resourced schools viewed them. From this premise, the research question was derived: *How can alumni be engaged to support their alma mater to enhance the educational experiences of learners?*

Moreover, this research contains an agenda of activism; addressing a historical realism created by an unequal social, political, cultural, economic dispensation and ethnic values over time; seeking to mobilise alumni to participate in supporting their former institutions; addressing the needs and issues of the day, such as scarce resources in schools, learners' social problems and enhancing learners' educational experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, 97). I embraced a participatory worldview in terms of how I aimed to facilitate a voice for alumni, raising awareness for the plight of their alma mater and developing a strong, unified voice for the school community as a whole (Riecken, Conibear, Michel, *et al.*, 2006, 266).

The data generation strategies followed in this research were selected to authentically represent participants' voices and reflect the quality and extent of their engagement within the school community. Denzin and Lincoln (2011, 415) explain that the world can never be captured directly; therefore, participants' experiences were represented in multiple ways, as discussed under data generation tools later in this chapter.

4.2   PROBLEM STATEMENT

Most schools located in disadvantaged areas in South Africa are underperforming on many levels, including academic achievement, with many learners dropping out of school without realising their full potential. This state of affairs, prevalent at most under-resourced schools, can be attributed to the fact that learners often lack positive role models and initiatives to motivate them (Maluleke, 2014; Nojaja, 2009). They may become despondent due to their circumstances and do not aspire to achieve higher academic and other goals in life. To change this negative mindset, pioneering efforts are required to address this situation at high schools. The literature study in chapter two revealed how the participation of community stakeholders and parental involvement play a significant role in improving learners' pass rates and lower learner drop-outs (Khosa, 2011; Nyoka & Lefko-Everett, 2010). Involving alumni as an important stakeholder group to actively and meaningfully contribute their skills and resources to enhance the learners' schooling experience and holistic

development could be a valuable initiative to bring about change in such high schools.

Although alumni from a number of disadvantaged schools in South Africa have committed themselves to support their alma mater, this is not well documented, nor has it been well researched. Very limited peer reviewed South African focused literature was found for this study.

In exploring the pathways for facilitating alumni engagement for a school in order to bring about change at a specific high school, this study focused on the purpose stated below.

4.3   STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to facilitate a process of alumni engagement for a school challenged by a lack of material and human resources. In order to achieve this, a participatory approach was chosen for this study because such an approach enabled the participants and I to turn 'lack' into possibilities, potentials and strengths (Padilla, 2014, 75). The study further explores how participants could add value to their former high school by collaboratively creating context specific knowledge and devising strategies for motivating learners, staff and the community alike.

4.4   RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design comprises the overall plan (blueprint), explaining how strategies will be devised to conduct research that traverses the steps from broad philosophical assumptions to detailed methods of data generation, analysis and interpretation (Cresswell, 2013, 3). Furthermore, when devising a research design, the researcher is guided by the nature of the research problem and the methodological approaches, including the practical and time constraints that could support achieving the research findings (Trafford & Leshem, 2007, 305). Such a research design renders a study ongoing and reflexive, involving a "tacking back and forth" as different factors influence the process at every stage (Maxwell, 2012, 77).

A Participatory Action Research approach was deemed appropriate, it is concerned with how people experience, understand, interpret and participate in their social and cultural worlds. Furthermore, a PAR approach enabled the participants in this study to collaborate in generating knowledge, by defining their role and values, concerns and perceptions. Furthermore, how my role as researcher influenced the learning set, research outcomes, as the philosophical assumptions that the researcher brings to a study are a set of basic beliefs guiding the study (Cresswell, 2013, 3). This PAR approach holds that research has a political and advocacy agenda that may change the lives of participants, the institution in which the research is conducted, and the researcher's life (Cresswell, 2009, 9). Moreover, specific issues such as empowerment, inequality and domination are addressed. The research therefore proceeded collaboratively so as to not marginalize the participants. In this sense the participants helped design questions, generated data and analyse information. Following a PAR approach provided a voice for the participants and advanced the process to improve the educational experiences of the learners at their alma mater. These are discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

4.4.1 Assumptions informing my study

A paradigm is underpinned by four belief systems, namely the epistemology (nature of knowledge); ontology (nature of reality); axiological assumptions (values and ethics); and methodology (inquiry approach) (Mertens, 2009, 45). In this regard, Joubish, Khurram, Ahmed, Fatima and Haider (2011, 1) contend that qualitative research as an "inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary and sometimes counter-disciplinary field" transverses humanities and the social and physical sciences, because it embraces a multi-paradigmatic platform. This study was underpinned by critical theory as an epistemological paradigm, complexity theory as theoretical paradigm, and participatory action research as a methodological approach, elaborated upon below:

- **Epistemological assumptions**

Epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge, understanding and what constitutes learning (Allmer, 2015; Elby, 2007, 138). My epistomology is based on

my particular orientation and learnt behaviour and my personal abilities and experiences (De Poy & Gitlin, 2011, 1). In this regard, both my epistemology and ontology epitomise my perception of the world, my being in the world, as well as the multitude of relationships potentially constituted therein (Arthur, Waring, Coe & Hedges, 2012, 17). It is my opinion that a school with a culture of strong norms, values and traditions and that strategically includes alumni in school programmes in significant ways, is able to infuse a spirit of purpose and unity in the community.

Mertens (2009, 57) asserts that epistemological assumptions refer to the relationship between the researcher and the participants in order to understand what constitutes valid knowledge. Therefore, in this specific participatory context relationships were built with participants in order to generate subjective evidence based on the participants' experiences (Cresswell, 2013, 16).

Using participatory action research (PAR), this study was characterised by true collaboration between the researcher and participants as the validity of the study would be compromised in the absence of democratic participation. Collaboration among the participants within the process could be realised only once a relationship had been established between the researcher and the participants as well as amongst the participants. It was therefore important for this study that the relationship between the researcher and participants was based on trust and an understanding of the political intent of the participants. Furthermore, in order to sustain collaboration, the relationships needed to contain a strong element of empowerment based on ongoing open interaction between the researcher and the participants (Cresswell, 2013, 16).

Because the PAR approach contains a political agenda it strives to overcome social injustices and supports social transformation towards the emancipation and affirmation of people (Marinopopoulou, 2017; Allmer, 2015). This study was concerned with empowering research participants to transcend the constraints placed on them by their history, circumstances and class (Cresswell, 2013, 30). Because knowledge carries meaning and value, it reflects the unequal balance of power and social relationships within society. A secondary purpose of this study was to co-create knowledge together with the participants, who wished to improve the

schooling experiences of learners at their former school. Moreover, these participants represented groups who desired a more expectant, positive psychology and resilience that would enhance the group's ability to address the challenges arising from their environment.

- **Ontology**

Ontology is often defined as the nature of our existence and what there is to know about reality and matters concerning the nature of reality and its characteristics (Cresswell, 2013, 16; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, 38; Allen & Varga, 2007, 19). Cresswell (2013, 16) explains that researchers working within the qualitative paradigm embrace multiple realities, therefore this research includes multiple forms of evidence including quoting the actual words of individual participants and presenting their different perspectives. This is explained later in this chapter under the section on data generation tools. The ontological assumption of critical theory is that knowledge is socially contructed (Allmer, 2015), identifying and making known the structuring forces. The participants defined what "alumni engagement" would be and what the extent of their participation would be, thus uncovering the multiple social, political and cultural realities influencing this study. Lincoln and Guba (2005, 110) assert that our ontological assumptions may generate injustices and inequalities, or even legitimise them. For this study, it was important that participants had equal access to the school and that their input was valued and that their continued support was essential for sustaining the project. It was therefore important throughout the project that I remained cognisant of unequal power relations and addressed and strived to dispel any misconceptions that existed in terms of the goals and purpose of the research.

- **Axiology**

Axiology refers to the values that influence our intentions and desires which, in turn, drive our epistemologies and determine what it is we wish to achieve (Allen & Varga, (2007, 19). Cresswell (2013, 20) emphasises that researchers bring their values to a study and that they should be explicit about their values throughout the process. As

this study dealt with human perceptions, I recognised and respected the value-laden nature of information garnered in the field.

For the purpose of this study, I adhered to an ethical practice of respect for and honouring the opinions, values, privacy, ideas and responses of the research participants, as discussed in Chapter One. However, the question is often asked whether research participants really have a choice in terms of the research topic. I believe that research should be conducted within a reciprocal relationship in which justice and beneficence for all the participants need to prevail. I believe, that alumni can serve an important role in partnering to support the school, because they can be their institution's most loyal supporters as fundraising prospects, generating invaluable word-of-mouth marketing among their social and professional networks, and generally benefitting the school with their skills and experience. This study was motivated and initiated by significant conversations among alumni who felt the need to support the school to fulfill its mandate to their learners.

For this reason, a democratic process, as embedded in the PAR approach, was established, in which the voice, values and assumptions of the participants were recognised in their support for their former high school. The research was guided by what constituted the participants' code of ethics incorporated in the alumni association's constitution (Appendix E), which was collaboratively developed by the participating alumni and teaching staff.

4.4.2   Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this research refers to the methodological approach, based on a specific epistemology or philosophy of knowledge (Green, 2014, 35). The conceptual framework for this research draws on complexity theory and humanising philosophies to guide the research approach. Many researchers use theoretical and conceptual frameworks interchangeably. I refer to it as a conceptual framework because multiple theories (meta-theory) have been used as a map to validate the research questions, design and outcomes (Parahoo, 2006, 25). Moreover, the conceptual framework helped me order my thoughts, overcome hurdles in my

relationships with the participants, and organise how the data was going to be presented.

The conceptual framework of this study was informed by a multi-layer of philosophies of complexity theory and a humanising pedagogy, of which the principles were applied within the guidelines, principles and strategies of PAR, embracing a democratic process, showing respect for individuality and self-determination. The conceptual framework helped in formulating the research questions and guided the research process in its endeavour to improve the school experience of learners at the selected school (Walker, 2005, 11).

4.4.3   Participatory Action Research as methodology

Brown and Rodriguez (2009, 1) describe Participatory Action Research (PAR) as systematic, empirical research in collaboration with representatives of the population, with the goal of action and intervention regarding the problem being studied. PAR is grounded in a critical ontology that acknowledges, yet rejects, the influence of unequal relationships of power and privilege within social relationships that inevitably lead to disempowerment and oppression among members of a group participating in a project. My thinking was influenced by Freire's philosophy concerning the impact of power, oppression, fear and poverty on society; and Fals Borda and Lewin (Brown & Rodriques, 2009, 1) who suggested that science is socially constructed and therefore, subject to reinterpretation, revision and enrichment. Therefore, throughout this study, I realised the importance for oppressed people to critically question and intervene in the conditions that cause their oppression.

I chose a PAR approach for this research, because it is based on the epistemological assumption that a genuine understanding of the social issues of a specific context is not possible without the insider knowledge of the people directly involved. Therefore, it was imperative throughout this study that the participants articulated their own thoughts, feelings, perceptions and motivation for participating; and regarding every aspect of the process.

In this regard, PAR proves to be informative and reflects participant-centered approaches like constructivist situated learning and culturally relevant pedagogy. PAR not only investigates real-life issues that affect the participants, but research is undertaken collaboratively with participants who are actively involved in co-constructing practical knowledge and solutions to directly apply in their own broader contexts. In this way, PAR not only builds the capacity of participants, but also enhances and possibly transforms their personal lives.

PAR was considered ideally suited for this research project because the alumni of a socially marginalised school community could be mobilised for assistance and intervention strategies devised by participants (alumni) for addressing and solving the social and educational challenges facing their alma mater could be investigated (Brown & Rodrigues, 2009, 2). Furthermore, PAR is appropriate to address issues evident in the context such as the lack of sufficient educational infrastructure (such as computer rooms, a library, a gymnasium, transport) and other difficulties facing learners in the identified school.

This research followed iterative action reflection cycles and maintained a democratic process in all action plans to improve the research context whilst creating opportunities for action learning (AL). The participants were tackling real problems in the context, developing leaders, building teams, and creating a learning organisation (Zuber-Skerritt, 2010, 25). By continuously examining and re-examining their position, the participants created opportunities for lifelong action learning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 5).

McIntyre (2007, 32) contends that conventional research paradigms cannot address the research-participant relationship, nor the positioning of consciousness-raising and affecting of change within the overall research experience. Participation provides space for people to think about what is being discussed in the group sessions and then, upon reflection, to take the required actions to improve their current situation. Kapoor and Jordan (2009, 4) focus on whether PAR is essentially aimed at contemporary international and marginal contexts; whether PAR is conceptualised in different educational and social contexts; and how the practice of PAR can continue to make research and learning meaningful to the participating communities. The

aforementioned authors conclude that PAR is a composite methodology, concerned primarily with questions of praxis, which refers to the marrying of theory and practice as an ongoing problem, addressed through the generation of theory as a practical activity. Kapoor and Jordan (2009, 5) further posit that the advocacy or revolutionary essence of PAR should not be compromised for neo-liberal purposes and suggest that researchers should fully include the research participants in the systematic interpretation of data, so that the concerns of the participants can be met. Therefore, this research aimed for a 'living praxis', as "life and practice are evolutionary and moving towards life-affirming and life-renewing experiences" (McNiff, 2013, 7). As the research developed, theory and practice became more integrated, forming praxis; this dimension of synthesising "the art of thinking, feeling and living and being influenced by values and worldviews" influenced behaviour, strategies and methods, ultimately improving practice. This meta-cognitive aspect of social research encompasses emotional intelligence, which forms part of participants' values, beliefs and spirituality (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 10).

In this study, the participants collaboratively determined the aims of and vision for projects and subsequently drove the process until they had improved the school context. Because PAR and learning are interwoven, activities are rooted within a tight dialectical relationship of mutual change and transformation; therefore, for this study, PAR became a powerful tool for generating critical forms of learning, as both alumni and the broader school community were able to interrogate a progressively power-inscribed world in which authoritarian forms of exclusion were continuously entrenched (Kincheloe, 2008, 5).

Following a PAR approach enabled alumni to learn from each other rather than being led by outsider groups; because they had the capacity to generate context specific solutions. The informal knowledge (insider knowledge) alumni could potentially contribute to this study was considered invaluable and fundamental to understanding the complex dimensions of knowledge creation as a united team. Alumni who had remained in the school community, especially those living in the geographical area, were viewed to be closely connected to the research context, understanding the economic situation and the predominant attitudes and values that influenced this study.

Scholars like Freire (1972) and Fals Borda (1969) focused their attention on the usefulness of collaborative research for centralising the struggles of the poor and marginalised, from the periphery of objective social inquiry to social research that could 'conscientise' the oppressed and marginalised, in order for them to become the agents for transforming their own societies (Kapoor & Jordan, 2009, 17). It is in this context that PAR as a research approach becomes most apposite for engaging alumni to put their former school 'on a stage and under a magnifying glass' (Guerrero, Gaztambide-Fernandez, Rosas & Guerrero, 2013, 106). Such a critical and exploratory approach enables participants who have an insider perspective of the context to find novel ways of solving context-specific problems guided by their insider knowledge and principles for relationship building. While particpants are able to critically examine their personal experiences, they are proactively advocating for a dynamic and mutual learning environment. Considering all the above, the focus of PAR as a critical and reflective approach to the study which supports the politically marginalised, was to bring about social change through insider knowledge, facilitate a forum for participation in the school community, and draw from formal and informal domains of education.

Figure 4.1 is an illustration of the research process which follows two cycles of observing, planning, acting and reflecting. The cyclical process of action research (AR) is reflective, creative and flexible that makes dealing with complex problems in the workplace possible (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 33). Such a framework provides a problem-centred, action-oriented, non-positivist and dialectic process, for improving social practices. The first step of cycle one involved creating good relationships between me as the researcher and the participants, and among the participants themselves, as well as developing a shared vision.

CYCLE TWO: Strategies for adding value to school

Reflect

Observe: Need for alumni platform

Actions: pamphleteering

Plan: Marketing

CYCLE ONE: Facilitating alumni engagement

Reflect

Observe: Need for engaging alumni

Actions: Pamphleteering

Plan: Social & fundraising events
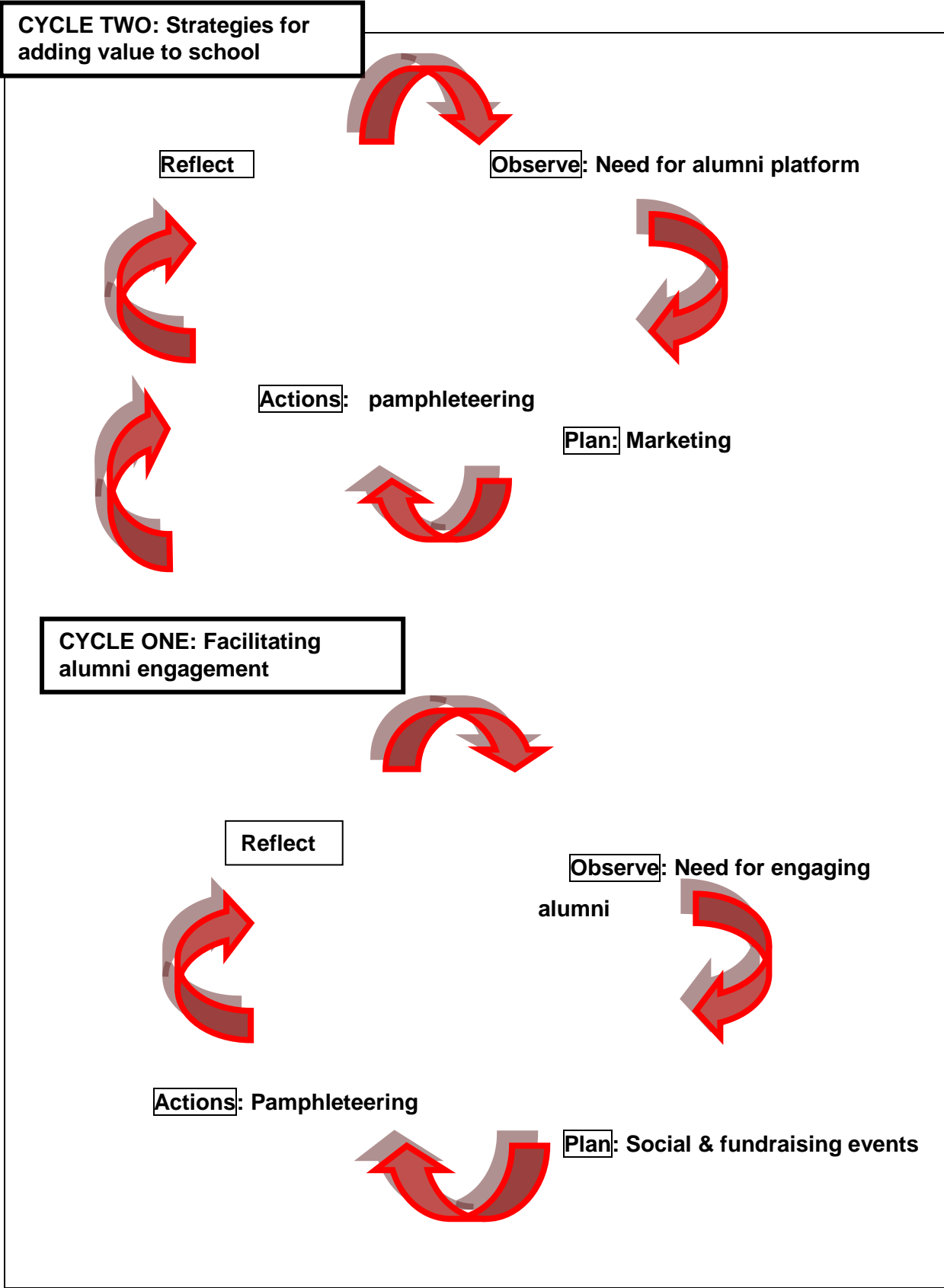
FIGURE 4.1: Action-reflection cycles

The subsequent steps involved strategies for building a network of alumni through marketing strategies and social and fundraising events. **Cycle two** of the research involved creating a platform for implementing alumni programmes for motivation, coaching and mentoring to add value to the schooling experiences of learners. Throughout the study, alumni could capture the culture and spirit of the school community; mapping their participation and making an inventory of their own abilities, questioning and reflecting on their own actions, whilst developing new insights for solving problems. These elements of PAR become meta-cognitive social research, which includes the participants' values, beliefs and spirituality (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011).

The alumni in this study had to collaboratively work on strategies to enhance the schooling experiences of learners. Therefore, the research focused on liberating participants from the limits they imposed on themselves and the constraints embedded in their contexts, such as relationships of power in their environment; constraints created by unjust structures in the past apartheid regime, which limited self-development and self-determination. This process was emancipating, originating in 'courageous talk' sessions with alumni embarking on this study in collaboration with other stakeholders of the school, in a spirit of truth and integrity, in order to improve the schooling experiences of learners. This framework, outlined in Figure 4.2 promotes a democratic non-coercive process, whereby participants learn from their own experiences through critical self-reflection (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013; Armstrong, 2013, 1; Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 6; Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011, 51).

RESEARCH DESIGN

A PAR APPROACH

CREATING A PATHWAY FOR THE RESEARCH

Courageous   Conversation

Reflect

CYCLE **1**

Act

HOW CAN WE FACILITATE ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT?

Participatory mapping
Asset-mapping & skills audit
Social and fundraising events

Observe

Plan

Critical Theory
Change

Complexitiy Theory
Shared vision

Reflect

CYCLE **2**

ABCD Theory
Focus on internal strengths

Act

HOW CAN INTERVENTION STRATEGIES ADD VALUE TO THE SCHOOL?

Motivational talks
Opening school library
Mentoring programme
Celebrating learners' talent

Observe

Humanising Theory
Value framework

Capability Theory
Social justice

Plan

Replanning

Social Constructivist
Theory dialogue

FINDINGS:

• Alumni engagement is necessary for a low-resourced school

• It is important to create a shared vision

• Establishing an alumni culture

• Acknowledging alumni challenges and celebrating rewards

• Creating a sustainable alumni

ALUMNI WEEK 2

ONGOING CYCLES
Mentoring programme
Encouraging Entrepreneurship

4.5   IMPLEMENTATION OF PAR MODEL

As indicated in Chapter Three, a PAR model was deemed the most appropriate approach for this study. The research process the participants and me embarked upon was encapsulated by the concepts: personal, passionate and participatory (He & Phillion, 2008, x). The initial element was a personal passion and dream for this study. This passion drove the research process and provided guiding principles for seeking out like-minded research participants who shared my passion for an improved school context that could provide enriched educational and personal experiences for the learners.

The research comprised two action-reflection cycles, with **Cycle One** consisting of a start-up workshop for facilitating alumni relationships, conducting an assets audit and identifying ways of engaging alumni to support the school utilising the following tools: observations, interviews and drawings. In **Cycle Two**, the data were generated during the planning for the school's first 'alumni week' programme, captured in personal reflections, journals, narratives, photo voice procedures and observations.
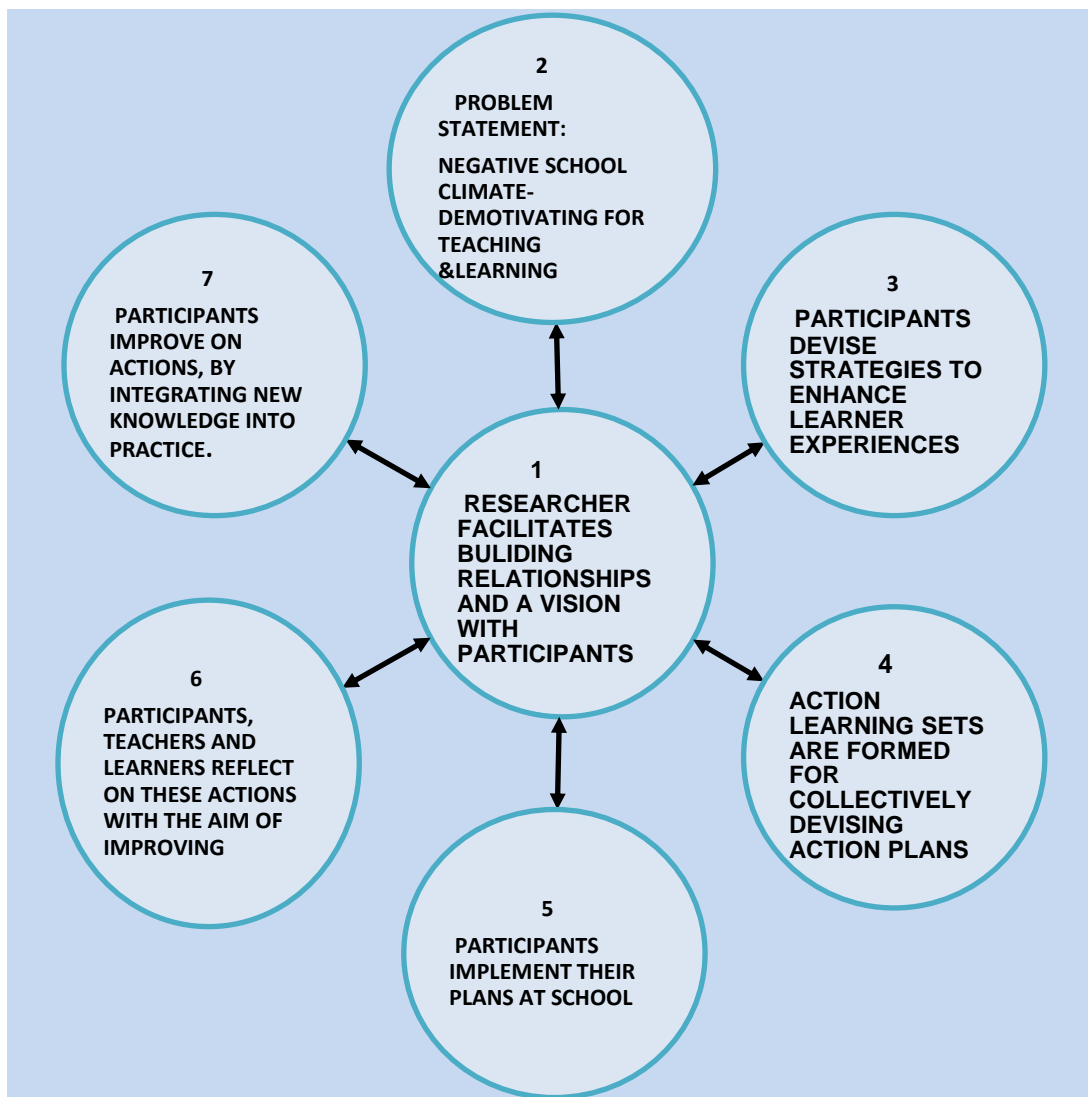
FIGURE 4.3: Action-learning within the learning set

4.5.1 CYCLE ONE: How can I facilitate alumni support using a participatory approach?

- **Start-up workshop**

Cycle One of the research emerged from 'courageous conversations' for exploring ways of engaging alumni to become involved at their alma mater, resulting in the first step of exploring their most serious concerns (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 41). Initially, a core group of ten participants, who were educators, alumni as well as current learners at the identified school, attended a start-up workshop in order to get to know one another by participating in a team-building exercise. The facilitators, myself and

members of the local university who were familiar with the PAR approach, explained the concepts and process of action research in order to establish trust and collaboration among the participants.

During the start-up workshop we focused on building meaningful and sustainable relationships among alumni by working in teams, listing their collective assets and skills, as well as an inventory of possible and real strengths in the community at large. The start-up workshop formed an essential part of the PAR approach and a conceptual model for organisational planning because teamwork began at the workshop. The workshop was ideal for developing an alumni vision that served to inspire cohesion and building team spirit for sustaining ongoing participation, while introducing action learning and action research concepts and processes needed for planning, designing, managing and evaluating each step of the research process. Critical reflection was introduced early and maintained throughout the research process. Throughout the process, the participants and me were cognisant of and applied the core values of a PAR culture, comprising inclusion, collaboration, reflection, appreciation of diversity, questioning mindsets and paradigms (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 47). Participants discussed how their personal assets, namely expertise in the field of information technology, marketing, business, and so forth could contribute to the school, and how harnessing community resources, like businesses and police services could create a safer school, churches could provide pastoral care, while greater parental involvement could benefit the school in a sustainable manner. Throughout this stage, we were advancing our knowledge concerning alumni engagement, while critically reflecting after each learning set meeting to refine concepts, set principles and explore theoretical philosophies that would guide the rest of the research.

As research participants worked from an asset-based approach, mapping their experiential knowledge and assets (contextualised in the diagram below), their confidence grew as they recognised how much they had to contribute to the school. The ensuing paragraphs present a detailed account, supported by diagrams, of how alumni relationships were facilitated and maintained and how alumni engaged in mapping their collective assets and performing a skills audit in order to add value. Initially, a core group of ten participants participated in the research.

IN AND AROUND THE SCHOOL	FINANCIAL ASSETS	OTHER
• Helpful teachers	• GOOD BUSINESSES IN THE COMMUNITY	• Spiritual support
• Motivating principal	• SPONSORSHIPS FROM THE	• Feeding scheme for learners
• Excellent sport coaches		• Motivational speakers
• Good leaders among learners		• Police sector protection
• Well- developed learning atmosphere		• Parent forum patrolling the school for protection
• Sponsors in the community		
• Helpful community		

PHYSICAL ASSETS
- Nice building
- School hall
- Well-resourced conference centre
- Sports field
- Internet access for teachers

FIGURE 4.4: An Assets Audit compiled by alumni

The participants and I employed an asset-based approach, seeking solutions based on internal strengths (assets), as an asset-based philosophy rests on the premise that each individual is resourceful; and in this study, that alumni have the potential to improve the learners' motivation through enhanced educational experiences (Ebersohn & Eloff, 2006, 16). As participants mapped their collective assets (Figure 4.5), appreciation for their intrinsic values and resources grew which contributed to their general sense of well-being. This approach was a paradigm shift from a crippling 'needs and concerns' attitude, to an enabling perspective, where participants focused on what could be done with was available, as well as on their personal strengths (Olivier, Wood & De Lange, 2009, 10).

Participating alumni were in a position to effectively address complex and unprecedented challenges due to a lack of proper infrastructure and low resources, which negatively impacted on the educational experiences of learners, as experienced in many disadvantaged schools in South Africa. This research approach required the alumni to think creatively and work collaboratively to develop their insights, using systemic ways to enhance the educational opportunities the school could offer their learners. This is in line with findings by Zuber-Skerritt (2011, 10), who infers that PAR is particularly suitable for a research study challenged by limited infrastructure and economic underdevelopment, in an environment offering limited educational opportunities that restricts human potential. I believe that facilitating alumni support for a low-resourced school could be fulfilled within this framework, as

many participants were leaders in specialised fields, with the potential and skills to develop the leadership and problem-solving skills of others, especially of learners at this school.
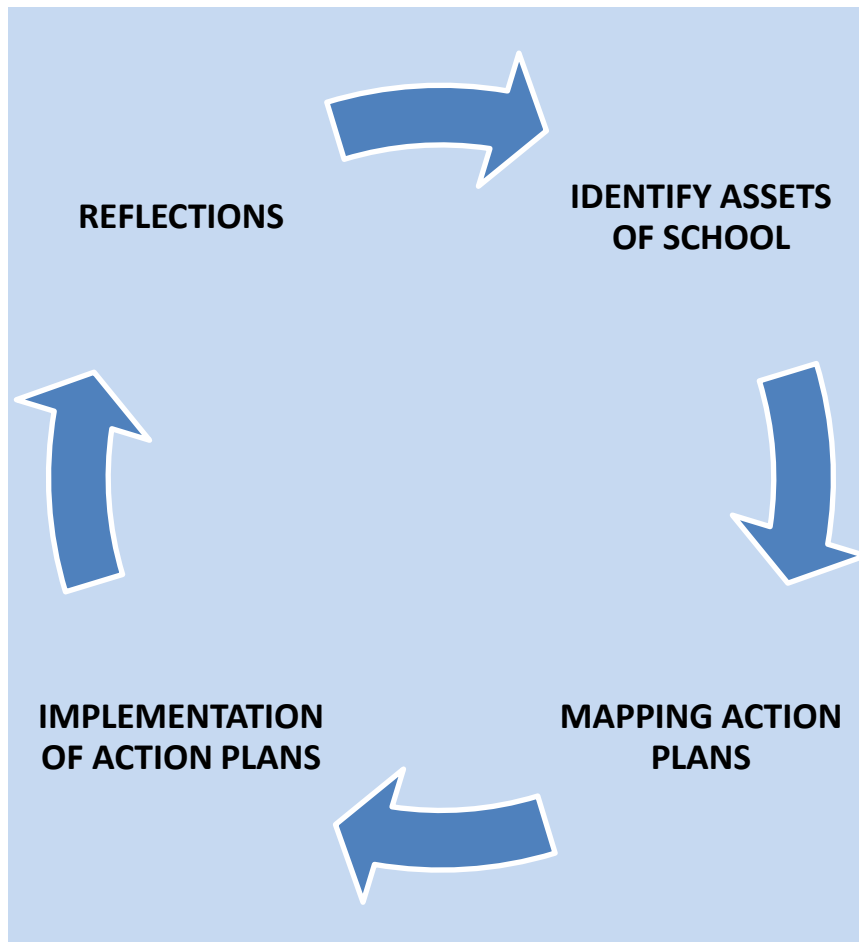
FIGURE 4.5: **Action-Reflection cycle of mapping assets and action plans**

The research process followed action-reflection cycles (see Figure 4.1), comprising components of problem identification (asset mapping), actions (implementation of the plans), observation (watching and evaluating the action), reflection (an ongoing process of planning, acting and evaluating), and reviewing the outcomes. It outlines the process that encompassed four years of research, from start to completion. In the subsequent paragraphs, a detailed account is given of the conceptual theory underpinning the research process, motivating the discussions, explaining how indigenous knowledge was applied, decisions were made, relationships sustained and action plans executed and new knowledge generated in each action-reflection cycle.
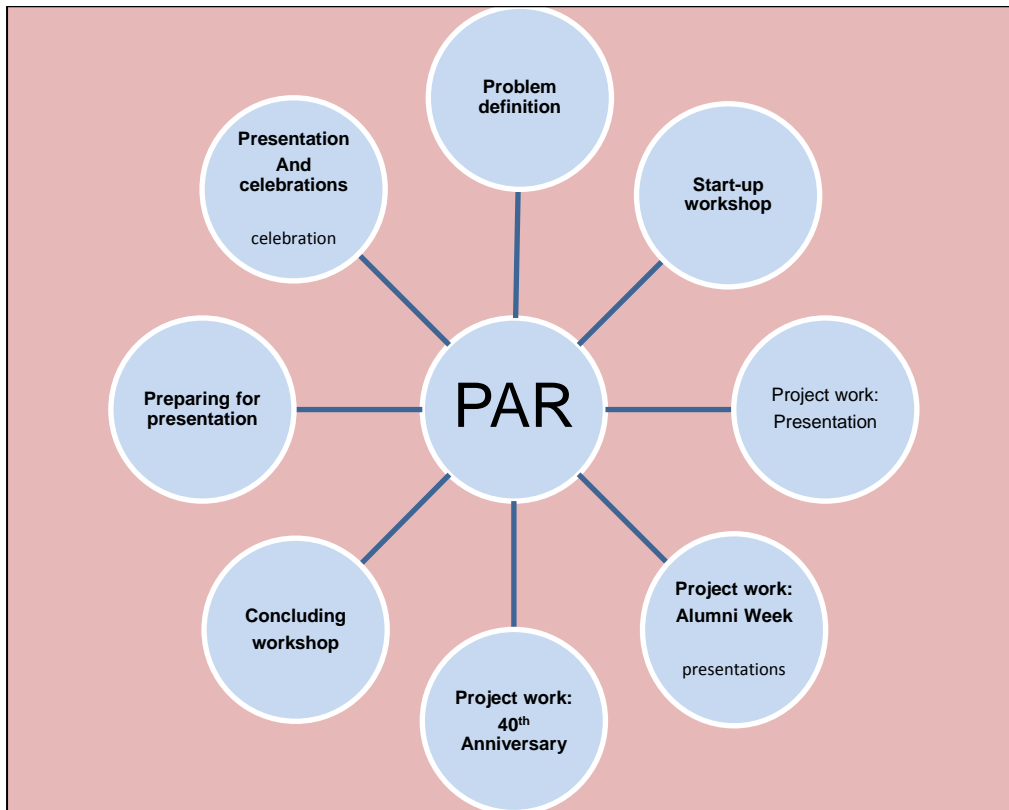
FIGURE 4.6: Model adapted from a PAR project (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 42).

The concept for this research journey was initiated by alumni who felt the need to serve the school in various ways. The **PAR** approach created a pathway for involving alumni in a collaborative way where relationship building was a prerequisite for successful alumni engagement. The choice of approach is in line with Fine's (2014) findings, stating that now is the opportune time for participatory work to break the anesthesia that is setting in; to gather social critique as forms of knowledge; to disrupt the status quo; participate in analytical questions and activate enlarged audiences that will ask questions about how to become involved in effecting change in a school context. In this regard, more alumni participating in this study became involved as fundraisers, donors, motivational speakers and coaches. **Social Constructivism** provided guiding principles for the process of building relationships during the start-up workshop, as alumni engaged and mediated meaning through dialogue, using language, symbols and images that were part of their history and cultural context, as new insights about their efficacy emerged as a result of their

working together within the school environment. Alumni initiated sports days serving to honour/commemorate their specific class groups, thereby building alumni networks. A **Critical paradigm** guided project planning, as the unequal distribution of resources and power relations was addressed, aiming to liberate personal mindsets regarding under-resourcing, while respecting the diverse historical and political backgrounds of participants. Starting with the participants' knowledge and understanding the challenges faced, **Complexity theory**, as a theory of change, became significant, as the school and alumni were considered a complex system. In this system, the participants had the capacity for learning and for acting proactively when engaging with the community to discuss ways in which to improve safety at school and how to turn a dysfunctional library into a functional hub of learning (Norberg & Cumming, 2013, x). The participants and I proceeded from an **Asset-Based Community Development approach** harnessing our collective knowledge, skills and experiences (captured in a skills audit) to establish what programmes could enhance the educational experiences of learners. This process of public action of highlighting the plight of the school in the community widened the possibilities and capabilities of alumni, while recognising and valuing their diversity.

Social events organised for the purpose of building relationships and networks of alumni were instrumental in expanding the alumni data-base, even beyond our national borders. A school Facebook page and website (established with the benevolence of an NGO) helped build the profile of the school in the community, and connected us with alumni working abroad who made financial pledges and facilitated the distribution of limited resources more equitably and effectively.

Educators suggested the following projects for alumni to consider undertaking*: 'workshops against drug-and alcohol abuse', 'initiating chat forums', 'organising camps that can serve as bonding sessions'* and '*establishing study sessions to assist learners with their homework and preparing for examination'*. However, these suggestions were not implemented. I believe that this could be attributed to the fact that not all educators were involved in the research and could have yielded power over the alumni. Because alumni engagement is an ongoing process, we saw the possibility of Lifelong Learning emerge as we worked to sustain alumni interest by engaging them in various activities in supporting the school over time and in a sustainable manner.

A qualitative study uses representations of people's experiences in multiple ways, including stories, drawings, pictures and participants' reflections. The paragraphs below offer explanations of how, through interfacing with the methodological strategies and in collaboration with participants, the realities and representations of this research were explored during cycle two.

4.5.2   CYCLE TWO: How can alumni involvement add value to the school?

- **Alumni Week**

Significant conversations among alumni manifested in "Alumni Week" during the third term of school in 2014 (**Figure 4.7**) which formed a platform for creating a culture of 'paying it forward'. The alumni programme, which extended over three days, comprised motivational talks on the first day; while the second day was dedicated to peer learning, which ranged from personal testimonies to programmes addressing responsible choices and the prevention of teenage pregnancies. On the third day, the school library was launched, with the school celebrating the historic moment with music and poetry displays. Alumni Week served as a platform for past pupils coming together to support their alma mater, to build a culture of 'giving back', as well as to honour and celebrate the achievements of the school. Instituting an 'Alumni Week' as part of the annual school calendar was in line with research done by the National High School Institute for Research (2011, 1), which advocates that schools create structures for promoting a collaborative alumni culture. Moreover, partnerships were formed with appropriate stakeholders involving critical planning and decision-making, fostering 'buy-in' and developing ownership of school improvement strategies.

MONDAY, 28JULY 2014	
8:00 – 8:45	Assembly led by alumni
12:00 – 14:00	Motivational speakers addressing Grade 11 & 12 learners
TUESDAY, 29JULY 2014	
12:00 – 14:00	Showcasing school talent/skills/ peer education
WEDNESDAY,30JULY 2014	
12:00 -14:00	Launching the school library Celebrating our achievements with poetry and song
	We strive for excellence!

FIGURE 4.7: Alumni Programme: 28-30 July 2014

The figure above presents the culmination of what alumni were working towards over several months of planning, reflecting and re-planning. The Alumni Week programme addressed the needs of specific grades and afforded learners to showcase their talent.

During alumni week the research participants and I established a structure for alumni involvement for engaging with current learners and educators at the school. A platform was created for the community, alumni, learners and educators voices to be heard. The responses to this event engendered critical reflection for improving alumni programmes. Using democratic principles of integrity, respect, collaboration which are embedded in PAR approach foregrounds inclusive discussions of issues relevant to the research context.

Ferreira and Ebersöhn (2012, 42) posit the concept of asset-based resilience as the ability to focus on strengths during times of adversity through the application of awareness, reflexivity, identification, access, self-regulation and sustenance. Furthermore, the purpose of this 'strength focus' approach (Ferreira & Ebersöhn, 2012, 42) was to connect 'positive psychology' concepts, comprising the hope, assurance and optimism that the research participants displayed as they overcame obstacles in order to complete the research project.

Applying asset-focused resilience in this research journey, we acknowledged the synergy among participants and within the school environment as they utilised existing resources, albeit limited, in order to build learner resilience. Capturing learners' voices, comments and experiences was an important element of meeting the needs and expectations of ethical and transparent practice (Butler-Kisber, 2010, 21). In fact, this was more than an ethical practice, because alumni voices were more than a metaphor for individual perspective, but became the expression of their own existential design (Butler-Kisber, 2010, 943). Alumni realised that commitment was essential for the alumni association and community to grow, therefore felt that agency should start with the current learners, by creating an awareness of their roles as future alumni.

Some alumni showed so much commitment that they attended meetings directly after a long workday that their basic needs for refreshments had to be met and supplying transport when public transport was not available. Providing spiritual and emotional affirmation through appreciating their self-worth, mutual sharing and learning was necessary to complete the research. Throughout the study, participants had freedom of choice, where respect for each other was nurtured and considered as important. These elements gave momentum to the process and enhanced alumni commitment to the project until it culminated in success (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 53).

4.6   RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative research methods are complex, are applied in a changing and challenging field, and use diverse methods (Punch, 2009, 115). Though the methods of qualitative research are diverse in terms of the paradigms and approaches, there are common themes within this diversity, namely that the data generation tools and the interpretation of phenomena are perspectival, value-driven and theory-laden (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, 3).This study presents the collective experiences of the participants, analyzing and reflecting on patterns, problems and theory, chooses actions and reflecting on actions until systematised learning learning emerges from the processes (Loewenson, Laurell, Hogstedt, et. al., 20114, 40). The main task of this study was to facilitate alumni support for a low-resourced school using a

participatory approach. The PAR approach enabled the participants to effect change by seeking solutions to the challenges facing the school in a collaborative manner. In this regard, multiple data generation strategies were used as elements of triangulation in order to minimise the risk of systematic bias in the research (Maxwell, 2012, 106). Therefore, we were able to substantiate the findings through the convergence of different perspectives (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012, 154).

4.6.1 Sampling

When sampling strategies for social research are adopted, an important distinction is made between probability and non-probability samples (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2014, 112). Probability sampling is mostly used for statistical data, where elements in the population are chosen at random in order to test a hypothesis. Qualitative research, in contrast, prefers non-probability methods for selecting the sample for research, because the elements are usually selected to reflect the particular features of a group.

Qualitative research applies purposive sampling, because it seeks to obtain insights into particular practices, within a specific location, context and time (Gray, 2009, 180). Purposive sampling is criterion based; therefore, it reflects the features that enable a detailed exploration and understanding of the questions that the researcher intends studying (Ritchie *et al.*, 2014, 113).

This study identified alumni on the basis of their interest in the school and who were willing to participate in finding ways of supporting their alma mater. Purposive sampling was used by inviting former learners of different year groups (from the school's inception year 1975 to 2013) of the identified school to participate in the research, as alumni were considered to be in the best position to identify with the school culture. Some alumni responded positively indicating their willingness to participate. This group attended a meeting where the poor condition of the building, lack of sports fields, text books, a school library and lack of security at the school were highlighted. Thereafter we met socially in order to building relationships as the alumni shared a great deal of history with the school. Alumni who resided in the neighbourhood were considered to be potentially the most information-rich

candidates to include in the research. Through purposive sampling, the valuable experiential knowledge of alumni who had an academic, cultural and emotional attachment to the school was captured in this study (Mertens, 2009, 214). Alumni who participated in the research varied in age from 18 to 40 years old. Some participants had just completed their high school education the previous year, others had graduated from university by means of scholarships and bursaries, while the older participants were part of the teaching staff. In this regard, Maxwell (2012, 93) considers the selection of the settings and participants (sampling), gatekeepers and other stakeholders as the most crucial aspects of the actual data generation process.

Figure 4.8 over encapsulates the various data-generation tools employed during the research process. The multiple methods allowed participants to communicate their knowledge in ways that were comfortable and negotiated and gave them opportunities to share in different ways.

4.6.2 Participant Observations (used in Cycles One and Two)

Participant observation is a tool used to generate data through observing and listening to people in their natural settings in order to discover the social meanings they attribute to and their interpretations of their own activities (Gray, 2009, 399). I used participant observations, which provided rich descriptive data, to study the participants and the social situation as we engaged in activities during the research (Spradley, 2016, 45). Additionally, this process is able to reflect the researcher's own experiences, feelings, anxieties and insights while engaging with the participants. In this study, I observed how the participants interacted with one another, how they learned to respect the opinions of one another and how they reflected on their actions that gave me a better understanding of the research process (Gibson & Brown, 2009, 100). This helped me become immersed in the setting and enabled me to share the participants' experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, 140). Herein lay the dynamic nature of social interaction as a sense of shared identity was created between the participants and I as we responded to one another and adjusted our understanding and behaviour as we created new knowledge.

For this study, initially unstructured observation was followed. A large picture or pattern of behaviour was focused on at the beginning of the research and subsequently we worked towards a reductionist focus, which required more specific and select observation (Punch, 2009, 155). Using a reflexive approach of critically reflecting on the tools used to generate data, the process and being self-reflective, gave me an insider perspective of how participants' behaviour differed when interacting with different people, namely with teachers, learners and outsiders. I kept a diary of the dynamics during meetings and activities that provided me with data on the participants' concerns about the lack of interest and participation of important stakeholders of the school and the lack of growth in the alumni association.

4.6.3   Focus Group discussions (used in Cycle One)

Focus group discussions brought together the multiple views of participants, while planned discussions with a selected group created shared insights into how to build alumni networks to support school projects (Arthur *et al.*, 2012, 186; Somekh & Lewin, 2005, 43). Focus group discussions facilitated and often transformed alumni thinking about how to use their skills and knowledge in a practical way. The discussions creaed a platform (Alumni Week) to inspire and motive current learners and to build relationships among alumni based on mutual respect (Mertens, 2009, 250). Because focus group discussions can additionally seek solutions in a collaborative manner, these discussions served to strengthen the participants' beliefs in their own capacities as they created an alumni programme of volunteering, coaching and mentoring that would enhance the educational experiences of learners.

As we discussed the value of alumni engagement for the school, we realised how we could achieve more when working as a group (Lichtman, 2010, 154). We implemented alumni programmes like building a wider network of alumni using social media, fundraising and sharing alumni activities with the community. The research participants, educators and learners of the school were regularly asked to critically reflect on their effectiveness and propose amendments.

METHODS	JUSTIFICATION
Participatory mapping Included drawing maps of the school community and the key roleplayers in the area. This included a range of features, resources and conditions in the community.	Mapping was used to validate information on conditions in the school community and experience alumni were contributing to the process. Identifying strengths and problem areas in the school community, to analyse service access and benefits by social groups, when combined with social mapping, and to identify change. Maps were used at different stages of the process to present how alumni engagement enhanced social change.
Asset-mapping Participants drew pictures of themselves, particularly of characteristics and skills they were contributing to the inquiry.	Drawings were used to generate evidence of assets, or to validate evidence or to inform reflection on problems and actions.
Focus group interviews These interviews were conducted in a relaxed manner to elicit information on how educators viewed the necessity for and process of alumni engagement and how alumni could add value to the school.	These interviews were used to generate data that helped guide the process, identify potential problem areas and offered suggestions for actions during the research process. The data generated was used to prioritize action plans, such as how to relate resources to needs and to devise problem solving actions.
Drawings Participants were asked to draw a picture of themselves, depicting their qualities and character. The brief was: Draw a picture of how you see yourself and what you think you can contribute to the study.	The pictures expressed the thoughts and feelings of the participants, creating a space for self-expression, to convey messages and validate participants' narratives. Drawings were tangible, offering opportunity for reflection, were immediate and offered visual proof of their experiences.
Reflection diaries and journals Contained an arrangement of events, expressions of emotions, assumptions and self-reflection.	Diaries were used to record observations, impressions and self-reflections. Auto-ethnographic accounts of interactions and perceptions. These diaries contained the voice of participants, essential for social activism.
Photovoice Offered a space for social change, activism and transformation.	Photographs were used to create a narrative of a positive school environment. Was an empowering exercise as they explored diverse perspectives.
Personal narratives Relating a sequence of personal and career experiences.	Brought a personal dimension as participants reflected on their personal journeys and careers.

FIGURE 4.8: Summary of data generation and documentation method

Focus group discussions were highly appropriate for this study as these effectively generated authentic accounts of all the stakeholders' experiences and views; promoting active participation and the equal sharing of ideas and insights, which influenced attitudes and even practice as new knowledge emerged (Arthur *et al.,* 2012, 187). Therefore, focus group discussions offered participants the benefit of being heard, validated their worth and the importance of their experiences and contained the hope that by sharing how they had overcome personal challenges, they would be helping the learners of the school (Mertens, 2009, 245).

Throughout the research, I carefully guarded against negative power relations within the diverse group of people, especially since this study included alumni who had entered institutions of higher education as well as alumni who had not completed their high school education. In this regard, I cautioned against the influence of status and power on the group dynamics, which could have resulted in compromising the honesty and quality of the discussions (Arthur *et al.*, 2012, 188). Valuable data were generated during the focus group discussions, which reflected the interactions among participants and the influence of participants on each other. As such, the data were analysed deductively, keeping the research questions in mind, and inductively, until themes and sub-themes emerged.

4.6.4   Drawings (used in Cycle One)

The use of drawings in social research is located in contemporary studies such as arts-based research and participatory visual methodologies (Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith & Campbell, 2011, 19) for capturing the ineffable, especially aspects that may be difficult to verbalise (Mitchell, 2011, 51); for effectively expressing thoughts and feelings; and for creating a space for sharing emotions and complex messages in a prolific way, while validating participants' stories (Theron, 2012, 1). Drawings were used to facilitate critical reflection of the research process, affording us time for soul searching, to think and analyse (Theron, 2012, 1). Furthermore, drawings offered the advantage of simplicity, tangibility and accuracy, immediacy and visual evidence of how the participants felt about participating in the study and how their contributions added to their sense of self-worth. Participants were asked to append explanations to their drawings as literature cautions that researchers should not assume to know

the meaning of participants' drawings (Mitchell, 2011, 51). In this study, the drawings eloquently captured the feelings and reasons why alumni engaged in the study (appendix B.1); captured the indescribable, elusive and emotive; were persuasive, evocative, action-oriented and reflexive; and elicited a greater measure of self-awareness among participants (Milne, Mitchell & De Lange, 2012, 1).

4.6.5   Photovoice (used in Cycle Two)

Photovoice is a participatory action research method based on health promoting principles that has its roots in critical theory, particularly for raising consciousness in education (Wang, 1999, 186). Photovoice furthermore enables participants to identify and record community strengths or concerns, promote critical dialogue on these issues and help people to imagine alternative ways of doing and thinking in order to improve their contexts. Photovoice comprise the creation, organisation and understanding of images (Hartas, 2010, 200) and their relevance to the research questions. These visual images can be photographs, drawings, diagrams or a video of the context under study, created by the researcher and/or participants.

Photographs have the unique ability to capture visible phenomena in a unique manner. With the emergence of photovoice, which is considered to be a participatory action research data generation tool in which participants document and describe their community context by taking photographs that can be used for social agency in order for people to commit to social change action (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, 184). The justification for using visual data in this study is that images are pervasive of society and may reveal some sociological insights not accessible by any other means (Banks, 2014, 3). Flick (2014, 298) concurs that "images are not innocent", but convey the significance of those who create or use them.

Intrinsically, photovoice should not be seen as empowering or emancipatory, but, when integrated with other data generation tools, can create ongoing discussions around the research questions, interactions and facilitations, and generate valuable data (Milne *et al.,* 2012, 260). Additionally, photovoice should not be viewed as mirror images of reality, but merely as a presentation thereof (Flick, 2014, 335), because without interpretation and analysis these images do not tell the full story. In

this study, photovoice helped the participants visualise, express, illustrate and analyse how their contribution as alumni could possibly bring about social change within the school community for the benefit of the learners.

As the participants used photovoice, they became more aware of what was happening in their community, fostering deep reflections and creating a safe context for exploring their diverse perspectives (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievan & McCann, 2005, 275). Furthermore, photo voice offered participants the opportunity to reflect on their own individual and collective experiences at their alma mater. It became a catalyst for further discussions which contributed to a shared vision for the school. In this regard, Prosser and Burke (2008, 130) append that photo voice enables participants to become inquirers instead of respondents because they creatively engage and inspire transformation.

Photovoice provided participants with opportunities for critical self-reflection and a space to consider the significance of what existed in the school community and of the future possibilities (Milne, Mitchell & De Lange, 2012, 35). It became a participatory visual tool appropriate for identifying and addressing community needs and social problems. Additionally, it has the potential for revealing underlying social undercurrents among participants; and has the capacity to mobilise collective action, rendering it a social intervention strategy (Milne *et al.*, 2012, 1).

4.6.6 Personal narratives (used in Cycles One and Two)

Narratives are central to human experience; they relate a sequence of events in time, often referring to cause and effect and embracing personal change (Bold, 2012, 17-9). Silverman (2014, 315) defines narratives as more than a record of experiences, composed for a listener, questioner or even an audience, with the purpose of describing, explaining, motivating, influencing or activating.

Narratives brought a personal dimension to this study, enabling us to apply and refine our critical and reflective skills, thus challenging underlying views, biases, values and expectations (Bold, 2012, 3). Writing narratives was an ideal way of capturing the holistic school experiences of alumni (Gray, 2009, 514). In this study,

narratives (inserted under paragraph 5.5.2) improved our understanding of the impact of the school on the lives of alumni and how could inspire our action plans during the research. In this research, pseudonyms were used to mask biographical elements, especially when narratives were used, because research was conducted in a close-knit community where participants could be identified (Gibson & Brown, 2009, 61).

Narrators are often able to initiate further action (Silverman, 2014, 315). Narratives stimulated the participants' thinking and conversation concerning alumni engagement and how their history with the school could assist learners in dealing with their personal challenges. The afore-mentioned elements of narratives were beneficial for this study, because facilitating alumni support for this low-resourced school required agency within the community which translated into action plans.

Furthermore, narratives helped us obtain insight into which intervention strategies to design to enhance the educational experiences of learners. In this regard, Gibson and Brown (2009, 98) concur that narrative analysis asks specific questions about participants and how they make sense of their experiences, behaviour and relationships within their contexts.

4.6.7 Research diaries (used in Cycles One and Two)

Research diaries, also referred to as log books, journals or field notes, were used by the participants and I to record our observations, impressions and reflections (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, 24). Research diaries contain data obtained through observation, interviews, informal discussions, photographic impressions and contextual information of how the data was generated, as well as our reflections on any aspect related to the research. Our research diaries contained descriptive arrangements of events and interpretive arrangements that embodied the emotions, assumptions, predispositions and concepts of the participants, thus they were auto-ethnographic accounts of our interactions (Mertens, 2009; Somekh & Lewin, 2005).

These reflective diaries containing our self-reflections represented our voices which was an essential aspect for effecting social change. Journal writing was encouraged

among the participants as it served as "an aide-memoire" (Gray, 2009, 325), of cryptic notes and providing a platform for reflection-on-action and contributed to the analysis of data in a collaborative manner. Journal writing was essential for critical self-reflection through each stage of this research, especially for triangulation and the verification of multiple viewpoints, to enhance validity and transformative moments in this research.

4.7 DATA ANALYSIS

Gibson and Brown (2009, 4) refer to the analysis of qualitative data as a search for general statements sharing relationships, from which underlying themes can emerge. Systematic data analysis identifies essential characteristics and relationships within the data. Marshall and Rossman (2011, 208) concur that data be should be coded and organised into units and that while engaging with the data, categories and themes are generated. Once data has been re-conceptualised and synthesised, the researcher can make interpretations thereof by making annotations, while also searching for alternate insights until the final report is written (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, 208).

This study followed the framework analysis approach (Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin & Lowden, 2011, 219), with its four distinct, interconnected stages. The **first stage** encompassed familiarisation with the data by listening to two recorded group interviews, one with alumni and the second with teaching colleagues, reading transcripts, and allowed member checking of notes and research diaries. This form of synthesised member checking addressed the co-constructed nature of knowledge by providing participants with the opportunity to engage with, and add to, interview and interpreted data, several months after semi-structured interviews (Birt, Scott & Cavers, 2016). This process alerted me to relevant and key concerns within the context. The participants and I then identified a thematic framework by referring back to the research questions, and then searched for related material. Key words, quotes, recurring patterns and concepts were indexed.

During the **second stage**, we used 'coding lists' (paper and different colours) to log topics as they emerged, while concepts were labelled, sorted and compared.

115

Silverman (2011, 280) refers to this stage as developing a professional vision, as the participants and researcher make analytic choices about which lines, chunks or sections of data to highlight. In order to be collaborative, during the data analysis process, the participants were given transcripts and particles from narratives they contributed during interview and asked to verify their accuracy.

The **third stage** involved the extraction of a narrative context, which was placed within the thematic groupings. Research focusing on narrative analysis often involves ethics, morality and cultural obscurities (Gray, 2009, 172). Narratives illuminated personal and cultural dynamics within and among the participants, empowering them as it improved their understanding of their own context. Furthermore, the analysis of narratives brought forth the complexities within the (school) community; highlighting power constructs, different viewpoints and contradictions (Gray, 2009, 514). During this phase, we read the indexed data to gauge the coherence of the data extracts. Underlying themes that linked particular items were identified; forming a hierarchical arrangement, as similar content or properties were viewed as a whole (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton & Ormstron, 2014, 287). The **final phase** involved the mapping and interpretation of the thematic context to establish relationship between the texts and to show the links between the units of data as a whole.

Throughout this research, the process of data analysis happened collaboratively, democratically, and in iterative cycles, as analysis was an ongoing process during the cycles of action and critical reflection. Because participatory analysis takes the differences of opinions of the participants into account, it is often described as a disputed yet stimulating process (Kindon, Pain & Kesby, 2007, 660). For this study, a humanising approach was followed during the research process and the analysis of data as the voice of the participants formed the prime source of reference as they created and analysed their own experiences and were familiar with the research context. The emphasis was on the participants' reflexive insights during data as they considered how they made notes about their transitions through this collaborative learning process (Merrill & West, 2009, 131).

4.8   VALIDATION

Validation entails observing standards for a competence practice by employing ethical principles (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, 25). Therefore, an unquestioning acceptance of general criteria for qualitative research does not suffice for action research (AR) (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010, 243). Consequently, AR requires dialectical validation, in which attention is given to detail in the ongoing process, as well as the conflicts between practice, theory and research. It is my belief that the synergy of the aforementioned elements, namely praxis, which displays the dialectical feature of the input of participants, becomes the research and the new theory. I applied critical validity as the moral compass of the research process, because I was cognisant of and took into account the inquiry of participants into their own context (Holloway & Wheeler, 2012, 243). This element made me morally accountable for decision-making in order to improve the research context. Reflexive validity became a principle that challenged me as a participant, agent and evaluator of change. This challenge was addressed as I occasionally distanced myself from my own practice and assumptions.

During this study, I tested the validity of the findings with the participants and the key arguments thereof with a critical friend to establish the clarity, to improve claims of new knowledge and to guarantee that the data matched the claims (Gray, 2009, 327). In this regard, the following elements were used for ensuring the trustworthiness of the data, namely:

- **Transferability**, to illustrate pertinent issues and factors when comparing two contexts for similarity. In this research, however, the aim was not to establish generalisations, but to know, understand and improve the school context and to advocate change for the benefit of all the participants, as espoused by Zuber-Skerritt (2011, 80).
- **Dependability**, established through critical self-reflections of participants through communication and collaboration. This was possible because this research was dependent on the reflections of participants, as well as an integration of theory and practice.

- **Confirmability**, or rigour, established by means of triangulation. The use of multiple methods comprising different perspectives and stringent participant validation brought credibility to this research. I pointedly used the interpretation and views of the parrticipants and narratives of their experiences throughout the process in their own vernacular (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 81).

Additionally, the following criteria to measure the validity of the data (Anderson & Herr, 2005, 55) were employed:

1   **Outcome validity** or "workability" (Levin and Green, 1998), attained when the research question had been answered satisfactorily and a solution to the research problem was found.

2   **Dialogic validity**, attained in this study when the participants and I conducted reflective and ongoing cycles for the purpose of considering whether the underlying assumptions of the researcher were valid. The quality of research was established through a process of peer review, when a critical friend who was familiar with the context served as the proverbial 'devil's advocate' to find an alternative explanation for the research data.

3   **Democratic validity**, attained as the research was conducted in collaboration with relevant parties who had a stake in the problem under investigation Throughout this study, the multiple perspectives and voices of alumni, teachers, current learners and the wider school community were sought, respected and included.

4   **Catalytic validity**, achieved when the research process oriented, focused and energised participants towards understanding their reality in order to change it. Because this research had a 'social change agenda'; it strived to develop a deeper insight into the participants' view of reality, in order to improve their context (Levin & Green,1998, 4).

5   **Ecological validity**, accomplished as the constructs and findings of the research became relevant to the participants.

Furthermore, the trustworthiness of the process was ensured by using self-reflective and democratic strategies, such as true collaboration and ongoing dialogue as learning became a mutual process between the researcher and participants (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, 1); therefore, the data were critical and transformative in nature; generated collaboratively during focus group discussions and through personal reflection, while the participants possessed first-hand knowledge of their contexts. The data in research journals reflected the transformed opinions and ideas of the participants as they immersed themselves in this research journey (Mertens, 2009, 233).

4.9   ETHICAL MEASURES

Codes of ethics are formulated to regulate the relations of researchers and participants and the field they intend to study (Flick, 2009, 36). These codes of research ethics are necessary to avoid harm to the participants involved in the process, respecting their needs and protecting their interests.

Mertens (2009) and Flick (2009) contend that ethics in social research include principles of respect, non-maleficence, beneficence, self-determination and social justice. It was therefore required of me to treat participants with high regard, refrain from harming them, and ensure that the outcomes benefitted the participants and that they were treated equally. In the same way, Marshall and Rossman (2011, 142) posit that an ethical research process is founded on the principle of respect for the participants, requiring me to respect the voice of participants and continually negotiate and re-negotiate their collaboration in a democratic manner. Zuber-Skerritt (2011, 47) refers to the core values of a 'PAR culture' as the advancement of learning and knowledge through reflection and action, based on the collaboration and communication of participants. Respect and appreciation for the participants' views, experiences and diversity was maintained throughout the process. This PAR process was built on a democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge among alumni to benefit and improve the conditions of a particular school (Jupp, 2006, 1). As the afore-mentioned qualities were maintained, a safe space was created to access new ideas and created learning opportunities as the participants critiqued and accepted critique from fellow participants. Finally, through asking

probing questions, coaching opportunities were created for significant learning outcomes to be achieved. This is discussed in Chapter Five.

The following ethical statements of intent are elements that guided this practice, namely informed consent, confidentiality, avoiding harm, integrity and professionalism (Gibson & Brown, 2009, 60).

- **Informed consent**

I applied the principle of informed consent by requesting the permission of those being observed and interviewed. I explained the purpose, process and possible consequences of participation in the research in advance (Appendix A.1). Somekh and Levin (2009, 56) allude to a process of 'rolling informed consent' as a process where consent is renegotiated as the research proceeds that makes realistic assessments of possible consequences. We negotiated consent for using personal disclosures and narratives for use at certain social events and for the inclusion thereof in the study.

- **Confidentiality**

I wrote letters to participants (Appendix A.2) explaining how this PAR study would be conducted and participants' right to anonymity and to withdraw from the study at any time. Because the research participants worked collaboratively towards a common goal, it was possible to negotiate confidentiality at different phases of the research. Participants decided what would remain confidential and to which extent direct quotes could be used (Somekh & Levin, 2005, 57). It is often true that participants do not want to remain anonymous, but seek recognition for their contribution to change. In this study utilised presentations as a form of celebration and recognition of their successes (personal progress) that participants achieved during the research (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 46).

In this research, the participants (alumni) furthermore wrote their 'alumni protocols' (Appendix A.3), which were sets of rules and responsibilities (Swiderska, 2012, p1-2; Lassen 2012, 1) concerning their rights as a group as well as recognising their roles,

voice and views throughout the research process. These protocols controlled access to valuable knowledge and served as a code of ethical conduct for the proper use of dialogue and the transmission of knowledge that guided the research.

4.10   CONCLUSION

This chapter offers justification for using a PAR approach to facilitate alumni engagement for a low-resourced school and for collaboratively developing strategies to enhance the educational experiences of learners. This participatory approach was essential for participants to collaborate throughout the research process; while action learning offered enabled participants to grow their coaching and mentoring capabilities.

The theoretical framework mapped the critical features of multiple theories and philosophies contained in this research. Complexity theory explains the multiple relationships interacting within an education system, while Social Constructivism on the other hand explains the importance of semiotic mediation contained in specific interactive events and symbols within a school which creates greater understanding of the needs of the institution. Critical theory and Capability theory specifically provided a language of proficiency, democracy and responsibility that reflected the spirit of the research process, enabling participants to recognise the challenges within the research context and presenting them with the motivation to enact change.

While the conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between the mentioned theories, it additionally frames the particular pathway for exploring the research topic. Moreover, it offers justification for the choice of methodological strategies, based on participant collaboration, critical reflection and action-reflection-cycles of data generation.

Framework analysis was used to identify key words, codes and categories. This process assisted the participants and me in identifying themes and sub-themes, while maintaining the ethical integrity of the research process.

The following chapter offers a contextualised and reflexive account of the findings and interpretation of the learning of the participants and the researcher. The ensuing chapter simultaneously recognises the intricacies of the research journey, whilst we continuously strived to sustain the integrity of the data.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

> *"Struggle is par for the course when our dreams go into action. But unless we have the space to imagine and a vision of what it means fully to realise our humanity, all the protests and demonstrations in the world won't bring about change (Kelley, 2003)."*

5.1   INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter encompassed the research design and methodology that informed this study. This chapter captures the outcomes of the research process and encapsulates the significance of Participatory Action Research, as a methodology for proactively cultivating a process for local knowledge to be disseminated that is a self-sustaining process that ideally continues even after the research is completed. This research was self-developing because it enabled research participants to unlock their potential to deal with complex issues in their own communities. Therefore, the findings I present reflect the participants' experiences, their learning and reflections as they collaboratively addressed complex challenges that influenced the experiences of learners at a low-resourced school.

During this research, I learnt that one could resist apathy and scepticism by saying no to 'cannot and lack', and by constructing the context one wants to reside in (He & Phillion, 2008, x). The learning that emerged from this process was the result of 'courageous conversations' among educators at a low-resourced school and their alumni. From these conversations emanated activities of discovery as we immersed ourselves in this study and wrote our own script as members in dialogue with one another. This democratic research was based on trust in one another and consideration and respect for the viewpoints of educators, learners, parents and alumni as important stakeholders of the school. The stakeholders were afforded several opportunities to make their voices heard during alumni meetings, interviews,

by writing narratives and reflecting on the research process. The outcomes and interpretations of this data had been documented and are reflected in the ensuing paragraphs. I worked within a wider learning set consisting of student researchers involved in different aspects of educational research. My research was enriched by our regular learning set meetings and monthly reflections, where we shared the highlights of our experiences and bemoaned our exasperations. The invaluable contributions of a collaborative and participatory research approach are well documented and reflected throughout this report.

A PAR approach was delineated as the most suitable approach for this research as the participants and I collaboratively engaged in embarking on this research journey. We chose to proceed with the research based on the philosophy of Senge (1990, 3), who postulates:

We continually expand our capacity to create the outcomes we truly desire, we probed deep to find and cultivate new and extensive patterns of thinking, as our collective aspirations were set free, we were continually learning to learn together.

The findings are indicative of what and how we learnt, showing how we traversed complex relationships between how and what we were thinking and what we were doing. This dialogical process required mindful reflection and interpretation of observations and narratives, as well as critical self-exploration of our own interpretation of the empirical material as suggested by Alvesson and Skölberg (2009).

In line with Zuber-Skerritt's views (2011, 57), the findings indicate and encompass the values of a PAR model, namely advancement, collaboration, trust, vision, openness, questioning, coaching and celebration. The afore-mentioned principles provided the participants and I with valuable standards for practice, which inspired confidence in the process. The following responses of participants attest to the value of these principles for research:

We want to learn about the roles alumni can play; we want to be a positive dynamo, creating a vibrant school climate; through sharing our experiences with learners we can create a culture of belonging.

The extract above is underscored by literature indicating that shared goals and aspirations enhance collaboration (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, 5). In my personal reflections (2015), similar sentiments were penned:

Collaboration stretched me – I had to move from self to others. During this process I discovered more of myself and others. Mutual respect is what kept us going amidst the challenges. I appreciated the few alumni who engaged in the research process, gave and served the school, overlooking the hundreds who did not offer their services.

5.2   CYCLE ONE: HOW CAN I FACILITATE ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT USING A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH?

5.2.1   Findings

- **Facilitating alumni relationships**

The findings highlight the importance of proactively pursuing and building healthy relationships with and between alumni. Furthermore, the findings indicate that when a platform is provided for alumni of different levels of education, skills and experience to collaborate, they tend to increase their focus on the common goal of rendering support to their alma mater. In this regard, participants commented as follows:

P1 - "*I want to create a positive mindset, because I feel that learners do not even want to be at school.*"

P2 - "*I failed Grade11 therefore I want to share my personal experience with others of how I turned my life into a success story.*"

P3 - "I have a role to play in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth, because there is no culture of giving back".

Alumni who comprise professionals from various disciplines, entrepreneurs, volunteers and learners, who had recently completed their high school education, used drawings depicting their characteristics as positive, hardworking, a willingness to learn, curious, goal-oriented and determined to succeed as some of the assets they were contributing to the school. From these discussions, action plans that encompass marketing the alumni association and the school, organising raising funds events and initiating mentoring and coaching opportunities for learners were implemented. As alumni participated in different activities and relationships were built, participants learned to trust one another. From alumni self-reflecting on the process, a reciprocal bond among themselves and the school developed; highlighting mutual concerns for the school, generating ways of enhancing the school context in such a way that created a positive atmosphere at school and inspired motivation among learners.

The findings furthermore indicate that the alumni regarded relationship building as both important and enjoyable for ensuring their continuous involvement with the school. In this regard, literature attests to the fact that "supporter alums' are more likely to initiate a lifelong relationship with their alma mater in many ways including by speaking at valedictory services, mentoring learners and volunteering as coaches (Weerts & Ronca, 2007, 20). Furthermore, Sun, Hoffman and Grady (2007, 307) emphasise that facilitating alumni support is largely regarded as "relationship marketing", because when alumni believe that they can make a difference and their contributions, big or small, are appreciated, they are more likely to 'plough back' in an institution.

Alumni, comprising enthusiastic past pupils, educators and entrepreneurs, listed the following reasons for participating in this study*:*

P1- "I came to share my personal experiences and make a positive contribution".
P2- "I was moved by a sense of pride in the school; I wanted to meet people".

P3- "I want to motivate others".

P4- "I wanted to learn about the history of the school".

P5- "I want to help create an alumni culture in the community".

Diagrams and sketches of alumni (Appendix B1) encapsulate the passion and bond alumni experience towards their alma mater. As alumni worked collaboratively they formed a vision for their group (Figure 5.2) that effectively captured their thoughts, longings, feelings and experiences, and elicited further dialogue (Theron, 2012, 2). Not only did these images stimulate communication, but rich data was generated relating to participants' attitudes and the various ways they could impact on the school context. Most participants expressed positive perceptions concerning their abilities and attitudes in the following ways:

P1 - *"I have a positive mindset; is dependable and helpful"*

P2 - *"I like to work under pressure".*

P3 - *"I prefer working within a group".*

P4 - *"I am goal-directed, well-organised and creative".*

P7- *"I will promote alumni to school friends and visit the Facebook page to encourage others to attend alumni meetings".*

Participants' drawings captured a multitude of assets present within the structures surrounding the school, namely a public library, police services (for safety), churches (for pastoral care) and social clubs. As participants immersed themselves in discussing how these assets could be harnessed and mobilised, mindsets changed concerning resourcing as we realised that within the community they were untapped resources that could be utilised to advance the vision of the school.

This phase of the research was guided by Freirean theories of critical pedagogy as well as a humanising philosophy with a clear value framework, which put people at the centre. In this study, alumni experiences superceded systems and philosophies (Galvin & Todres, 2013, 1). I observed how relationships of trust and respect were strengthened as alumni, sharing a passion for their former school, were capable of seeking and finding solutions to improve the educational opportunities of existing learners.

The research, based on PAR principles of inclusion, collaboration and consensus, ensured a participatory, consensus-based forum, providing tools for exploring our feelings and values. The findings reflect the benefits embedded in action research as research approach, where different action-reflection-cycles afforded my fellow researchers the opportunity to apply their skills and knowledge, reporting and evaluating the outcomes, and collating their findings. In this way, alumni were introduced to the key values, strategies and behaviour of a participatory action research approach that foregrounded communication, collaboration, commitment, coaching and a critical and self-reflective attitude (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 217). Thematic analysis was employed throughout the research, revealing patterns and categories until the subsequent themes and sub-themes emerged, as illustrated in the figures at each theme.

The study's findings confirm that the alumni intentionally and consistently wanted to engage with their alma mater to achieve its motto "*Meliora peto*": striving for the best. The alumni planned the celebrations of the school's 40th anniversary, building a sense of community and ownership of the school by hosting a family day and generally building the support base for the school. This is the way in which alumni responded to the question: *Why are you here?*

P1: "*An emotional attachment with the school*"

P2*: "Want to share our success stories"*

P3: "*Give back by teaching skills*"

P4*: "Pride in the school"*

P5: "*Meet new people*"

P6*: "Learn more"*

P7: *"To motivate others"*

The above is in line with Freire's definition of an 'educated hope' (Smyth, 2011, 3); that there is an awareness embedded in our incompleteness, and what makes us human is the quest to become more fulfilled. This sentiment was relevant regarding what the alumni were pursuing collaboratively and in relation with others. Smyth's citation above encapsulates and underpins the philosophy which was followed in this

research journey, namely that the research participants were regarded as being more important than the project (Smyth, 2011, 11).

5.4 THEME ONE: ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT IS NECESSARY FOR A LOW-RESOURCED SCHOOL
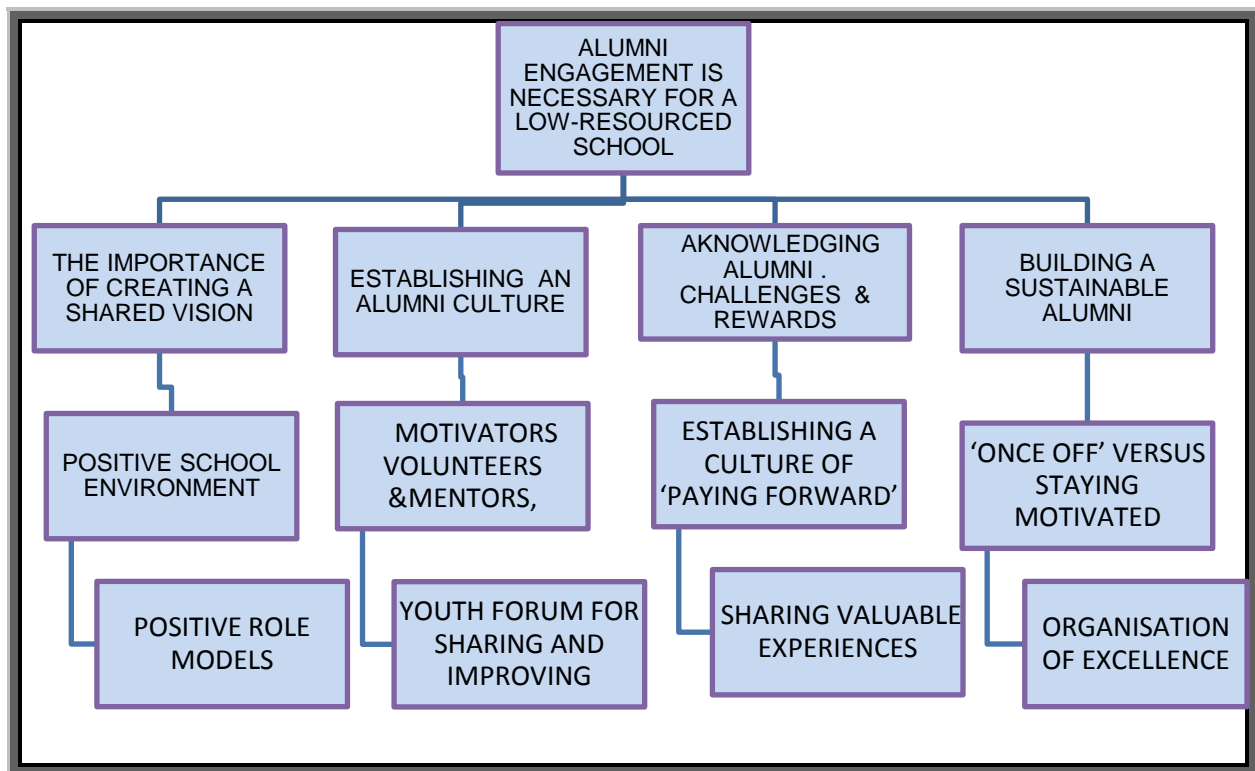
FIGURE 5.1: Themes and sub-themes

The research pursued an inclusive concept and position regarding alumni involvement by welcoming all alumni who showed an interest in participating, irrespective of whether they had dropped out of school, completed their high school education, or whether they were esteemed – or not – in their community. As the participants involved themselves in various projects, utilising their 'indigenous' knowledge and local leadership, their attachment for each other and the school was nurtured, resulting in larger alumni networks.

Participants as co-researchers formed 'learning sets', meeting once every month to devise strategies to improve the school context. In the process, alumni learned from each other as they prioritised and executed plans. These learning set meetings soon

understood that for change to happen, they needed to recognise each member's input and respect each individual's ideas, with the aim of creating a shared understanding of the group's aspirations. The learning sets proceeded in a socially just manner as they addressed inequities in practices, power, access to information and resources, as well as how these injustices were constructed, sustained and maintained, especially when alumni who had achieved higher educational and social standing in society seemed to yield more power than alumni who did not enjoy a similar standing in the community and were perceived to be dictatorial regarding the action plans to be pursued. Many times it was difficult to maintain the principles of democracy, inclusion and collaboration, because alumni represented a cross section of society (medical doctors, entrepreneurs, teachers, accountants, shop assistants and labourers), and some of the participating alumni occupied powerful positions in society. In this regard, the research group deliberately sought to suspend any hierarchies of power and privilege within the group by inviting all alumni (FIG: 5.11) to learning set meetings in order to participate in planning and decision making (not only those who had completed their schooling or achieved a higher education qualification). In this way, we were simultaneously capacitating alumni and concurrently establishing the sustainability of the association.

5.4.1   THEME TWO: THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATING A SHARED VISION

A brainstorming session based on the question: *What can I contribute to the school? e*licited interesting comments that alumni translated into a drawing entitled a 'resource fountain' signifying that alumni were able to work collaboratively towards a common goal. The following concepts, vision; 'resource fountain; generating energy; striving for excellence; pride; loyalty; self-discipline; creating a vibrant culture; youth friendly; positive dynamo' depict the alumni resource fountain that formed their vision. During this brainstorming session, alumni engaged in reflective and dialogical conversations that opened up their thinking to the scrutiny of their peers, resulting in greater levels of trust and collaboration.

Applying thematic analysis to identify words and concepts that continually emerged, the findings indicate that the alumni were able to collaboratively create a shared vision. Drawing and articulating this shared vision motivated other alumni to become

involved, as they witnessed the enthusiasm of alumni participating in the study. Furthermore, the sense of pride that alumni displayed in their school inspired loyalty and motivated others to support the process. Conversely, alumni observed the lack of self-discipline of learners in the way they abused school facilities and the lack of respect these learners displayed towards their teachers. Therefore, alumni recognised that they could serve as role models for existing learners, for instilling respect for their institution. The following reflection encapsulates the spirit of the alumni vision:

> "Alumni would become like a resource fountain that would sprout its influence to all areas of the institution; in this way they can become role models"(February 2014) .

The phrase 'resource fountain' became a catch-phrase during the research process. Figure 5.6 is our resource fountain. Energy laden words like dynamo, energiser and energy-source below represent the alumni vision.
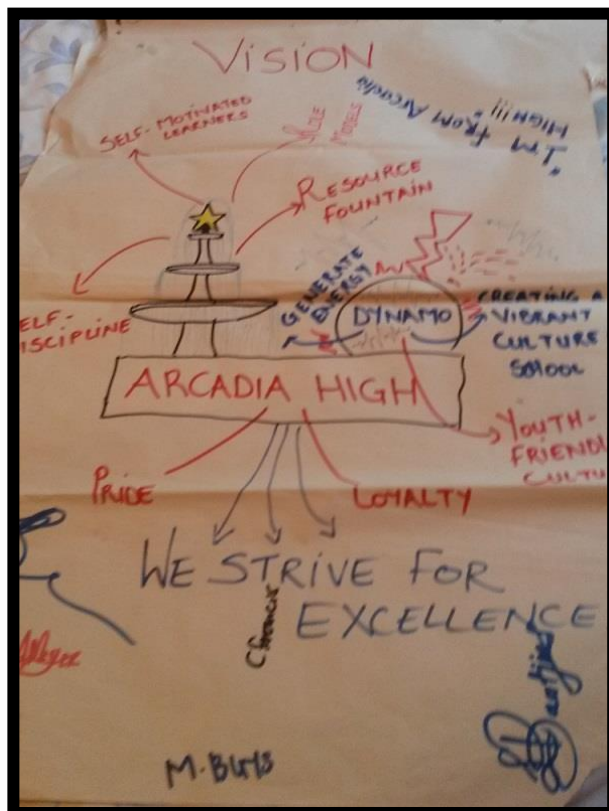
FIGURE 5.2: Our resource fountain

The findings further indicate that the participants were eager to make positive contributions towards the school context and environment. Some participants commented that: "w*e want to share with others, energise the learners, to create a vibrant climate at school*'. The alumni aimed to create a positive atmosphere and a satisfying school experience for current learners to fully develop their potential. In this regard, Hughes and Kritsonis (2006, 1) state that a shared vision is what keeps an organisation learning. Similarly, Senge (Moloi, 2010, 1) elaborates that the discipline of a shared vision is the set of tools and techniques necessary for bringing together the disparate aspirations of people into alignment in a common goal. In this regard, literature attests that shared goals enhance collaboration (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, 5) resulting in new and enduring infrastructures that can bring forth sustainable change. In this context, there was synergy of individual aspirations; utilising the diversity of alumni skills in order to advance the ethos of the school – *Meliora peto* (striving for better).

The alumni critically questioned and challenged whether the school vision was evident in learners' attitudes and achievements in a holistic way. Subsequently, alumni devised creative activities, such as introducing Alumni Week, which served as a platform to motivate and mentor learners, by celebrating the achievements of the school and its alumni.

- **Establishing a positive school environment**

Discussions with alumni revealed that they wished as part of their vision to create a positive school environment. During these sessions, the alumni expressed their intention of developing sports fields and reviving various types of sporting codes to develop learner discipline and commitment. The following confirms alumni intentions:

P3 - *"Our involvement is about motivating learners to improve their behavior; developing the sports fields for learners' use.*

P4 – *"To encourage learners to stop using drugs; about creating a positive self-image to inspiring all".*

Literature confirms that when learners feel unsafe as school vandalism against the school property increases, abusive behavior toward school staff escalates, conflict among peer groups heighten and, in general, young people are unable to learn in class (Mayer, 2007, 1). Conversely, when alumni focused on creating a positive school environment by implementing activities focused on peer education, drama and music presentations that emphasised positive choices for teenagers, the environment changed, which had a positive influence on learner motivation. The following are some of the learners' responses:

M1 – *It motivated me. It convinced me that I am able to rise above my circumstances. It made me realise to strive for better. This made me realise that my matric certificate is the key to success.*
M2 – *It inspired me. It showed me something about life and what I can get out of it. I took the words to heart.*

5.4.2 Positive role models

Alumni expressed as part of their vision to serve as positive role models for learners. Participant drawings (Figure 5.3) are indicative of their eagerness to interact and work together in creating a spirit of optimism in the school. Alumni drawings captured themselves as strong characters, independent and creative, expressing their need to become role models to current learners in order to develop the learners' leadership qualities. A fountain was erected in the school entrance to symbolise alumni and their support for the school. This is how learners responded to alumni:

M1 - *"Alumni motivated me to improve and strengthen my self-image."*
M2 – *"Alumni can have a positive impact on us to develop our confidence."*
M3 – *"Alumni taught us to rise above our circumstances and reminded us of the school's mission and vision."*

This articulation is in line with the views of Wiggan and Hutchison (2009, 213), who remark that alumni who show themselves interested in the well-being and development of the learners are able to strengthen learners' self-esteem and increase positive identity formation. As research participants worked from an asset-

based approach, mapping their experiential knowledge and skills (contextualised in figure 5.3), alumni confidence grew, as they realised how much they had to contribute to the school.

Literature verifies that the key to lasting solutions resides with the participants within their context, as they explore their gifts and skills (Chrzanowski, Rans & Thompson, 2010, 7).

I am talented, loyal and dependable.   **I am creative, goal directed and positive.**
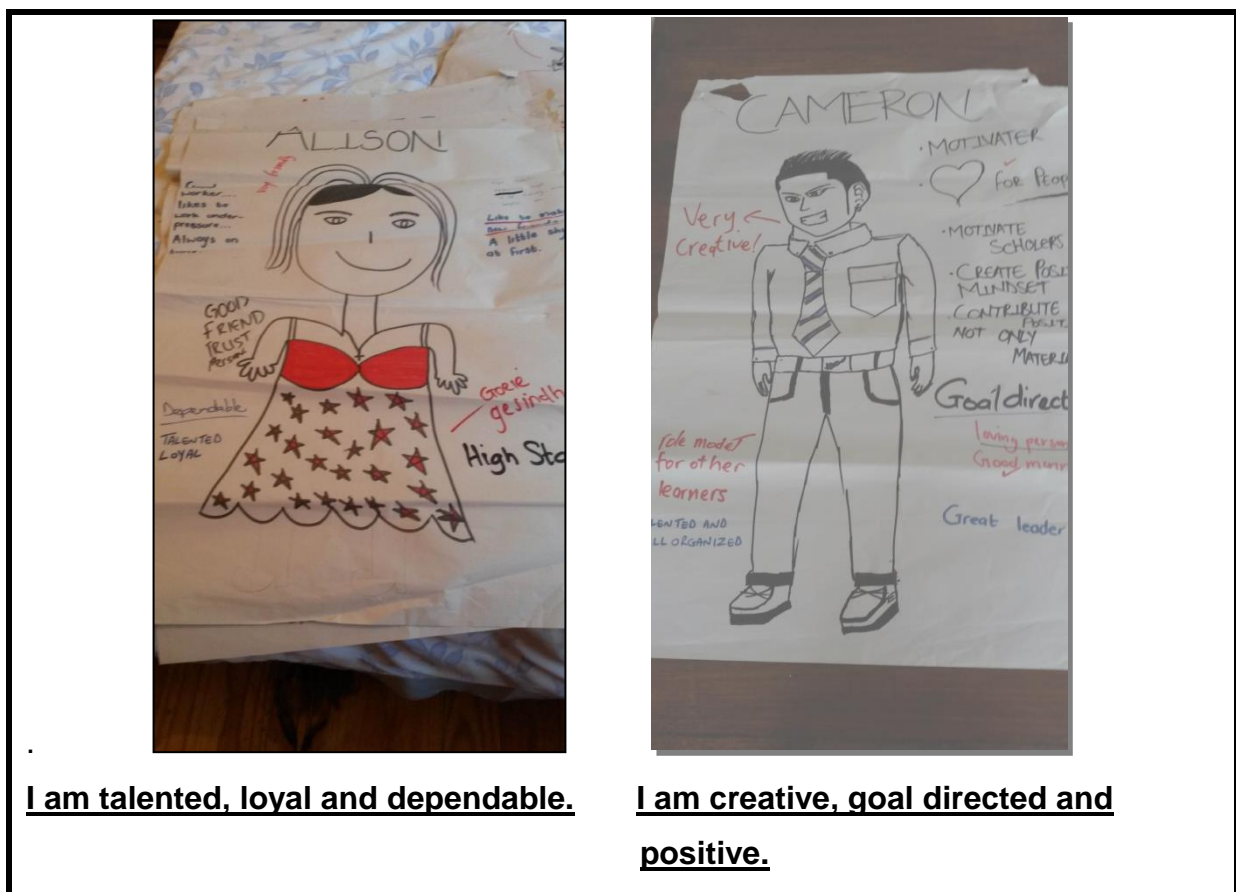
FIGURE 5.3: Drawings depicting alumni as role models

5.4.3   THEME THREE: THE IMPORTANCE OF ESTABLISHING AN ALUMNI CULTURE

The data indicate that the school and alumni concurred on creating structures for advancing an alumni culture by communicating the school program effectively, recognising and valuing their various skills and differences, maintaining

accountability and promoting collaboration with alumni (Martinez, Smith & Humphreys, 2012). Creating an alumni culture was deemed important in order to provide the necessary materials and services to provide learners with positive learning experiences.

Dialogue within the group enabled participants to suspend their individual goals, thus creating a 'think tank' for pursuing the school's vision and goals of always improving the learners' schooling experiences.

P7: "*I have much love to give; I can listen without criticiing because I am loyal, hardworking and tolerant. I have time to offer and can contribute positively by promoting alumni to school friends, by visit the alumni Facebook page I can motivate other alumni to participate in creating a culture of alumni engagement*".

FIGURE 5.4: Alumni brainstorming intervention strategies

The findings suggest that participants aimed to create an alumni culture of 'paying forward' by helping learners realise their full potential by initiating. The ideas below were expressed by the group (and discussed in Chapter four):

"*Establish groups to combat crime', 'inviting rap-music groups to motivate', 'develop sports clubs to develop', 'encourage fundraising and sponsorships to alleviate deficits'* and '*increase the school's capacity to develop their learners*".

- **Motivators**

Motivators refer to "a graduate's kinship with his or her alma mater" that becomes his or her incentive to give (Drezner, 2011, 62). Among these motivators may be alumni's feelings of honour, devotion and duty, referred to as intrinsic motivators. Intrinsic motivators are usually influenced by alumni's social group that encourages different forms of philanthropy. Extrinsic motivators may include small gifts to alumni and invitations to events.

Participants created self-portraits that encapsulated their characters and their intentions to their alma mater in the following ways:

P1 - "*I am a goal-oriented, positive minded and dependable person*".
P2 – "*I am a good worker, trustworthy and maintain high standards*".
P3 – "*I like to meet new people, is motivated to help others*".
P4 – "*With my creative abilities I would like to make a positive contribution*".

As the participants created new knowledge concerning an improved school context, by using photovoice as well as data from interviews with teachers, further actions and reflections were elicited. The findings from interviews with teachers indicated that:

C1 - "*alumni should implement study sessions, assist with homework, because learners lack the necessary study facilities at home*".

The teachers believed that when the action plans above were implemented, learners' attitudes might improve, as alumni could replace the existing negative role models in the community.

The findings demonstrated how the emotional bond among alumni and towards the school became the foundation for planning fundraising and social events. Alumni expressed the desire to "give back" to the school and contributed by organising fundraising events. Alumni articulated their intentions and contributions in the following ways:

P3 - *"Build an emotional bond'.*

P4 – *"Make a commitment, not only materially'*

P5 – *"Creating a network of alumni".*

P6 – *"Continually contributing to the well-being of the school (Holistically)".*

P7 – *"Create a positive mindset among learners and staff".*

P8 – *"Highlighting the school's achievements".*

Some alumni became involved in organising social events while others focused on academic and sports events. A fundraising event named 'Reunion at the Vault' served to raise funds as well as build alumni networks in the community. It was in sharing experiences, time and commitment that an alumni culture was built in this school community. Furthermore, dialectic dialogue among the alumni provided them with a platform for contributing to effective change in the way they viewed themselves and the school; and for improving the exchange of ideas among themselves (Wang, Yi Tao & Carovano, 1998, 80). In this regard, literature confirms that no plan or organisation from outside a community can reproduce what already exists within that community (Chrzanowski & Rans *et.al,* 2010, 7).

When the following question was posed to educators during an interview: *"Do you think getting alumni involved in the school can work?"* the response was, "*Yes, alumni are welcome at the school. Our learners have so much creativity that needs to be developed".* In this regard, Green, Moore and Cunningham (2009, 4) state that a positive mental map can infuse the collective mind-set of the school community, strengthening the belief that the school is not an unproductive 'landscape', deprived of industrious ability or worth. This positive mindset served as new inspiration for ongoing alumni interest and contributions. In this way, alumni could expand the network of support in the community until more past pupils show solidarity and engage with their alma mater. In this regard, literature attests that cultivating robust alumni networks through information technology is the norm, because it covers distances effectively – describing it as 'the death of distance' enhancing products and services from a larger pool of talent; and creating a culture of trust that is dependent on the exchange of value (Gopsil & Suissa, 2006).

- **Volunteers and mentors**

Volunteers help ease the financial pressures by assisting non-profit institutions raise money, saving money by providing technology and training services and conducting strategic planning without being paid (Eisner, Grenan, Maynard, *et. al.,* 2009), while mentoring is a youth development intervention that seeks to provide a child with an additional caring adult relationship (Bayer, Grossman & Du Bois, 2013). The findings suggest that the participating alumni aspired to make a difference in the lives of current learners by volunteering and mentoring. This fact is supported by literature, that indicates that in order to improve community involvement, a level of organisation and cohesion has to be co-initiated (Loewenson, Laurell, Hogstedt, D'Ambruoso & Shroff, 2014, 100). Conversely, alumni with a passion for sport felt that learners' interest in sport should be stimulated through developing the sport fields, creating opportunities for positively impacting learners' attitudes and developing discipline and a determination to succeed that could ultimately promote their progress at school. Through a process of asset mapping, the following information to support planning was presented:

P5 – *"My love of sport, especially rugby, can help me influence and motivate learners to work as a team. I have the ability to organise learners to get involved in team sport, because I do not mind 'getting my hands dirty".'*

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the teachers endorsed alumni engagement, considering that interviews with teachers revealed that learners needed mentors, because many learners came from single-parent households; lacking father-figures, they were often susceptible to negative influences. From interviews with teachers, the following mentoring programmes were suggested:

'Adopt-a-learner, regular camps that can serve as bonding sessions, games of sport and music festivals to draw crowds of people to the school'.

The data supported the creation of a culture of mentoring and volunteerism at the school in order for learners to benefit from alumni expertise. In this regard, literature attests that mentoring has emerged as a strong response to the plight of youth.

Connecting learners to caring, consistent and supportive alumni, could assist with the young learners in achieving their dreams, strengthening communities, the economy and ultimately, a nation (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014, 2). Furthermore, literature reveals that 35 percent of alumni believe that they can promote their alma mater through mentoring; offering their experience and practical advice (Tacquard, 2012, 2). Additionally, the participating educators communicated that they believed alumni could achieve the following:

C1 – "*Learners can be reached through motivational speakers. These talks can help when learners feel as if their lives are falling apart, because of their circumstances*".

- **Youth Forum**

The participating educators believed that alumni involvement in the school could impact on learner experiences. For example, a youth forum could serve as a platform for addressing drug abuse and related issues, presenting study sessions and assisting learners with homework. The data suggested that the learners lacked proper facilities and role models in the community and that, alumni could fill the niche by changing learners' attitudes through 'chat-groups' and supervising study sessions at school. The above is underscored by literature that supports structured relationships for helping learners remain focused on a successful path by helping them achieve key milestones on the path to adulthood, such as high school graduation and college completion (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014, 2).

The data reflected, highlighted, honoured and respected the opinions and comments of participants and stakeholders of the school as well as creating improved understanding of the importance of a youth forum. A platform was created for learners to present their drama and music skills where one of the topics was: 'adolescence and their sexual behavior a' and another was: 'the dangers of drug abuse'. Alumni were invited to this event to encourage the learners to adopt a positive attitude and develop their skills. The learners responded to the following questions as follows:

Question: What is your evaluation, feelings and opinion regarding the value of alumni involvement in the youth forum?

M1 - **"**_The speakers inspired me; I feel more positive and strong"._
M2 – _"I am motivated to study harder"._
M3 – _"I was inspired when I saw what some alumni have achieved"._
M4 – _"We have to change our behaviour"._
M5 – _"I realise that I am able to rise above my circumstances"._
M6 – _"It made me realize that my Senior Certificate is the key to success"._
M7 – _"I have taken the inspirational words which were spoken to heart; I am now motivated to do my best"._

The participants and I employed critical reasoning during Cycle One that embodied our beliefs and ideologies, our everyday experiences, emotions, unconscious existential, spiritual and physical environment to interpret the new knowledge generated (Thomas, 2011, 198). For this critical aspect to be elicited, I was compelled to apply a measure of skepticism, which involved looking for evidence to support the positive response from learners and find a critical line of reasoning, as expounded by Dewey (2004). I therefore posed a second question for exploration in Cycle Two, in order to establish whether alumni involvement was beneficial for enhancing learners' educational experiences: How can alumni impact the school?

The responses recorded were as follows:

L1 – _"Alumni can introduce activities like drama drum-majorettes and ballet"_
L2 – _"It was good to see the display of 'real' talent. To have talent shows every term"._
L3 - _"The school uniform should be changed"._
L4 – _"The school sports fields should be improved"._
L1 – _"Build groups to fight crime in the community"._

L2 – _"Musicians could compose theme songs and logo's to support alumni activities. Have functions at school to motivate learners"._
L1 – _"Search for helpers to join the group"._

The preceding responses of learners were a clear indication of their support for alumni involvement in the school. However an alumna made the following comments during a monthly meeting:

"It is very disappointing that only a few teachers are on board. It is an indication of a lack of ownership (February 2015)".

Cycle One of this research provided a platform for a collegial learning environment in which alumni could voice their opinions and share the knowledge and personal experiences obtained and for further exploration and implementation in Cycle Two.

B CYCLE TWO: How can alumni add value to the school?

5.5   ALUMNI WEEK

5.5.1   Creating a culture of "paying it forward"

It is important to recognise that whatever our circumstances we all have the capacity to give in order to enrich a person or environment. In order to develop a pay it forward culture one has to have a conversation about giving to bring attention to it followed by consistent action to foster a culture.

The following are the responses of senior learners regarding alumni:

L1- *"The alumni programme was uplifting; giving us guidelines on how to achieve our goals".*
L2- *"I realised that I had to start at the bottom, rising above my circumstances in order to reach the top".*
L3- *"I was motivated to strive for better".*

In my personal reflections, I appreciated the fact that as a student I also benefited from alumni gifts in the form of a school uniform. As an educator at my school, I subsequently became a benefactor by contributing towards learners' school and study camp fees. In this way we were building a legacy for those who could not

easily access better educational opportunities. However, participants remarked that the school did not have a culture of giving back. I initially agreed with them, but with hindsight, I realised that the principle of giving back had always been embedded and practised in this community but had, however, not been documented. Literature attests that poorer communities have unwritten, yet effective tools for survival. In this regard, Meintjies (2013, 1) states that poor neighborhoods are often opaque to outsiders, even to those making policies that have a direct impact on such communities. Furthermore, governments do not understand the livelihood systems or appreciate the coping strategies used in marginalised communities. My reflections encapsulate moments of despair as well as of hope for the success of this research:

"I realised that facilitating alumni engagement for improving educational practices at school was not an easy undertaking, but as I observed how some alumni members were unselfishly supporting this cause, I knew that all their efforts and participation during this project will improve the school context".

5.5.2   Sharing valuable experiences

The data suggested that the school should institute an annual alumni week as an effective platform for sharing personal and professional experiences with students. In this regard, Gadamer and Bernasconi (1986, viii) remark that it is within the continuity between generations 'channels of cultural information' are facilitated. Alumni from different year groups visited the school and became re-acquainted with inspired the school as motivational speakers as well as with their personal achievements. The following is an address of an alumnus at a valedictory event:

"My four siblings and I were raised by two dedicated parents in a four-roomed house. Though my dad earned a meager salary as a bus driver, and my mom was a stay-at-home mom, they successfully educated two medical practitioners, an oral hygienist and two high school educators. The sheer determination of this unwavering goal to educate their children astounds me. What this means is that we are capable of overcoming our physical, social and financial limitations in order to realise our personal goals.

5.6   THEME FOUR: ALUMNI CHALLENGES AND REWARDS

Zuber-Skerritt and Teare (2013), among others, have contributed to a body of knowledge that signifies active learning, or learning by doing, effective for improving people's achievements, as people define their own learning goals. The learning encounters experienced during this research journey helped shape the participants, as their learning was personally enriching, promoting both individual and team development, and allowed engagement opportunities with each other and with experts in the field of PAR (Kaagan & Headley, 2010, 83). The planning and execution of an Alumni Week (Appendix D) became a significant platform for sustained alumni engagement.

FIGURE 5.5: Alumni and learners celebrating their successes

Alumni were consistently involved in school programmes from the Grade 8 orientation programme to the Grade 12 valedictory event. During The Alumni Week programme learners alumni did motivational talks, career guidance and celebrated the successful re-opening of the school resource centre. The general consensus was

that Alumni Week created a sense of hope among learners. Reflections confirms that as alumni partnered with the school during Alumni Week, a positive atmosphere was created.

"Alumni week was a success, because we learnt from the motivational speakers as they shared their experiences and insights".

It was clear that alumni had personal and institutional aspirations they needed to fulfill. Though many alumni expressed the desire to be part of the group, many did not attend meetings or offered their assistance with projects. I reflected on this aspect as follows:

"Meetings were another source of frustration for me. Because alumni consist of working, professionals and business people, it was difficult to find a time or day for a meeting convenient for the whole group. Many times attendance was poor, at times even non-existent. Scheduling a meeting during the week in winter, while navigating road-works with street lights out, was a nightmare. Waiting for an hour to find that nobody was coming was frustrating. I felt let down by participants, who initially seemed so enthusiastic".

- **Challenges (teachers, personal, school ,alumni)**

My teaching colleagues were concerned that alumni would not remain interested in supporting the school beyond this research project. In fact, I shared their concern throughout the research. I intermittently posed myself the question: How do we capture alumni attention in a sustainable manner? During the interviews, the concerns of educators were highlighted and expressed as follows:

C1- *"Alumni are not 'there' yet."*
C2- *"There must be more money available. Alumni are not keeping up."*
C3- *"Is alumni involvement a 'once off' occurrence?"*

The data indicated that there was a need to create an alumni culture at the school. The alumni comments underscored this: '*We have no culture of giving back to the*

community'; *"We are reactive"* and *"No-one else is interested'*. An educator observed that alumni involvement should not be a 'once-off occurrence', but should motivate others to take ownership of their alma mater. My personal reflections (June 2014) below indicate the woes and triumphs experienced during this research:

> *The past month has certainly been one of new experiences. At our last meeting on 25 May 2014, six participants attended. This resulted in a frenzy of ideas for staging an Alumni Week programme from 28 to 30 July 2014. On many occasions I became despondent at the slow pace of the research process, because so few of the participants would attend meetings. I despaired, because I felt that we were not making any progress.*

> *However, this research approach was a process of learning and of understanding the participants' contexts and that nothing could be taken at face value, or taken for granted. One evening after a meeting I dropped off some participants at their respective homes, I realised that they live quite a distance from the school, in dangerous areas, and that there were no taxis running late at night. Therefore, I had more empathy with their circumstances and also understood why it was important to build relationships with participants in order to appreciate their contexts. What is considered a necessity for one is considered a luxury for another. I have learnt to take nothing for granted.*

> *However, I have come to understand that one should not allow one's circumstances to dictate or limit one's future. During that particular meeting, as we celebrated with a participant who had obtained a BA degree from the Nelson Mandela University, she shared with us that she is the first to graduate in her family, which in itself is a great achievement. She set a new standard of achievement for her family. Moreover, this is an example of what alumni can achieve and is motivational material for Alumni Week!*

Nevertheless, a core group of ten alumni continued to participate in the research and strategising in order to change the dynamics within the school. In this regard, Burns

and Worsley (2015, 53) remark that participation leads to ownership, and learning combined with participation leads to appropriateness.

- **Rewards (personal, learners, alumni)**

This research project was justified, as participants' cynicism and apathy turned to inspired action and alumni connected and found a greater and collective purpose to satisfy the educational needs of the identified school. During Alumni Week, alumni and learners displayed powerful elements of commitment and support for the process and enthusiasm to expand the programme the following year. I realised how the alumni efforts were rewarded when a senior learner responded: *"I am motivated to become something in life; the motivational speakers made me realise that I can rise above my circumstances. Alumni made a positive impact on my life, as I took their words to heart"*.

The findings suggest that the alumni felt that their efforts were rewarded by the way in which learners responded to them. The following narrative of a learner reflects the importance and rewards of alumni engagement:

L3 - *"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. Always aim for the best and not for less. Think out of the box. In life you have three choices: give up, give in or give it your all. Alumni Week inspired me to become something in life. It has proven to me that I am able to rise above my circumstances. I now realise that my matric certificate is the key to success. Alumni had a positive impact on me, because they help build learners' confidence. Alumni encouraged me to think about my future, giving me hope to also achieve success. Alumni Week was uplifting, because we were presented with guidelines of how to achieve our goals"*.

Fabian, 2010, 943) stated that as history charges forward our existential experiences are changed from apathy to enthusiasm. The findings indicate that no situation is fixed nor entirely pre-determined, because as the participants chose to relinquish their passivity by planting a seed of creativity and learning how to make a difference within the school, their lives were changed as well. A learner commented that*: "It was nice to see real talent for a change; I would also like to see the school uniform*

changed". This is in line with the critical paradigm that challenges the status quo by initiating change; by overcoming their own psychological impoverishment, their alma mater was being transformed. Consequently, participants started to think in terms of 'assets' instead of 'deficits'. While mapping their skills, they were charting a course for a fully functioning alumni association.

The reflections of learners, educators and alumni speak of their personal aspirations and passion for the cause as well as a renewed passion for what they could become and the intentionality of facing challenges with renewed hope. This research journey was encapsulated in the words of Ayers in He and Phillion (2008, ix): "….. an appreciation that overflows with life; crackling with the surprises and contradictory harmonies of love, stunning in its hope for a better world". I was motivated, because despite the negative influences prevailing around the research context, there resided so much hope for the future.

5.7   THEME FIVE: THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATING A SUSTAINABLE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

Sustainability is an essential consideration that must be part of the 'collective consciousness' of an effective alumni association (USA Bureau of Education, 2013, 16). This means that alumni have to cultivate diverse and reliable funding, implement policies to increase financial and administrative practice, build and maintain strong membership, and develop strong leadership and governance.

Approaching this project in a sustainable way was a challenge, because the process was dependent on alumni participation that I had no control over. Sustainability, in this context, meant that the existing and future needs of the school community had to be met in an economically efficient way, pursuing social justice in the way resources were distributed (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012, 211) and aligning the process to serve the goals of the school. The concern was always whether the alumni would remain committed to support their alma mater in a sustainable manner. This is how alumni collectively responded to the question: What would you like to see in place?

"To create a well-established, sustainable alumni; celebrating their success in a broad-based way by having a responsible alumni committee in place to help grow the association".

Amidst the complex challenges, like time constraints and personal and career commitments, research participants were able to sustain the momentum of the research process. We dealt with crises as opportunities for change.

In my reflections (2012), I gave credence to PAR principles of democracy, trust and collaboration, during the process of building a sustainable alumni association:

"There was nothing I could do without the participation of alumni. I could not make decisions on their behalf. In order to contextualise a PAR approach, the process had to be inclusive and accommodate the diverse opinions of all. The aim, therefore, was community participation, striving for continuous improvement. In this way, constructive dialogue was promoted and equitable partnerships were formed among members. When community values were understood and negotiated, organisational representation and cohesion among members were improved."

A social and economic reality found in this community is that as alumni improve their education and subsequently their income, they relocate to more affluent suburbs and therefore leaving few positive role models for youth to identify with. As a result of this 'cultural drain', the learners tended to identify with gangsters, especially as these gangsters represent a more affluent lifestyle, judging by the cars they drive and the clothes they wear.

Notwithstanding the above, an alumnus responded to the above-mentioned challenge in the following spirit:

"Commitment is essential, as I would like to see growth in the alumni committee and school community. The process should therefore start as soon as a learner leaves school, where learners must be made aware of the role of an alumnus at school level. We need to 'push and persevere' with the alumni

programme until a well-established sustainable alumni association is establish (16 February, 2015)".

In this regard, Stacey (2010, 73) remarks that people are conscious and self-conscious, they feel emotion, and spontaneity is part of their character; they are inspired and dream; they experience and act upon their ideals and follow or flout the values in society. Although alumni disagreed on various issues, they executed action plans which showed excellent leadership skills, while acknowledging their dependency on one another. This research process captured, harnessed and nurtured the knowledge and skills of alumni in order to sustain the research project, and ultimately the alumni involvement in the school in a sustainable manner. This was evident in the way alumni planned the Alumni Week programme, conducted the assembly, motivated learners and volunteered as coaches and motivators.

- **'Once off' or staying motivated**

The findings indicate that it is possible to build a motivated alumni united around a common goal of providing support for their alma mater. An independent source interviewed teachers at the school and the responses to the following question: *Is alumni a 'once-off' event?* were:

C2 – 'should not be'
C3 – 'Find projects that are achievable'
C4 – 'After a project is completed, it should be advertised in the media'

The alumni decided to meet on a monthly basis to strategise and assess whether goals were being met. A further aim was to continually plan forward, because in this way the alumni would encourage each other to remain motivated, thus ensuring the continuity of the association.

Notice of an important alumni meeting @ ARCADIA SECONDARY SCHOOL

DATE: 12 Februariy 2013 (TUESDAY)

TIME: 19h00

VENUE: SCHOOL HALL

AGENDA: 1. FUN DAY

                  2. PLANNING PROJECTS

                  3. ELECTION OF LEADERSHIP

                      SEE YOU THERE!   SEE YOU THERE! SEE YOU THERE!   SEE YOU THERE! SEE YOU THERE!

FIGURE 5.6: Notice of a meeting

The open invitation above was our way of maintaining an inclusive association where all alumni would be considered for the election of leadership, as well as safeguarding the sustainability of the group. During the research we continually engaged the alumni to broaden the resource base of the school and to improve the educational opportunities of the learners. Literature attests that alumni can remain motivated if the organisation is community driven and when 'there is a social movement behind it' (Burns & Worsely, 2016, 141). Consequently, for alumni to be sustained, it was important to establish a definitive structure for the association. This structure is believed to enhance the accountability of members, improve cohesion and attain sustainability. The following comments made by an alumna during a meeting speak of her commitment to ensure the sustainability of the association:

> *"A working committee should constitute all stakeholders of the school that will develop a sense of ownership. However, it is disappointing that all educators of the school are not supporting the alumni programme* (February 2013)."

Alumni engagement showed indications of an ongoing endeavor and of growing and not a 'once off' event A social event (Golden Oldies) was planned for teachers, parents and alumni to create cohesion among these role-players. In this way, the

alumni association was considered to be the building blocks for sustained community engagement with the school.

- **An organisation of excellence**

Excellence in an organisation refers to the ability of an organisation to exceed stakeholders' expectations in terms of performance (Judeh, 2014). Some of the indicators of excellence will refer to a coherent structure where those structures relationally close to one another would be grouped together. Furthermore, obvious pathways are necessary for leading an outsider from one part of the organisation to another.

The findings indicate that the alumni considered it necessary to build an organisation of excellence. A letter appealing to alumni is an indication of some of the strategies implemented to encourage alumni participation (Appendix B7). Pertaining to this, literature attests that an effective association is typically alumni driven, taking ownership and responsibility for the direction of the association (USA: Bureau, 16). Various suggestions were made as to how the process had to unfold, among other, the development of strong leadership, having a definitive structure, and persistence in marketing the association in a wider arena. In this regard, the alumni and I harnessed our interpersonal and social competencies to engage in honest and productive dialogue within a wider geographical space by employing social media, and embracing diverse value systems, yet affirming the culture of the community as we embarked on establishing a sustainable alumni practice (Loewenson, Laurell, Hogstedt D'Ambruoso & Shroff, 2014, 25).

 We devised developmental interventions like encouraging alumni and learners to write narratives about their schooling experiences to create maximum influence at school (Burns & Worsely, 2016, 5) because we witnessed how alumni projects at some schools failed due to the implementation of interventions from the top down; with little involvement of those directly affected by it. In this regard, literature confirms that when communities are not involved in projects like the achievement of "millennium-development goals", especially the alleviation of poverty by encouraging education in low-income areas, it becomes rhetoric, failing to achieve the envisaged

outcomes. Therefore, this research was responsive to the voice and contributions of the research participants, because literature indicates that PAR programmes are likely to be unsuccessful if the participants' basic needs are not met; the project is too large or difficult; and when the process is initiated from a higher hierarchy (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012, 54). In this research, we ensured that a grassroots approach was followed by setting realistic goals by people directly affected by the outcomes. The findings indicate that the alumni had the potential to form a structured and sustainable organisation (Appendix E). In this regard, alumni articulated their attitudes and intentions in the following manner:

P1-"*I am goal-directed, determined to succeed*".

P2- "*I am a team-worker*".

P4 - "*I am well-organised and dedicated to every task*".

This research approach is in line with PAR that shifts power towards communities involved in generating their own knowledge, acting on it and gaining greater control over the conditions and services that affect their lives (Loewenson, Laurell *et al*, 2014, 27). Furthermore, transferring leadership through regular rotation was critical for the sustainability of this alumni and found expression as follows:

> "*Regular elections of leaders can serve to keep members engaged and motivated; draw new alumni with innovative ideas to leadership positions*".

5.8   CONCLUSION

This chapter comprised an analysis and discussion of the research findings represented in themes and sub-themes. The interpretation of the findings paid homage to the research participants as their narratives enhanced the credence of the research.

Successful emergent practices require a fundamental change in thinking and behaviour (Burns & Worsley, 2015, 176). This research process challenged the alumni and I, as we navigated various concerns while engaging with one another. We challenged ourselves, the school, business and the knowledge systems within

which we operated by employing critical theory to interrogate the status quo; working within a value-framework that applied philosophies aiming at establishing a more humanising society by honouring democracy, respect and collaboration in order to maintain the integrity of this research. Alumni and I were compelled to be flexible in our thinking and democratic in the process as we built trust and fostered participation in order to find answers to the research questions.

In **Chapter Six** the research conclusions, recommendations and limitations will be presented.

CHAPTER SIX

INFERENCES, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

"*We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give".***

(Winston Churchill, 2002)

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I discussed the findings of this study that related to answering the main research question, namely, "How can I facilitate alumni engagement to support a low-resourced school using a participatory approach?" In this chapter, I present a summary of this study and the recommendations derived from the conclusions. I will also deliberate on the contributions of this study to the academic corpus of knowledge.

6.2 SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FOCUS OF EACH CHAPTER

The aim of this study was to facilitate alumni engagement at a low-resourced school, using a Participatory Action Research approach. The following is a summary of the six chapters comprising the research report and an outline of how the participants and I addressed the research questions.

6.2.1 Context, problem statement and purpose of study

Chapter One presented the rationale for the study and argued for the need to answer the primary research question, namely, "How can I facilitate alumni engagement in a low-resourced school using a participatory action research approach?" My main aim

with this study was to work collaboratively with the alumni of the school to explore ways of enhancing the educational experiences of learners.

6.2.2 The possibilities of alumni engagement at high school

Chapter Two outlined a review of the literature that considers alumni to be an institution's most valuable asset in providing potential financial, strategic and social contributions towards its establishment and sustainability. Literature indicates a long and illustrious history of alumni engagement in developed countries. However, in many disadvantaged schools in South Africa, alumni engagement is not a common practice. I thus argue for a process of alumni collaboration, based on a shared understanding and social interventions, to transform a school's context.

Thus, adopting a participatory approach, building relationships among alumni and within the community based on the principles of respect and inclusion of diverse opinions, volunteering and mentoring, and establishing an alumni culture.

6.2.3 Theoretical framework informing the research

In Chapter Three, I explained and justified the theoretical foundation of the study, comprising theories and philosophies of Critical theory that advocates social transformation based on truth, justice and democracy, in order to enhance the schooling experiences of learners. Complexity theory addresses change by emergence, as an important element of how coherent structures within the school emerged from interactions and patterns of actions. Capability theory informed and addressed the redistribution of resources, valuing the diverse capabilities, interests and skills of the participants, while the philosophies of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) theory endorsed the recognition and utilisation of alumni assets and strengths for building a school community from within, as the participants and I observed, planned, implemented and reflected on actions. The philosophy of Humanising theory prompted me to deem people more important than the research process, which impelled me to apply the principles of mutual respect, integrity and inclusivity to ensure an ethical practice.

6.2.4 A theoretical discussion of Participatory Action Research as methodology

This chapter presented and validated the research methodology and research methods I chose for this study. I used critical theory as the epistemological paradigm and participatory action research as methodological paradigm as I purposely chose to work with educators, alumni and learners of the school. The research methods consisted of drawings, observations, focus group discussions, reflection diaries, participant narratives and transcripts of recorded action learning.

The data in each cycle of the study was thematically analysed by myself, independent coders, and the participants. The process of validating data was improved using Atlas ti, a computer software program as it provided corroborating evidence generated during interviews and photovoice to locate themes and sub-themes.

6.2.5 Research findings and interpretations of data

In this chapter, the research findings were presented that addressed the research questions, namely:

- How can I facilitate alumni engagement for a low-resourced school using a participatory approach?
- How can alumni engagement add value to the educational experience of learners?

Based on the findings of fieldwork that I conducted, four themes emerged, namely: (1) the importance of **creating a shared vision** through the collaboration of alumni; (2) the importance of **establishing an alumni culture** promoting collaboration among alumni, educators and learners of the school; (3) identifying **alumni challenges and celebrating rewards**; and (4) the importance of **creating a sustainable organisation.**

The findings indicate how a PAR pathway was created for building alumni relationships based on the principles of advancement, collaboration, trust, openness and critical questioning, and a coaching spirit for enabling a democratic practice. The participants and I intentionally pursued healthy relationships with and among alumni, focusing on the common goal of rendering social, financial and spiritual support to the school. During discussions, the alumni indicated their concern for the well-being of the school and pledged their support to fulfill the vision and mission of the school. During Cycle One, the participants mapped their roles in the research, which resulted in a shared vision for alumni and which was described as a resource fountain for generating and sprouting energy and establishing a vibrant and positive school environment in their strive for excellence. Because it was important for the vision to be communicated to all the stakeholders, an ornamental version of their resource fountain occupies a price of place in the school entrance hall, visible to all at the first point of entry. The vision which became the group logo, was printed on T-shirts and worn by the alumni, educator and stakeholders as a marketing tool for recruiting more alumni to engage with the school. This marketing exercise helped create an alumni culture within the school community, which resulted in attracting more active alumni.

6.3 REFLECTION ON RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OUTCOMES

The purpose of this study was to facilitate alumni engagement for a low-resourced high school by using a Participatory Action Research approach. The concept of alumni engagement for the identified school emerged during 'courageous conversations'. Past pupils and colleagues were enthused with the concept of collaboratively creating a platform for alumni engagement to enhance the educational experiences of current learners. At neighbouring schools, attempts were made to engage with their alumni, but at the selected school little effort was made in this regard, or very little effort was made in any purposive or structured manner. The initial effort of engaging alumni proved to be unsuccessful and could not be sustained, because the process which had been initiated by the school was prescriptive and we did not seek the active participation of alumni, and neither honoured or respected their voices. After lengthy discussions with academia and practitioners of action research, we facilitated the process of alumni engagement by

hosting a start-up workshop at which the concepts and principles were explained and implemented, followed by cycles of action-reflection of problem identification, planning, implementation of action plans and reflecting on actions. In this way, we recognised and applied contextualised pathways of action learning and participation as well as generating structures to promote a collaborative culture among alumni (Kaagan & Headley, 2010, 82).

6.4   REVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY

The research followed a Participatory Action Research approach (PAR) which focussed on the life-world and meaningful actions of the participants (Bergold & Thames, 2012, 1). This inquiry is emergent, appreciates the possibilitiy of its outcomes, honours and respects the significance and value of involved research partners in the production of knowledge (Bergold, 2007).

This study can be considered as a litmus test for a democratic self-concept (Lenz, 2012, 10). PAR principles of democracy foregrounded this research as the process required community involvement. Consequently, a democratic social and political framework was developed. In this regard, the research process created a number of distinctive elements. For example, safe spaces were available for participants to disclose their personal views, even to make their dissenting voices heard. The study also ensured the inclusive participation of all past pupils who knew the history of the school, irrespective of whether or not they had completed their high school education, as well as past educators who showed a concern for the well-being of the school and its learners. This study created a platform for dialogue and mobilised donors who saw the need for improving the school infrastructure, and community stakeholders who had a vested interest in school development. Though communicative spaces were created, they were not "conflict-free", as differences emerged during planning that taught us new levels of "conflict tolerance" (Bergold, 2007). At times, during the planning process, some alumni were uncompromising about how a project should be implemented and were prescriptive about certain conditions while other alumni embraced the values of inclusiveness and tolerance. On these occasions, there was a need to exercise diplomacy, without offending anyone, while striving to maintain unity. This concept is in line with the PAR

approach that maintains respect for partnerships within the community and creating an egalitarian process that reflects the democratic nature thereof (Jamshidi, Morasae, Shahandeh Majdzadeh Seydi, Amaresh & Abkar, 2014, 1328).

Productive discussions around the concept of facilitating alumni support continued as we increasingly recognised alumni as "cultural wealth" (Martin, 2002, 13). In this regard, literature supports the concept of past pupils embodying a proud heritage that speaks of possibility, ability, creativity and endurance (He & Phillion, 2008, 75). In harnessing this cultural wealth for the school, valuable skills, academic and experiential knowledge enhanced the educational experiences of learners by means of motivational talks, peer counselling, and coaching. By contextualising intervention strategies, we facilitated alumni engagement by listening to and honoring the social, academic and experiential knowledge of the participants. Opportunities appropriate to their understanding, creativity and lived world were harnessed. A skills audit conducted by alumni and I revealed that participants embodied the necessary skills to make a difference in the research context. Participants' drawings and vision sketches (see Appendix 1), defined team leadership, which encouraged effective collaboration (Kaagan & Headley, 2010, xx). Data analysis was performed using Atlas.ti, a computer software package that created a digital paper trail of written text that could be added in a single file that made the coding process more systematic and rigorous.

6.5   SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Using a participatory approach and applying philosophies of humanising language and theories indicates that alumni engagement could improve the educational experiences of learners.

Following a participatory approach, the participants and me critically questioned and challenged our own mindsets concerning limited school resources and the implications of a deficit attitude. While exploring ways of improving the school context, we pursued an inclusive concept of alumni engagement, based on the formal and informal learning of alumni. A core group of motivated alumni committed

to a sustained process of engagement throughout the research, which boded well for the future of the school.

The findings determine that facilitating alumni engagement for a low-resourced school is possible and necessary. Therefore, I recommend that alumni who have an emotional bond with their alma mater have 'courageous conversations' about supporting their alma mater. I also recommend a PAR approach as it provides powerful tools for experiential learning. A collaborative practice where open discussions and reflections can be valued while maintaining good relationships based on mutual respect for others and commitment to the process are essential to ensure sustainability. By honouring the core values of PAR, an alumni culture that foregrounds the development of mutual can be developed in any school, particularly low-resourced schools and where alumni are recognised as role models. Finally, when alumni support is valued a sustainable alumni organisation can emerged, based on a "grassroots approach", co-sharing responsibilities, creating continual interest in the wellbeing of the school, and building an image of the school, discernable by excellence.

A. CYCLE ONE: HOW CAN I FACILITATE ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT USING PARTICIPATORY APPROACH?

6.5.1 THEME ONE: ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT IS POSSIBLE AND NECESSARY

The findings suggest that a prerequisite for alumni engagement is maintaining healthy relationships with past pupils. To establish relationships, I recommend the identified school proactively create a platform and create opportunities to include alumni in its programme in a structured and sustained manner. In this regard, alumni expressed that they felt an affinity with the school, were concerned about the wellbeing of the school, and wished to improve the schooling experiences of learners.

As the alumni mapped their collective assets and performed a skills audit, they realised that by applying their collective capabilities, they could effect change at their

alma mater. Working from a critical pedagogy, that has a social change agenda, our thinking and language reflected respect, integrity, democracy and community (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) as we focused on the redistribution of resources, the inclusion of all affected by the study, and avoiding unjust social practices.

6.5.2   THEME TWO: THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATING A SHARED VISION

Based on the findings and supported by literature, we can conclude that alumni have important roles to play in advancing the educational experiences of learners at an under-resourced school. This is based on the premise that alumni should create a common vision, aligning individual goals and aspirations to advance the school. In this regard, Kilbane (2007, 70) states that shared visions are uplifting, encouraging creativity and experimentation, that stimulate people throughout an organisation.

The evidence indicates that the alumni were eager to volunteer their services at the school, as they expressed a sense of belonging and a desire to become positive role models for learners to develop self-esteem and pride in their school. Creating a positive school environment would sharpen the focus of daily behavior and increase the attention to what is important and valued.

❖   **Establishing a positive school environment**

Based on the findings and from evidence in literature, I conclude that alumni can play a significant role in developing and transforming low-resourced schools into welcoming places that foster motivation for learning. Schools should be places of hope and opportunity for communities, where students can realise their full potential. Literature espouse that the atmosphere at school must be welcoming, encourage conditions for learning, creating a shared belief that we are part of something special (Fisher, Frey & Pumpian, 2010, 6). Research has found that problems such as disengaged learners, vandalism, littering and teacher burnout can be solved by creating a more positive school climate (Zakrzewski, 2013).

The study's findings confirm that our alumni aspired to give learners hope, in the face of the increase in violence and drug abuse in the community. In this regard, the

alumni expressed the need to create a positive mindset among learners and teachers as they had observed the unenthusiastic and demotivated attitude the learners displayed towards their school.

❖ **Positive role models**

Based on the findings, I recommend that schools recognise the important potential contributions of alumni and invite alumni participation when planning the school calendar. Literature attests that including alumni in school rituals and ceremonies, like orientation programmes and valedictory ceremonies not only enriches the learners' school experiences but provides them with positive models (Daniel, Bellani & Marshall, 2008, 5). The findings indicate that alumni can serve as positive role models as they bridge the gap between the ideal and reality (Rose, 2004, 1). In this regard, the alumni embody the values they are trying to pass on to the learners. Therefore, the alumni in this study created a platform (Alumni Week) and opportunities for shaping the moral identity of learners by availing themselves as motivational speakers at school events.

6.5.3 THEME THREE: THE IMPORTANCE OF ESTABLISHING AN ALUMNI CULTURE

The evidence indicates that alumni aspire to create an alumni culture in the school community a network reaching outside the province and even beyond the country borders.

Based on the response of learners, educators and alumni during the research, it is evident that an alumni culture is essential for developing mutual capacity within the school community. This is in line with the capability approach, which recommends a framework for the redistribution of varied resources, recognising and valuing diverse identities, and pursuing equal participation (Walker, 2008, 117). Furthermore, the concept of mutual capacitation in low resourced school communities involves the equalisation of conditions which involves opportunities for enabling people to be empowered to exercise a wider range of choices as they work and learn together. A network of alumni affords a widened platform for the participation of learners and

educators in school development. This thoughtscape is created for learning to equalise and capacitate individuals in order for them to choose and live esteemed lives (Walker, 2008, 131). Moreover, the value of the capability approach for this research was to motivate human development, by critically questioning how education could enable learners to achieve their potential and offering a structure of support for learner to develop their full human dignity.

❖ **Motivators**

An assets audit (figure 4.4) indicated that a wide range of skills and resources existed that could be utilised to fulfill the school's mandate and vision and the alumni declared themselves willing to serve this agenda. This is in line with Chrzanowski and Rans (2010, 7), who state that no plan or body outside an organisation can duplicate what is already there. This research enabled the school to re-learn, re-assess and re-use community resources in innovative ways. The research approach (PAR) enabled alumni to work within current structures, with existing resources, in a spirit of collaboration, integrating and respecting all contributions in the pursuit of successful outcomes. This study was anchored in the realities of human participation, as we endeavoured and laboured ahead with our change agenda (Burns & Worsely, 2015, 180) to facilitate a wider network of alumni to assist their alma mater.

An Alumni Week programme became part of the annual school calendar. The Alumni Week provided motivational talks and presented role models for current learners. In return, a sense of belonging was created among alumni, as they felt valued and their achievements were celebrated by the school.

❖ **Volunteers and mentors**

The evidence indicated that the alumni had strong emotional attachments to their alma mater and aspired to volunteer their services to the school. During discussions, the alumni would reminisce about specific teachers, coaches, fellow students and specific events.

The alumni serving the school as volunteers imparted their knowledge and skills and were motivated by the interest of current learners and their achievements. Volunteering has a reciprocal benefit, as both the benefactor and beneficiary were satisfied by the exchange (Weerts & Ronca, 2007, 30). Literature supports the above, as volunteering strengthens social connections, linking different sections of society, building strong, safe, cohesive communities, as greater trust is fostered among citizens, and enhancing civic engagement by addressing critical challenges in society (Wu, 2011). In turn, the volunteer builds his/her resumé, receives internal rewards of social recognition and build self-esteem. Therefore, volunteering can be a mutually beneficial relationship for alumni and current learners.

❖ **Youth Forum**

The findings suggest that a youth forum could provide a platform for learners to voice their personal, academic and social concerns. Both educators and alumni consider such a forum to be an opportunity to build resilience among learners, capacitating them to communicate their own needs and dealing with challenges in a positive manner, rather than resorting to negative behaviour. Literature attests that schools should indicate to learners how vital a part of a school community alumni are and how important it is to maintain an alumni presence in the learners' school experience and programme (Daniel, Bellani & Marshall, 2008, 3). The youth forum is also a way of capturing the voice of alumni in regard to individual and collective perspectives of how they can impact on learner development.

B.   CYCLE TWO: HOW CAN ALUMNI ADD VALUE TO THE SCHOOL?

6.5.4   THEME FOUR: IDENTIFYING ALUMNI CHALLENGES AND CELEBRATING REWARDS

The evidence indicates that where there is no attachment or emotional bond between the alumni and their alma maters, it is difficult to facilitate support for such institutions. Alumni expressed that they had moved on after matriculating. They, however, admitted that they need to cultivate a culture of giving back. Because some

alumni have been a beneficiary of some good deed in the past they felt the need of creating a culture of paying it forward to the learners of their alma mater.

❖ **Culture of 'paying it forward'**

The outcomes of the research indicate that the alumni were making positive contributions by helping the school in a physical way in paying forward to the community, and that they were also learning from each other. In my reflections, I described the research journey as one of enlightenment: as participants engaged with their community and shared their knowledge, they enriched one another. Alumni gave credence to the concept of 'lifelong-learning', because in their paying forward to their school, they provided structure, and made learning accessible to all, irrespective of age, social or economic status.

❖ **Sharing valuable experiences**

During the research journey, an alumnus received a Bachelor of Arts degree. This was a great achievement, as she was the first in her family to achieve such a qualification. However, the findings suggest that this school community did not celebrate their achievements enough. Participants found that negative events received more attention than success stories. Therefore, the alumni felt that the school should also celebrate their achievements. At a valedictory service at the school, an alumnus related how his low-income family had ensured that four siblings graduated from tertiary institutions. The alumnus related that the siblings qualified as educators, while two other siblings became medical practitioners, and one a practising oral hygienist. At an awards evening, an alumnus raised in a low-income family who had qualified as a dental surgeon, encouraged learners not to give up but aspire to greater and higher heights in order to achieve their goals. When alumni share their experiences learners are able to learn from these experiences and advance the bond between alumni, the learners and the school.

6.5.5   THEME FIVE: BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

According to Burns and Worsley (2015) it is comparatively simple to initiate change, but much more challenging to sustain it. In order for change to be sustainable, the authors above suggested that it needs to be an intrinsic process and not initiated from outside the institution. It should be based on self-determined action, an organic process, built on internal intervention with a co-sharing of responsibility. This study followed these guidelines as it emanated from within the school, the interventions were context specific, and they were implemented by alumni and teachers with the aim to improve the educational experiences of learners.

❖   **Once-off versus sustained actions**

The findings indicate that the teachers and alumni were concerned that alumni engagement would be difficult to sustain. Some teachers mentioned that there were too few positive role models in the community, as the role models (alumni) had relocated to higher socio-economic communities once they completed their studies. The findings suggest that the afore-mentioned realities can be addressed by alumni partnering with the school in its advocacy against drug abuse; campaigning against illegal practices in the community. By using the media, these campaigns could attract wider interest. Furthermore, by setting attainable goals for alumni programmes, for example, youth training camps and workshops to educate learners against the danger of drugs and more sports events, a sustainable alumni association can be established.

Cycle two of the research addressed the above-mentioned challenges when pioneering work was conducted, as the learning set planned and executed an alumni week programme comprising motivation, a mentoring programme, a peer counseling programme, and the launch of the school library. Learners of the school participated in music productions and poetry readings. The above collaborative action of alumni and other stakeholders created a platform for greater collaboration and a sustainable alumni practice. The findings suggest that when alumni partner with the school to

offer positive social programmes other than what the community has to offer sustained collaboration and interest is generated.

❖ **Organisation of excellence**

The findings highlight the fact that: "*the school was not celebrating their academic, sports, social and cultural achievements, adequately*". The findings indicate that by celebrating its successes, the school would be creating a more positive image, generating sustained interest, even among those alumni working and studying abroad. The research participants expressed the thought that more teachers, alumni and learners should participate in striving for excellence, as "an expression *of their pride in the achievements of the school would contribute to building an organisation of excellence in a sustainable manner*."

6.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study conducted through PAR can produce pleasing results, but such findings would only be suited to the specific context or to a similar context, therefore generalisation of the findings is not possible in the practice of this paradigm. Using PAR requires skill. If the facilitator is not skillful, the research can end up revealing undesirable outcomes, for instance the withdrawal of participants due to power struggles with the facilitator and among participants.

Facilitating alumni support was an arduous, and on many occasions, a challenging process. The limitations of the study exist in the fact that despite thorough marketing, too few alumni engaged with the school. Many alumni were not aware of the study or did not notice the many appeals posted on social media, the newspapers and flyers. Though a data base had been built, it was still limited to those who had access to the internet and thus failed to elicit widespread interest. I believe that alumni relations can only be facilitated and sustained if it is initiated by stakeholders of the school and if current learners are taught the importance of 'paying it forward' as an important aspect of their personal development.

6.7   CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

Some public schools in disadvantaged communities in South Africa are progressively experiencing under-resourcing which has a negative impact on the quality of learners' education. It is therefore important that schools explore all avenues of engaging their alumni to partner with them to improve the academic, social and spiritual programmes to create a school climate conducive to learning. It is therefore imperative that schools intentionally engage their alumni and make current learners aware of their role as future alumni, thus creating an alumni culture, imperative for sustained alumni involvement.

Using PAR as methodology offered us considerable access to the context because the participants (alumni) share a long history with the school and they were familiar with the community. Furthermore, considerable effort and time was spent building informal networks and relationships. Positive relationships based on equality empowered participants to apply their knowledge and skills at the school. The reflective element of PAR enabled participants, learners and teachers to reflect on the process with honesty and integrity as they developed a deeper understanding of the school.

PAR is a practicable approach that accentuated personal learning and promoted social development. This approach enabled participants to plan and execute projects collaboratively. Participants, learners and teachers learned and developed as they applied their skills to make the alumni programmes successful. This change agenda of PAR was evident as the school displayed an openness to collaborate with alumni in school events like the valedictory, assembly, fundraising and coaching sport.

The investment of time, energy and skills alumni offer as resources should not be under-estimated. Schools should market and value alumni support in a significant and structured manner. In this regard, this study contributes to the literature relating to alumni engagement, the roles alumni can fulfill and the ways of partnering with the school. An alumni association can share valuable experiences, offer mentoring and act as a catalyst for motivating learners to achieve their best.

The qualitative nature of the study allowed for participants' voices and narratives to be heard. Working within a small group allowed us to become a close knit group where personal lives and context were valued, supported and made change possible. The narratives and reflections of alumni, learners and observers further enriched the landscape of this topic and not only contributed to knowledge regarding how worthwhile these experiences had been for alumni and learners alike, but also provided a pathway with clear examples and activities that can be followed/or adopted to suit a similar context.

Furthermore, this study contributes to new knowledge in the way in which a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach enabled alumni to utilise their indigenous knowledge, sharing real-life experiences and creating a self-sustaining process of engagement that will continue long after the research is completed (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013, xv). Using PAR and philosophies of a humanising approach enabled us to build relationships based on trust, democracy and respect for one another. This research used a counter narrative; it rejected a top-down development approach and followed a 'coal-face' method of emphasising local knowledge and experiences of alumni to address challenges at a school in a context familiar to them.

While there is a body of literature that attest to a Western and wealthy alumni participation and contributions to school, there is little understanding of how alumni can support a low resourced school in the South African context and how the establishment of such an alumni can be achieved. This study presents written and practical examples and a process of facilitating alumni support for a low resourced school in enriching the educational experiences of learners.

Having established an alumni that is able to support a community in a low resourced school, I advocate that success is contingent on the self-determination of its membersp, valuing the contributions of all alumni and that the school embrace alumni as a valuable resource.

6.8 MY PERSONAL LEARNING

This research journey stretched my thoughts, imagination and creativity in ways I did not think possible. Being part of a learning set, funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF), my fellow students and I were introduced and became involved in a wide variety of community engagement projects. I was continually challenged to enhance my own project, while being inspired by the successes of my fellow students. As we shared our reflections, fears, disillusions and successes, critical discussions set the stage for improving our own projects.

I was a 'vacillating pendulum' in terms of my own epistemological reflexivity, continually questioning the wisdom of the research questions, the appropriateness of the chosen research paradigm, and doubting and reconsidering the astuteness of the methodological decisions. I searched the evidence (interviews, narratives, drawings and reflections) to assess how alumni impacted on the research process, and in turn how they were affected by participatory inquiry in terms of their beliefs and assumptions. I conclude that the alumni were influenced by the research process, learnt from the process and was enriched by it. In this regard, literature attests that narratives are socially constrained forms of action, explicating socially situated performances striving to make sense of the world or serve a social change agenda (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Narratives therefore verify human possibilities (He & Phillion, 2008, ix) in the following ways:

I once was a learner at this school, who did not take my school career seriously. I wanted to be popular, therefore amused my peers by entertaining them with jokes and by mimicking situations and even the teachers. Only during my final year (matric) did I realise the importance of achieving a good matriculation, as it can be considered the doorway to higher education. After completing a degree in criminology, I can share how important it is to have a good school career (motivational speaker)..

Furthermore, I was continually questioning my own criticality, suspending my own negativity, in order to restore my faith in the value of continuing this project for the benefit of the school, especially on occasions when the school received negative

170

feedback and critique from alumni regarding the state of neglect of the school buildings, the lack of sports facilities and the general disregard for a once proud history and ethos.

Using a PAR methodology as a pathway for the research was more difficult than I anticipated. There was a 'pull and thrust' and as I forged ahead with the process, I realized that when doing research with people (and not on people), one was mostly dependent on their participation in order to move forward. In this regard, the process was a synergy of theory and practice (praxis), an integration of knowledge and wisdom, mind and heart, of practical know-how and creative thinking (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, 15).

On many occasions, I became stunned by my own willfulness when asking myself why the other research participants could not realise the urgency of this process of alumni engagement. However, it was on such occasions that my empathy deepened, and I learned to understand the challenges that some research participants were experiencing. Some were unemployed, had no means of supporting themselves and yet were willing to participate in this study. For many, the ability to navigate public transport to attend meetings or support fundraising events often posed quite a challenge, especially at night, when some communities became unsafe.

6.9   RECOMMENDATIONS

6.9.1   Recommendations for alumni

Based on the findings, I recommended that alumni clearly identify the different roles they can play in creating an atmosphere that motivates learners. The varied alumni roles discussed in Chapters Two and Four included volunteers, motivators, mentors, donors and fundraisers.

The conflict and crime prevalent in the larger school community, lack of text-books, and the school's poor response to learner distress, contributed to the negative school environment. Participants helped created a more affirming atmosphere at school by serving as role models in order to develop learner self-esteem and

increase positive identity growth. I believe that current economic challenges, threats to safety in society, and learners who are increasingly vulnerable to peer pressure are at risk, but that these challenges can be addressed by capable alumni. Therefore, I recommend that Alumni who have the collective will and specialised knowledge in various fields, including artisans, labourers and clerks, or those who have no post-matric qualification, are able to serve the school as volunteers, motivators, entrepreneurs and medical personnel, facilitating the safety and general well-being of learners.

The evidence indicates that committed alumni aspire to build a strong alumni association and network. I therefore recommend that this alumni group continue to inspire respect for the diverse value systems of its members, affirming the culture of the community. Because the participants and I honoured a grassroots approach, we continually ensured that the participants' needs were met, initiating projects within scale, thus setting achievable goals. In this regard, interviews with educators revealed that in order to sustain alumni interest the projects they embark on should be attainable and well-advertised for the community to become motivated to support these.

6.9.2 Recommendations for the school (SGB, SMT and Educators)

Based on the research findings, it is clear that alumni can serve the goals of the school and increase the well-being of learners by utilising and designating available resources and individual achievements in creative ways. The school and alumni as a complex system consists of a large number of stakeholders, each having a distinct set of principles and pattern of interactions and definitive roles in advancing the learners' expectations, capabilities and human dignity. The school as an evolving landscape of learners, educators, policy makers, alumni, parents, volunteers and donors is continuously challenged by the cost of education and has to overcome various socio-economic factors in order to fulfill its mandate of offering its learners a quality education.

The lack of support from the Department of Basic Education as well as the scourge of violence and crime in the community necessitates alumni involvement. Based on

the findings, I recommend that more opportunity be created in the school programme for alumni to share their personal narratives of how they overcame their debilitating circumstances to achieve their personal goals. Alumni can be invited to speak at school assemblies to orientate learners entering high school for the first time or motivating matriculants who are finishing high school to enter the labour market or institutions for higher learning.

The evidence indicated that alumni who represent a wide variety of skills, knowledge and experience could contribute to advance the vision and ethos of the school. Based on the evidence, I recommend that the school considers the collective value of alumni as an important stakeholder group in addressing its immediate and future educational concerns. I also recommend that the school continues to communicate with its alumni in a meaningful way by including them in school programmes, highlighting the benefits of their presence for school growth and development. Furthermore, a network of alumni that extends its influence beyond provincial and national borders should be developed. This can be done by using different social media platforms for instance a face whatssap or a school website to build a data base of alumni and for keeping alumni informed of events.

6.9.3   Recommendations for sustained community practice

Smyth (2011, 110) refutes negative terms when referring to communities that do not necessarily conform to "middle-class" norms and values. In fact, the aforenamed author concedes that because the playing fields on which we live are not level one should not necessarily encourage stereotypes. Based on the evidence, I recommend that the particular history, aspirations and lifestyle that are valued by the school community be understood, honored and respected as alumni continue partnering with the school. This can be done by posting alumni events on the school website to encourage a wider network of alumni to join and to remind past learners of a heritage that they share with the school.   Therefore, the philosophies and values of **Capability theory** guided the study as mutual capacities were built. Smyth (2011, 111) explains that as alumni engage with the school, learning spaces are created for building potential within a school community.

The findings of this study indicate that alumni should be encouraged to continue building a sense of pride and recognition for a unique and proud heritage that comes from their connection with their alma mater. This evidence indicate that alumni who are goal-directed and well-organised are prepared to market the association to their peers will commit and give expression to these goals by visiting the school as motivational speakers, mentoring learners, teaching practical skills (for example, computer training) and securing bursaries. In this regard, Hughes and Kritsonis (2006, 6) expound that creating a collaborative vision for the alumni association will more likely produce long-term results, because all parties involved will most likely be working towards the same goal. I believe that developing an inclusive alumni organisation is essential for the school, because it is based on and true to democratic principles that honour the voices of all. Therefore, alumni should aim to improve the school context (Lichtman 2010, 89) by transforming people's thinking at grassroots level. By participating, people will be able to find solutions to their own challenges.

In this regard, Daresh and Lynch (2010, 17) clarify that when a vision is established, it represents a collective value of the best that the group is capable of achieving. The personal benefits for alumni are that they become skilled in visioning, contextual analysis of problems and issue identification, asset mapping for action, citizen mobilisation and evaluating campaigns, explains Gladkikh (2012). My reflections attest to the fact that when people are acknowledged, a shared understanding of where they are going can be created. This shared vision and understanding forms the basis for the sustainability of any project.

I recommend that events such as Alumni Week remain a part of the school's annual programme of events. This event provides a platform for alumni to become part of the school's strategic planning, for members to meet socially and to act out their passions and concerns, as well as raise funds for the school. In return, it gives the school the opportunity to honour and celebrate their alumni.

Based on the successful outcomes of the Alumni Week programme, I recommend that the school, collaborate with the alumni to create a 'Strategic Volunteer Plan'

(attached as Appendix 6). Eisner, Grimm, Maynard and Washburn (2009, 1) suggest eight basic elements, that emphasise the importance of alumni forming part of the strategic plans of their alma mate, because their expertise, skills and experiential learning can benefit school growth and development. This volunteer plan recommends that a definitive and focused recruitment and marketing strategy should be devised and implemented to ensure the proper screening and selection of volunteers. Furthermore, the appropriate orientation and training of volunteers should be embarked upon guided by ongoing supervision and management that recognises the need for the development of volunteers. In order to ensure the success of this Strategic Volunteer Plan, the outcome should be measured and an evaluation of the process should be performed to ensure continuity and sustainability.

6.9.4   Recommendations for further research

This study has answered the main research question,"How can I facilitate alumni engagement for a low-resourced school using a participatory approach?" However, there are several other questions that can be explored and need further investigation. For example:

- How can alumni be engaged in a process of improving support to educators?
- How does an alumni programme impact on the schooling experiences of learners?
- How can a model be developed and used to advance school leadership in general?

It is also suggested that a longitudinal study be conducted to determine the impact of a model on learners' academic performance.

6.10   CONCLUSION

This study used a participatory approach to facilitate ways of engaging alumni support at a low-resourced school. The findings indicate that alumni support can add

value to the educational experiences of learners. The primary purpose was to generate an in-depth understanding of the roles of alumni and illustrate how partnering with alumni could creating synergy among a diverse set of participants by aligning their insights, attitudes and energy to fulfill the mandate of this research.

As alumni engaged with the school, many challenges and rewards emerged, which were delineated and explored. The challenges promoted reflective and critical thought, as we sought favourable outcomes for the school, as discussed in the preceding paragraphs. The importance of growing sustainable alumni support has been identified as a significant outcome. Sustainability was a key concern in the collective consciousness of the participants as their concern was the importance of ongoing alumni engagement beyond this research. Therefore, alumni suggested that a responsible alumni committee be established to grow the association and that the school's successes be celebrated. Additionally, a process of making learners aware of their future roles as alumni should be started at school.

Furthermore, this research had to be inclusive in order to accommodate both alumni who had graduated from high school as well as alumni who had not graduated in order to avoid relations of unequal power. Therefore, the process honoured the diverse opinions of all participants striving for true community participation that promoted constructive discourse in order to form equitable partnerships. This study is reflective of a process that implemented philosophies and values of critical theory and a humanising pedagogy that honours the participants rather than the process advocates for change in the redistribution and reallocation of resources and encourages collaboration for the development of the potential of the participants in order to find solutions to the challenges at this low-resourced school.

The support of alumni was invaluable, their enthusiasm unrivalled and the attachment alumni showed towards their alma mater was commendable. Because PAR seeks to understand and improve a context by changing it, it usually changes the roles of the participants to active researchers and agents of change. Therefore, as the alumni acted collectively they effected change by creating and implementing new knowledge.

REFERENCE LIST

Allen, P M , Varga L 2006, Complexity: The Co-evolution of Epistemology, Axiology and Ontology- Nonlinear Dynamics, Physics and Life sciences, Elsever, Netherlands.

Allen, W R, Jewell, J O 2002, 'A Backward Glance Forward: Past Present and Future Perspectives on Historically Black Colleges and Universities', The Reviewer of Higher Education, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 241-261.

Allmer, T 2015, Critical Learning and Social Media: Between Emancipation and Commodification, Routledge, London.

Alvesson, M, Sköldberg, K 2009, Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research, SAGE, Los Angeles.

Anderson G, Herr K 2005, The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty, SAGE Publications, New York.

Anderson, K J Minke, K M 2007, Parental Involvement in Education: Toward an Understanding of Parent's Decision Making, The Journal of Educational Research, vol. 100, no. 5, pp. 331-323. DOI 10: 3200/JOER.100.5.11-323.

Armstrong, R 2003, 'Participatory Action Research: A guide for community-based organisation' Participation House Support Services London and Areas.

Arthur, J, Waring M, Coe R, Hedges, L V 2012, Research Methods and methodologies in Education, Los Angeles, SAGE Publication Inc.

Ary, D Jacobs, L C Razavieh, A, Sorensen, C 2006, 7th ed. 2006, Introduction to Research in Education, Belmont, Thomson Wadsworth.

Aveling, E, Jovchelovitch, S 2013, 'Partnerships as Knowledge Encounters: A psychosocial theory of partnerships for health and community development', J Health Psychology, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 34-45.

'Biodiversity and Culture: exploring community protocols, rights and consent', 2012, The Institute for Environment and development. Vol. 65, pp. 80-86.www.iied.org.

Baldwin, R H B 2007, Using College Students as Mentors and Tutors, Fellowship Report. Retrieved September 04, 2014, from www.communitiesinschools.org.

Banks, J 2006,Diversity and Citizenship Education, San Francisco, Routledge.

Banks, M 2014, Using Visual Data in Qualitative Research, SAGE Publications, London.

Barnard, Z 2008, The Value of Alumni Networking for the South African Higher Education Sector (SAHE), Retrieved January 10, 2014, from http://hdl.handlenet.

Barnard, Z 2010, The value of Alumni Networks For Soth African Higher Education Sector (SAHES), Social Science Research Network, http://dl.handlenet/2010/85.

Barnes, K, Brynard, S, de Wet, C 2012, 'The influence of school culture and school climate on violence in schools in the Eastern Cape province', South African Journal of Education, vol. 32, pp. 69-82.

Bashow, D 2011, Best Practices & Trends in Alumni Communications. Retrieved June 05, 2014, from www.journal.forces.gc.ca.

Bauer, S, Brazer, D 2012, Using Research to Lead School Improvement: Turning Evidence into Action, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications.

Bayer, A, Grossman, J B, Du Bois, D L 2013, School-Based Mentoring programs using Volunteers to improve academic outcomes of underserved students, MDRC- ERIC.

Bekkers, R, Wiepking, P 2011, 'A Literature Review of predictors of charitable giving Part One: Religion, Education, Age and Socialisation', Voluntary Sector Review, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 337-365.

Bergold, J, Thomas, S 2012, Participatory Research Methods: A Methodological Approach in Motion, *Qualitative Social Research,* vol. 13, no. 1.

Bergold, J, Thomas, S 2014, *FQS Forum: Qualitative Social Research,* Participatory Research Methods: A Methodological Approach in Motion, vol. 13, no. 1, Art. 30.

Bernard, H R 2 ed. 2010, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative,* Sage Publications.

Bethell, J, Hunt, T Richard, M 7 Sherton, Robert 2004, Harvard A to Z Magazine:

Birks, M, Mills, J 2011, Grounded Theory; A practical guide, Los Angeles, SAGE Publications.

Blankstein, A M 2010, *Failure is NOT an Option,* Thousand Oaks, Corwin, Hope Foundation, National Education Association.

Bold, C 2012, Using Narratives in Research, SAGE Publications Ltd. London.

Boudah, D J 2011, Conducting Educational Research: Guide to completing a Major Project, SAGE Publications, Inc. Los Angeles.

Brown, T M, Rodriquez, L F 2009, New Directions for Youth Development: Youth in Participatory Action Research, Jossey-Bass, San Fransisco.

Bruce, M, Bridgeland, J 2014, The mentoring effect: young people's perspectives on the outcomes and availability of mentors, A Report for Mentor: The National Mentoring Partnership, Civic Engagement, ERIC.

Brunton, C & Associated (Ed) 2003, Education Labour Relations Council: Policy Handbook for Educators, Universal Print Group.

Burns, D, Worsely, S, 2015, Navigating Complexity in International Development: Facilitating sustainable change at scale, Warwickshire, Practical Action Publishing.

Burns, D 2014, Assessing impact in dynamic and complex environments: Systemic Action Research and Participatory Systemic Inquiry, CDI Practice Paper 8, Brighton: IDS.

Butler-Kisber, L 2010, Qualitative Inquiry, Thematic, narrative and Arts-informedPerspectives, SAGE Publication Ltd. London.

Cammarota, J, Fine, M 2008, Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participation Action Research in Motion, New York, Routledge.

CASE, Community College Advancement News 'The state of Community College Alumni Relations'. November 13, 2012, vol. 2 no. 5.

CASE, Growing Pains in community College Alumni Relationships, Retrieved May 8, 2013, from http://engagealumni.com.

Chandy, L, Linn, J F 2011, Taking Development activities to scale in fragile and low capacity environments, Global Economy and Development Working Paper 45, Brooks Institute.

Chrzanowski, D, Rans, S, Thompson, R 2010, Building Mutually-beneficial Relationships Between School and Communities: The Role of a connector. ABCD Institute, North Western University. www.abcdinstitute.org.

Clark, A, Flewitt, R, Hammersley, M, Robb, M, 2014, Understanding Research with Children and Young People, London, SAGE.

Coetzee, J K, Graaf, J, Hendricks, F, Wood, G 2001, Development, Theory, Policy and Practice. Oxford University Press, New York.

Coghlan, D, Brydon-Muller, M 2014 The SAGE Encyclopediaof Action Research, SAGE Publishers, Los Angeles.

Coghlan, D, Brannick, T 2010, Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization, SAGE Publications Ltd. London.

Cohen, J, McCabe, L, Michelli, N, Pickeral, T 2009,'School Climate: Research, Policy, Practice, and Teacher Education', Teacher College Record, vol. 111, no. 1, pp. 180-213.

Cohen, I, Marion, L 2011, Research Methods in Education, 7th Ed, New York, Routledge.

Corbin, J, Strauss, A 2014, Basics of Qualitative Research: techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory, SAGE Publications Inc, Los Angeles.

Cresswell, J 2013, 3rd ed. Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches, Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publications Inc.

Cresswell, J 2013, Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches, SAGE Publications Inc. London.

Cresswell, J W 2014, Fourth ed, Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approach, SAGE, Los Angeles.

Cresswell, J W 2013, Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches. 4th edn, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks.

Crisp, A, Brown, L, Hardcastle, S 2012. Alumni Matters: What Alumni Want, The Association of Business Schools, Carringtoncrisp.com.

Dale, J, Hyslop-Margison, E J 2010, Paulo Freire: Teaching for Freedom and Transformation:The Philosophical influences on the work of Paolo Freire, London, SAGE Publications.

Dalkir, K 2013, Knowledge management in Theory and Practice. Routledge Publishing Inc. Toronto.

Daniel, R, Bellani, R, Marshall, N 2012, 'Students and Alumni – Enhancing each other's Experiences'

Daresh, J C, Lynch, J (ED) 2010, Improving Learning by Building Community: A Principal's Guide to Action, ElPaso, SAGE Publications.

Daresh, J C, Lynch, J 2010, Improving Learning by Building Community: A Principal's guide to Action, SAGE Ltd. Thousand Oaks.

Day, C (Ed) Thee Routledge International Handbook of Teacher and School Development, Routledge, London.

De Lange, N, Mitchell, C, Moletsane, L Stuart, J, Buthelezi, T 2008, Seeing the body: Educators' representation of HIV and AIDS, South African Journal of Education, vol. 28, no. 3, Pretoria.

De Vos, A, Strydom, H, Fouché, C B, Delport, C S L, 2003, 2nd ed. Research at grassroots: For the social and human service professions, Pretoria, Van Schaik Publishers.

Deal, T E, Peterson, K D 2011, Shaping School Culture: Pitfalls, Paradoxes, and Promises, Wiley Publishers, Los Angeles.

Denzin, N K, Lincoln, Y S (ed.) 2011, The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research, SAGE Publications, Los Angeles.

Denzin, N K, Lincoln, Y S 2008, The Landscape of Qualitative Research, SAGE Publications, Los Angeles.

Denzin, N K, Lincoln, Y S (ed.)2011, The SAGE handbook of Qualitative Research, Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications.

Denzin, N K, Lincoln, Y S 2011, The Sage handbook of qualitative research, 4th edn, SAGE Publications Inc, London.

Desai, V, Potter, R (ed.) 2008, Doing Developmental Resarch, London, Sage Publication.

Dewey, J, 1920, Reconstruction in Philosophy, New York, Henry Holt and Company.

Dickmann, E, Cooner, D, Dugan, J 2007, 'The Alumni Survey: Program Implications for School Leaders', Journal of Educational Research and Policy Studies, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 76-84.

Dobson, G 2012, Club Events & Budgets: International Alumni, Retrieved September 04, 2014, from www.academicimpressions.com.

Dunphy, D, Benveniste, J Griffiths, A, Sutton, P 2000, Sustainability: The corporate challenge of the 21st century. Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards.

Eastern Cape Department of Education 2004, School Development Support: A training programme for building teams and nurturing spirit in schools and communities.

Ebersohn, L, Eloff, I 2011 Understanding-resilience-in-poverty-school-settings-rural-schools.

Ebersohn, L, Eloff, I 2006, Identifying asset-based trends in sustainable programmes which support vulnerable children, *South African journal of Education*, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 457-467.Retrieved March 7, 2016, from LISELEBERSOHN.ORG.

Eisner, D, Grimm, R T, Maynard, S Washburn, S 2009, *The new volunteer workforce*, Stanford Social Innovation Review, Leland Stanford Jr. University, Stanford.

Elbot, C F, Fulton, D 2008, Building an Intentional School Culture, Dener, Sage Publications.

Elby, A 2007, Defining Personal Epistemology: A Response to Hofer & Pintrich (1997) and Sandoval (2005), Journal of the Learning Sciences, vol. 18, no. 1 http://dx.doi.05/10.1080/10508400802581684.

Farrow, I I, Yuan, Y C 2011, Building stronger ties with alumni through Facebook to increasevoluntwerism and charitable giving, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, vol,16, no. 3 pp. 445-464.

Fereirra, R, Ebersohn, L 2012, Partnering for Resilience, Pretoria, Van Schaik.

Fierke, K, Jorgensen, K E 2015, Constructing International Relations: The Next Generation, Routledge Publishers, New York.

Fisher, D, Frey, N, Pumpian, I 2010, How to create a culture of achievement in your school and classroom, ASCD, Alexandria.

Flick, U 2014, An Introduction to Qualitative Research, SAGE Publications Ltd. Berlin.

Flood, R L, Carson, E 2013, 'Cultivating Social Resources on Social Network Sites: FacebookRelationships, Maintenance Behaviours and Their Roles in Social Capital Processes", Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, vol. 19, no. 4.

Foster-Fishman, P, Nowel, B, Deacon, Z, Nievan, M, McCann, P 2005, 'Using Methods that Matter: The impact of Reflection, Dialogue and Voice, American Journal of Community Psychology, vol. 36, no. 314.

Foucalt, M 1973, Cultural values, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 419-441.

Freire, P 1972, Pedagogy of the oppressed, Penguin, London.

Friese, S 2014, Qualitative Data Analysis with Atlas.Ti 2nd ed, Los Angeles, SAGE Publications.

From Aab to Zeph Greek – and everything Crimson in between. Harvard University Press.

Fu, G 2013, Alumni Handbook, Retrieved September 03, 2014, from appstate.edu.

Gadamer, H, Bersoni, R 1986, The Relevance of the Beautiful and other Essays, Cambridge University, https://philpapers.org/rec/GADTRO-3.

Gadamer, H G 1986, The Relevance of the beautiful and Other Essays, Cambridge, University Press.

Galvin, K, Todres, L 2013, Caring and Well-being: A lifeworld Approach, Routledge, New York.

Garcia, A S, Morrison, K, Ah Chung, T, He J, 2014, Managing Complex Change in Schools: Engaging Pedagogy, Technology, Learning and Leadership, Routledge Taylor Francis Group, London.

Garcia, M 2013, Fundraising and Alumni Engagement; Energise Your Alumni and your Fundraising in the process.

Garrison, D R, Vaughan, N D 2008, Blended Learning in Higher Education: Frameworks, Principles, and Guidelines, Wiley Publishers, San Fransisco.

Gastrow, S 2013, Inyathelo: The South African Institute for Advancement: Creating sustainable NPO's through a mixed funding model. Retrieved September 04, 2014, from www.inyathelo.org.za.

Geswindt, P 2013, The Role Alumni can Play in the development of Disadvantaged Schools, Master's Thesis, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

Gibson, W J, Brown, A 2009, Working with Qualitative Data, SAGE Publications Ltd. London.

Gilchrist, A 2014, 'The Well-connected Community: A Networking approach to Community Development', Journal of Social Policy, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 170-177. DOI:1017/SOO472794378475.

Gitlin, T 2004, Handbook of Reflection and Reflective Inquiry: Mapping a way for Professional Reflective Inquiry, Cork, Springer.

Givens, L 2008, SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods, SAGE Publications.

Gladkikh, O 2012, Coady Institute.: Advocacy and Citizen Engagement, Retrieved November 05, 2013, from coady.stfx.ca/

Gopsill, C, Suissa, B 2006, Leveraging Intangible Assets: White Paper, First Tuesday Zurich, A Xing Company.

Gordon, S P 2008, Collaborative Action research: Developing Professional Learning Communities, New York, Teachers College Press.

Gottlieb, H (2008, May). Three Most effective Tools for Community Engagement. *Manitoba Family Services and Housing*.

Gray, D E 2009, Doing Research in the Real World, SAGE Publications, London.

Green, M, Moore, H Cunningham, G 2009, From Needs to Assets: Charting a sustainable Path towards Development in Sub-Saharan African Countries, www.abcdintritute.org.

Greenwood, D J, Lewin, M 2007, Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change 2nd edn, SAGE, Thousand Oaks.

Griffith, J, Maggs, H, George, E 2007, Joint event on Preventing Non-Comunicable Diseases in the Workplace, Background Paper prepared for the WHO/WEF, Dalin/China, September 2007.

Gruenert, S 2008, School Culture: They are not the same thing, Principal, https;//www.naesp.org.

Guerrero, C, Gaztambine-Fernández, R, Guerrero, M R, Guerrero, E 2013, 'Proyecto Latin @ On Stage and Under the Magnifying Glass: The Possibilities and Limitations of a High-Profile Institutionally Sponsored Youth Participatory Action Research Project', International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, vol.4, no. 2, pp. 105-126.

Habermas, J 1990, Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action, Cambridge, MIT Press.

Hall, A J 2016, Community College Alumni Engagement: Explaining the relationship of social media to alumni giving participating in school relatedactivities, the more engaged he or she is deemed to be, Doctoral thesis.

Harber, R M 2007, A Sociology of Educating, London, Continuum International Publishing Group.

Hartas, D 2010, Educational Research and Inquiry: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches, London,Continuum International Publishing Group.

Hartman, A, Linn, J 2008, Scaling up: a framework and lessons for development effectiveness from literature and practice, Working Papers no, 5, Wolfensohn Centre for development, The Brookings Institution.

He, M F, Phillion, J, 2008, Personal, Passionate, Participatory Inquiry Into Social Justice in Education. Information Age Publishing, Inc. Charlotte.

Heath, R L (ed) 2005, Encyclopeadia of Public Relations, Volume 1. Thousand oaks, SAGE Publications.

Hemingway, A J 2012. "Humanising nursing care: a theoretical model", Bournemouth University Nursing Times. vol. 108, no. 40, pp. 26-27.

Hennink, M, Hutter, I, Bailey, A 2011, Qualitative Research Methods, Los Angeles, Sage Publications.

Herr, K, Anderson, G 2005, Research Methodology. www.gjerull.net//masterthesis/masterthesissc8.html.

Holloway, I, Wheeler, S 2010, Qualitative Research in Nursing and Healthcare, 3rd edn, Wiley Publishers, Oxford.

Hopkins, B R 2011, The Tax Law of Charitable Giving, Wiley and Son Publishers, New Jersey.

Hoppers, C, Mahao, N, Richards, H Songca,S P, Havenga, M, Pillay, K 2010, Humanising Methodologies, College of Law. Unisa Online. Retrieved May 30, 2013, from http//wwwunisa.ac.za.

Hornby, G 2010, 'Parental Involvement in Secondary schools in New Zealand: Implications for school psychologists', SAGE Journal: School Psychology International, vol. 31, no. 5, pp. 495-508.

Horsemand, A M 2011, The effects of new media on alumni engagement among millenials: A case study of the university of Kentucky College of Health Science alumni. (Masters' thesis), Retrieved from http://uknowledge.uky.edu/gradschoolthesis/134.

http://go.worldbank.org/EDXJZOC4UO.2012. Secondary Education - Key Issues.

Hughes, T, Kritsonis, W 2006, A national Perspective: An Exploration of professional Learning Communities and the Impact on School Improvement Efforts, *Doctoral Forum – National Journal for Publishing and mentoring Doctoral Research,* vol. 1, no. 1, ERIC NO, ED491997.

Ichijo, K, Nonaka, I 2007, Knowledge Creation and Management: New Challenges for Managers, Oxford University Press, New York.

Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL), 2014, Coalition for community schools: What is a community school? Retrieved June 2014, from http://www.iel.org.

Iten, K 2013, 'Three ways to ensure your charitable donations qualify for a SARS tax break', FSP Business, Fleet Street Publications.

Jacobs, D (ed.) Benefits and the Role of Alumni, Retrieved June 07, 2014, from University of Pretoria, web.up.ac.za.

Jacobs, S 2016 2nd ed. Membership Essentials: Recruitment, Retention, Roles, Responsibility, and Resources, John Wiley Press.

Jamshidi, E, Morasae E, Shanandeh, K, Majdzadeh, R, Seydi, E, Aramesh, K, Abknar, N, 2014, Ethical Considerations of Community-based Participatory Research: Contextual Underpinnings for Developing Countries, *International Journal of Preventative Medicine,* vol. 5, no. 10, pp. 1328-1336.

Jeynes, W H, 2007, 'The Relationship Between Parental Involvement and Urban – Secondary School Student Academic Achievement: A Meta-Analysis', SAGE Journals: Urban Education, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 82-110.

Johnson, J, 2011, Alumni Advocacy: Alumni Associations Rally on behalf of Higher Education, Retrieved June 15, 2014, from www.napagroup.com.

Joubish, M F, Khurram, A, Ahmed, A, Syeda T F, Haider K 2011, 'Paradigms and Characteristics of a Good Qualitative Research'World Applied Sciences Journal, vol. 12, no. 11, pp. 2082 – 2089.

Jupp, V 2006, The SAGE dictionary of Social Research Methods, SAGE Publications Ltd. London.

Kaagan, S Headley, L 2010, Bringing Your Learning Community to Life: A Road Map for Sustainable School Improvement, Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks.

Kanfar, N M, Swaidon, Z, Muijtaba, B G 2009, 'A Study in Relationship Orientation and Priorization of Alumni Association Preferences with Colllege Seniors in Higher Education, Contemporary Issues in Education Research (CIER) The Clute Institute, vol. 2, no. 3.

Kapoor, D, Jordan, S 2009, Education, Participatory Action Research, and Social Change, Palgreave MacMillan, New York.

Kearney, J, Todhunter, M (Eds) 2015, Lifelong Action Learning and Research: A Tribute to the life and Pioneering Work of Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.

Keeley, B 2007, Human capital. How what you know shapes your life. OECD Insights. <http;//www.oecd.org/insights/37966934.pdf. Accessed 12 December 2016.

Khosa, G 2011, Sustainable school improvement- A partnership between the state, the private sector and civil society, Jet Education Services, Johannesburg.

Kilbane, J, Sustaining Schools as learning Communities: Achieving a Vision of the Possible, Proquest Co., Ann Arbor.

Kincheloe, J L 2007, Critical pedagogy primer, New York, Peter Lang Publishers.

Koelen, M A, Lindstrom, B 2005, Making healthy choices easy choices: the role of empowerment. Retrieved June 1, 2013 from http:/ wwwncbi.nlm.nih.gov/

Kretzmann, J, McKnight, J P 1996. "Assets- Based Community Development", National Civic Review. Vol. 85, no. 4, pp. 23-29.

Kuklys W 2005, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach: Theoretical Insights and Empirical Applications, Springer, Berlin.

Lagae, B, J 2012, 'Community –Based Participatory Action Research: An Emerging Alternative', PhD Thesis, University of Miami. Retrieved September 07, 2014, from http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa.theses.

Lassen, B 2012, Biocultural Community Protocols, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Ledwith, M 2007, On Being Critical: Uniting theory and practice through emancipatory action research. *Educational Action Research.* Vol. 15, pp. 597-611.

Levin, D, Green, D 1998, An Introduction to Action research, Thousand Oaks, Los Angeles.

Lichtman, M 2010, Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide. 2nd ed. SAGE Publication, Inc.

Lincoln, D, Denzin, Y 2011, Asian Epistemological and Contemporary Social Psychological Research, SAGE Publications, Los Angeles.

Lincoln, Y, Guba, E G 2011, Paradigmatic, Controversies, Contradictions, and emerging confluences revisited. Journal of thought. com.

Lippincott, J 2011, Overcoming the Undervaluing of Alumni Relations. CASE. Retrieved June8, 2013, from http://www.case.org.

Literat, I 2013, "A pencil for Your Thoughts" Participatory Drawings as Visual Tool, International Journal of Qualitative Methods, vol. 12, pp. Mantay, Tan 2012.

Mach, N, Woodsong, C, MacQueen, K, Guest, G, Namey, E, 2011, Qualitative Research Methods: A data collection Field Guide.

Mahn, H, John-Steiner, V 2012, Sociocultural approaches to Learning and Development: A Vygotskyan framework, Educational Psychology, vol. 31, no. 34, 191-206.

Management: Challenge to the Next Generation, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. Publishers, New Jersey.

Mangai, J, Oulai, D, Sankale, J, Mujidi, J 2004, Community Schools in Kenya: a case study on community participation in funding and managing schools, International Institute for Educational Planning/ UNESCO, Paris.

Marshall, C, Rossman, G B 2011, Designing Qualitative Research, SAGE Publications, Inc., Thousand Oaks.

Martin, J 2002, Cultural miseducation: In search of democratic solutions, Teachers College press, New York.

Marx, K 1977, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Moscow, Progress Publishers.

Mathie, A, Cunningham, G 2005,'Who is driving development? Reflecting on the transformative Potential of Asset-based Community Development', *Canadian Journal of Development Studies, vol. 26, Issue 1.*

Matthews, M, 2013, CSI Matters: The power of whole school development, csimatters.co.za.

Maxwell, J 2013, Qualitative Research Design: An interactive approach, 3rd edn, SAGE, Los Angeles.

Maxwell, J A 2012, A Realist Approach for Qualitative Research, SAGE Publications Inc., London.

Mayer, J 2007, Creating a Safe and Welcoming school, The International Academy of Education/International Bureau of Education, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, (Educational Practices Series – 16).

Mcdearmon, T, Shirley, K 2009, 'Characterisitics and institutional factors to young alumni donors and non-donors', International Journal of Educational Advancement, vol. 9, pp. 83-95, doi:10.1057/ijea.2009,29.

McNiff, J 2013, Action Research: Principles and Practice, 3rd edn, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, London.

Medvec, J 2014, College and High School Alliance Mentoring Program, Retrieved September 04, 2014, from Redlands.edu.

Meintjies, F 2013, 'How poor South Africans survive", The South African Civil Society Information Service, SACSIS.org.za.

Menter, I Dely, E M, Hulme, J Lewin & Lowden, K 2011, A guide to Practitioner Research in Education, SAGE Los Angeles.

Merchant, A 2005, 'How personal nostalgia influences giving to charity', PhD Thesis, Dissertation Abstracts Online.AA13322549.

Merriam - Webster Visual Dictionary Online, 2013.

Merriam, S B 2009, Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation. Wiley Jossey-Bass Publication, San Fransisco.

Merril, B, West, L 2009, Using Biographical Methods in Social Research, SAGE Publications Inc. London.

Mertens, D M 2009, Transformative Research and Evaluation, The Guilford Press, New York.

mhtml:file://E:\Education. 2012. World Bank Policy Paper.

Midgely, W Danaher, P A, Baguley, M (ed) 2013, The Role of Participants in Education Research: Ethics, Epistemologies, and Methods, Routledge, New York.

Milne, E J, Mitchel, C, De Lange, N 2012, Handbook Of Participatory Video, AltaMira Press, Lanham.

Mitchell, C, Theron, L, Stuart, J, Smith, A, Campbell, Z, 2011, Picturing Research: Drawings as Visual methodology, Sense Publishers.

Mitchell, C, Theron, L, Stuart, J, Smith, A, Campbell, Z 2011, Picturing Research: Drawings as Research Method, Springer, London.

Modisaotisile, B M 2012, 'The failing standards of Basic Education in South Africa, Policy Brief: Africa. Institute of South Africa: Briefing no. 72- March 2012.

Moloi, K C 2010, How can Schools Build Learning Organisations in difficult education contexts, South African Journal of Education, Vol. 30, no. 4, accessed August 2017.

Montgomery, B M, Baxter, L A (ed.) 2008, Dialectical Approaches to Studying Personal relationships, Sussex, Psychology Press.

Moolla, N, Lazarus S 2014, 'School'psychologists' views on challenges in facilitating school development through intersectoral collaboration' vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 1-10.

Morrison, K 2007, Complexity Theory and Education, APERA Conference, 28-30 Pretoria, NPC.

Morrison, K, 2012, School leadership and Complexity Theory, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London.

Muller, R 2010, Problem-Posing Education as a Practice of Freedom or Humanisation, Doctoral Thesis, www.holisticeducator.com/humanisation.htm.

Murphy, M, Fleming, T 2010, An introduction to Habermas, *Critical Theory and Education and the future of teaching*, Routledge, New York.

Murphy, M, Fleming, T 2010, Habermas, Critical Theory and Education, Taylor & Francis, New York.

Nagy Hesse-Biber, S, Leavy, P 2011, THE PRACTICE of QUALITATIVE RESEARCH. 2ND ed, Los Angeles, SAGE Publications.

National Planning commission of South Africa, National Developman Plan 2030; Our Future make it Work.

Neuman, W L 2006,Social Research Methods: Qualitative & Quantitative Approaches, Toronto, Pearson. New Oxford Dictionary, 2014.

Noffke, S E, Somekh, B 2009, The SAGE Handbook of Educational Action RESEARCH, Los Angeles, Sage Publications.Norwood, 2013.

Norberg, J, Cummings, G S 2008, Complexity Theory for a sustainable future, Columbia University press, New York.

Norberg, J, Cumming, G S (ed) 2013, Complexity Theory for a Sustainable future, Columbia University Press, London.

Nyoka, A, Lefko- Everett, K 2010, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation Policy and Analysis. No. 7 December, 2010.

Olivier, M A J, Wood, L & de Lange, N 2009, Putting People in the picture: Visual Methodologies for social change, Sense, Rotterdam.

Padilla, T 2014, Library Collections as Humanities Data: The Facet Effect, Public Services Quarterly, vol. 10 no. 14 pp. 35-36 do: 101080/15228959.2014.963780.324.

Parahoo, K 2006, Evidence-based Nursing: Recurrent themes, metanarratives and exemplar cases, Nursing Outlook, vol. 52, no. 1 pp. 30-35.

Parsloe, E 2013, The Academic Mentoring Handbook: University of Edinburgh, Retrieved 03, 2014, from http://www.coachingnetworkorg.uk/mentoring.htm.

Peterson, K, Deal, T 2011, Shaping School Culture: Pitfalls, Paradoxes and promises. Wiley Publishers. London.

Piaget, J, 1952, When Thinking Begins: The origins of intelligence in children, International University Press, New York.

Pitcallis, Q K 2014, Introduction to Research methods, SAGE, Thousand Oaks.

Powers, C B, Allaman, E 2012, Help Youth Development: How participatory Action research can Promote Social Change, Colorado, Berkman/ MacArthur Foundation.

Prew, M 2009, Community involvement in school development. Educational Management, Administration and Leadership, vol. 37, no. 6 pp. 824-846.

Price, J, Osborne, M 2012, Challenges of forging a humanizing pedagogy in teacher education, HolisticEducator.Com.

Prosser, J Burke, C 2009, Image-based Educational Research: Childlike Perspectives, SAGE Publication Inc. London.

Province of the Eastern Cape Education 2013, Human Resource Planning & Provisioning Services of the Eastern Cape, Instruction no. 7 of 2013.

Punch, K 2009, Introduction to Research Methods in Education. SAGE Publications, London.

Ravitch, S 2011Reason & Rigor: How Conceptual Frameworks Guide Your Work, Los Angeles, Sage Publications.

Reich, J W, Zautra, A, Hall, J S (ed.) 2010, Handbook of adult resilience: Asset-based strategies for building resilient communities, New York, Guilford Press.

Republic of South Africa 1996, South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996. Government GAZETTE. Vol. 377 no. 17579, pp. 1-42.

Rich, B L 2010, The Relationship between pay and job satisfaction: a meta-analysis of the literature, Journal of Vocational behavior, no 77, pp. 157-167.

Richie, J, Lewis, J, McNaughton Nicholls C (ed.) 2014, Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers, Los Angeles, SAGE Publications.

Rihani, S 2002, Complex Systems Theory and Development Practice; Understanding Non-linear Realities, London, Zed Books.

Rihani, S, Geyer, R 2008, Complexity and Public Policy: A New approach to 21st Century Policies, London, Routledge.

Ritchie, J, Lewis, J, McNaughton, M, I Ormston, R 2014, Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Research, 2nd ed. SAGE, London.

Robeyns I 2008,'The capability approach: a theoretical survey, Journal of Human Development, vol. 6 no. 1, pp. 93-117.

Robson, C 2002, Real World Research, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.

Rossman, G B, Rallis, S F 2012, Learning in the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research. 3rd edn, SAGE Thousand Oaks.

Ruskay, S 2000, How to turn a Year of Service Into a Lifetime of Commitment, The Jewish Service Corps, Retrieved May 13, 2013, from https://docs.google.com.

Sapungan, G M, Sapungan, R M 2014, Parental Involvement in Child's Education: Importance, Barriers, and benefits, Asian Journal of Management Sciences & Education, Vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 42-146.

Sathiapane, M, Van Wyk, N, Wolhuter, E 2010, The management of Parental Involvement in Multicultural schools in South Africa: A Case study, 1st ed. Juta & Co. Ltd. Pty. reedom or Humanisation.

SAWIP 2011, South African Washington International Program for Service leadership, Retrieved May 10, 2014, from www.sawip.org.

Schmuck, R 2006, Practical Action Research for Change 2nd ed, Los Angeles, Sage Publication Company.

Schratz, M, Walker, R 2005, Research as Social Change: New opportunities for Qualitative Research, Routledge, New York.

Schraven, B, Eguavoen, I, Manske, G 2009, Doctoral degrees for capacity development, BIGS – DR Alumni.

Shaidlin, A 2014, Alumni Futures: Ideas, Trends & New Directions in Advancement.

Sikes, P, Piper, H 2011, Ethics and Academic Freedom in Educational Research, London, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Silverman, D 2011, Interpreting Qualitative Data, Los Angeles, SAGE Publications Ltd.

Silverman, D (ed) 2011, Qualitative Research, 3rd edn, SAGE Publications Inc. London.

Silverman, D 2014, Qualitative Research, SAGE Publications, London.

Simon, K 2011, Dissertation and Scholarly research: Recipes for Success, http://dissertationrecipes.com.

Simons, H, 2009, Evidence-based practice: panacea or promise, Research paper in Education, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 303-311.

Skyttner, L 2005 (2nd ed) General Systems Theory: Problems, Perspectives, Practice, World Scientific Publishing Co, London.

Smyth, J, Steinberg, R, Freire, M (ed.) 2011, Critical Pedagogy for Social Justice, Continuum, New York.

Smyth, R, 2011, Exploring the usefulness of a conceptual framework as a research tool – A researchers reflections, *British Journal of Educational Technology: Issues in Educational research,* vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 167-180.

Somekh, B, Lewin, C 2005, Research Methods in the Social Sciences, SAGE Publications Ltd. London.

Somekh, S E 2009, Educational Action Research, Los Angeles, Sage Publications.

Spaul, N 2013, South Africa's Education Crisis, The quality of education in South Africa 1994-2011, Report by the Centre for Development and Enterprise.

Speer, P, Jackson, C B, Peterson, N A 2011, The relationship between social cohesion and empowerment: Support and new implications for theory, Health Education Behavior. Sage Journals, Pub Med.gov.

Spradley, J 2016, Participant Observation, Waveland Press Incorporated, Illinois.

Springer, K 2010, Educational Research: A contextual approach, Danvers, John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Manning, 2015.

Stacey, R 2007, Tackling Wicked Problems, www.apsc.gov.au/publication 07/wickedproblems.pdf.

Stacey, R, 2010, Complexity and Organisational Reality: Uncertainty and the need to rethink management after the collapse of investment capitalism, Routledge, London.

Steinberg & Kincheloe 2007, 19 Urban Questions. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.

Stichweh, R 2001, Systems Theory as an alternative to Action Theory? The rise of communication as a Theoretical Systems Theory', International Encyclopedia, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 5-13.

Sugden, R 1982, 'On the Economics of Philantrophy', The Economic Journal, vol. 92, no. 366, pp. 341-350.

Sun, X, Hoffman, S C, Grady, M L 2007, 'A multivariate causal model of alumni giving: Implications for alumni fundraisers', International Journal of Educational Advancement, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 307-332.

Swiderska, K 2012, Using Biocultural Community Protocols to implement MEA'S and UNDRIP at Local Level for Sustainable Development, IIED, 13th ISE Congress, Montpellier, France.

Tacquard, W 2012, 'The Role and Importance of Alumni Relations', The Council for Advancement and Support of Education.

Teach South Africa, 2009, Retrieved June 07, 2014, from teachsouthafrica.org.

Theron, L 2012, 'Does visual participatory research have resilience-promoting value? Teacher experiences of generating and interpreting drawings', *South African Journal of Education,* vol. 32, no. 4, Pretoria.

Thomas, P, Walker, M (ed) 2011, The Routledge Doctoral Student's Companion: Getting to grips with Research in education, Taylor & Francis, New York.

Thompson, P (ed.) 2009, Doing Visual Research with Children and Young People, London, Routledge.

Thurmaier, K 2010, La Follette School of Public Affairs: Alumni Development International, Retrieved September 03, 201, from www.niutoday.info.

Toth, E L (ed) 2009, The Future of Excellence in Public Relations and Communication.

Trafford, V, Leshem, S 2001, Embracing contraries in Research on Doctoral Education, Journal innovations in Education, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 305-316.

Trembley, C, Gutberlet, J 2010 Empowerment through participation, assessing the voices of leaders for recycling cooperatives in Sao Paulo, Community Development Journal Advance Access, doc10, 1093/cdy/bsc 040.

UNESCO, 2012 Education for the 21st Century. Retrieved May 6, 2015, from unesco.org.

USA: Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs: Running an Effective Alumni Association. Retrieved September 03, 2014, from https://alumni.state.gov/alumni.

Vaughan, R 2008, Conceptual Framework, A Powerpoint Presentation: Blended Learning in Higher Education; Frameworks, Principles, and Guidelines, kttm.hoasen.edu.vn.

Vygotsky, L 1981, The genesis of higher mental function, New York, Sharpe Publishers.

Walker, M 2008, The capability approach as a framework for reimagining education and justice, Springer Publishers, Wiesbaden. DOI 10.1007/978-3n531-90922-67.

Walker, M 2008, Widening Participation in Higher learning: Lifelong Learning as Capability, Lifelong Learning Book Series, vol. 11, pp. 131 – 147.

Walker, M, 2007, Lifelong Learning Book Services, "Wider Participation in Higher Education: Lifelong Learning as Capability, International Publishing, Vol. 11, pp. 131-147.

Weerts, D, Ronca, J 2008, Characteristics of alumni donors who volunteer at their alma mater, Research in Higher Education, vol., 49, pp, 292-294. Doi:10.1007/s11162-9077-0.

Weerts, D and Ronca, J 2007, Profiles of Supportive Alumni: Donors, Volunteers, and those who "Do It All", International Journal of Educational Advancement, no. 7, pp. 20-34.

Whitehead, J, McNiff, J 2006, Action Research Living Theory, London, Sage Publications.

Wood L, Govender, B 2012, 'You learn from going through the process'; The perceptions of South African school leaders about action research. Retrieved June 17, 2013, from http://arj.sagepub.com.

Wood, L, Zuber-Skerrit, O 2013, 'PALAR as a methodology for community engagement by faculties of education', South African Journal of Education, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 8-15.

Xaba, M 2011, 'The possible causes of school governance challenges in South Africa', South African Journal Of Education, vol. 31, no. 2. Education. Vol. 26, pp. 15-26.

Xaba, M 2006, 'The difficulties of school development planning', South African Journal of Education, EASA, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 15-26.

Yeasman, Rahman, 2012, 'Triangulation', Research Methods as a Tool of Social Science Research, BUP Journal, vol, 1 no,1 ISSN: 2219-4851

Yull, Blitz, Thompson and Murray, 2014, Can we talk? Using Community-Based Participatory Action Research to build Family and School Partnerships with Families of color, Community School Journal, vol. 24, no. 2.

Zakrzewski, V 2013, Greater Good in Action: Science-based practices for a Meaningful life.

Zuber-Skerrit, O & Teare, R 2013, Lifeliong Action Learning for Community Development, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.

Zuber-Skerrit, O & Teare, R 2013, Lifelong Action Learning for Community Development: Learning and Development for a Better World, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.

Zuber-Skerritt, O, 2011, Action Leadership: Towards a participatory paradigm, Springer International, Dordrecht.

Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2012). *Action Research for sustainable Development in a Turbulant World.* Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

APPENDIX A

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL
NMMU RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HUMAN)

SECTION A: (To be filled in by a representative from the Faculty RTI Committee)

Application reference code:	**H**	....	....	....	....
	HUMAN	YEAR	FACULTY	DEPARTMENT	NUMBER

Resolution of FRTI Committee:
- **Ethics approval given (for noting by the REC-H)**
- **Referred to REC-H for consideration** (if referred to REC-H, electronic copy of application documents to be emailed to Imtiaz.Khan@nmmu.ac.za)

Resolution date:

Faculty RTI representative signature:

2. GENERAL PARTICULARS

TITLE OF STUDY

    a.   Concise descriptive title of study (must contain key words that best describe the study):
Facilitating alumni support for high schools

PRIMARY RESPONSIBLE PERSON (PRP)

    b.   Name of PRP (must be member of permanent staff. Usually the supervisor in the case of students):
Dr AJ Greyling, Faculty of Education

    c.   Contact number/s of PRP: **0822022345**

    d.   Affiliation of PRP: Faculty **Education**
                Department (or equivalent): SERE

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATORS AND CO-WORKERS

    e.   Name and affiliation of principal investigator (PI) / researcher (may be same as PRP):
Cheryl Rensburg Gender: **Female**

    f.   Name(s) and affiliation(s) of all co- workers (e.g. co-investigator/assistant researchers/supervisor/co-supervisor/promoter/co-promoter). If names are not yet known, state the affiliations of the groups they will be drawn from, e.g. Interns/M-students, etc. and the number of persons involved:
Supervisor: Dr. AJ Greyling /Colleagues at school/ Participants-Alumni as per PAR methodology

STUDY DETAILS

      g.   Scope of study: **Local**   h.   If for degree purposes: **Doctoral**

      i.   Funding : **NRF grant**
   Additional information (e.g. source of funds or how combined funding is split) **Not applicable**

      j.   Are there any restrictions or conditions attached to publication and/or presentation of the study results? **No**

If YES, elaborate (Any restrictions or conditions contained in contracts must be made available to the Committee): **Not applicable**

      k.   Date of commencement of data collection: **2013/10/01**
Anticipated date of completion of study: **2 years**

      l.   Objectives of the study (the major objective(s) / Grand Tour questions are to be stated briefly and clearly):
To facilitate alumni support at a selected high school. To determine how alumni involvement can add value to their former high school.

      m.   Rationale for this study: briefly (300 words or less) describe the background to this study i.e. why are you doing this particular piece of work. A few (no more than 5) key scientific references may be included:
As teacher at the school, a PhD student and participant in a learning set who aim to encourage alumni to volunteer their skills, resources and time to provide support for their former high school, I am of the opinion that almUni represent untapped potential which needs to be channeled back to their alma mater. I am impassioned by Freire's belief that humans have the capacity to surpass their experiences and construct the world from a critical and moral perspective as described by Dale and Hyslop-Margison (2010: 59). I belief that people are capable of transforming their society when they go beyond analysing cause and effect, but reflect on their circumstances and take tangible action.

METHODOLOGY

      n.   Briefly state the methodology (specifically the procedure in which human subjects will be participating) (the full protocol is to be included as *Appendix 1*):
The research is qualitative, because it primarily reflects on the views and experiences of participants. It is dialectical as it integrates theory and practice as new knowledge, is created together with the participants. It follows a Participating Action Research method as it is collaborative, founded on actionable learning and research. Participants will work in collaboration to enhance and support educational opportunities at the school. Participants will generate data during focus group interviews, forming a synergy of their ideas. Furthermore, their reflective journals will contain their subjective perspectives on the process, while photo voice will be used to stimulate communication around the research problem. Thematic analysis will be used, looking for categories, until patterns form into themes. The analysis will also be a cooperative process involving the participants. This way the validity of the process will be enhanced.

      o.   State the minimum and maximum number of participants involved (Minimum number should reflect the number of participants necessary to make the study viable)
Min: **20**   Max: **30**

4.   RISKS AND BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY

a.	Is there any risk of harm, embarrassment or offence, however slight or temporary, to the participant, third parties or to the community at large? **No**

If YES, state each risk, and for each risk state i) whether the risk is reversible, ii) whether there are alternative procedures available and iii) whether there are remedial measures available.
Not applicable

b.	Has the person administering the project previous experience with the particular risk factors involved?
No

If YES, please specify: **Not applicable**

c.	Are any benefits expected to accrue to the participant (e.g. improved health, mental state, financial etc.)? **Yes**

If YES, please specify the benefits: **Developing leadership skills by empowering participants in being part of creating a model for alumni engagement.**

d.	Will you be using equipment of any sort? **No**
If YES, please specify: **Not applicable**

e.	Will any article of property, personal or cultural be collected in the course of the project? **No**
If YES, please specify: **Not applicable**

# 6.	TARGET PARTICIPANT GROUP

a) If particular characteristics of any kind are required in the target group (e.g. age, cultural derivation, background, physical characteristics, disease status etc.) please specify: **past pupils of a particular high school in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality**

b) Are participants drawn from NMMU students? **No**

c) If participants are drawn from specific groups of NMMU students, please specify: **Not applicable**

d) Are participants drawn from a school population? **Yes**

If YES, please specify: **Past pupils of a school in the Northern Areas of the NMB**

e) If participants are drawn from an institutional population (e.g. hospital, prison, mental institution), please specify: **Not applicable**

f) If any records will be consulted for information, please specify the source of records: **Alumni reflective journals,diaries.**

g) Will each individual participant know his/her records are being consulted? **Yes**

If YES, state how these records will be obtained: **as participants they will agree to this beforehand**

h) Are all participants over 18 years of age? **Yes**

If NO, state justification for inclusion of minors in study: **Not applicable**

# 8.	CONSENT OF PARTICIPANTS

a.	Is consent to be given in writing? **Yes**

If YES, include the consent form with this application [Appendix 2].

If NO, state reasons why written consent is not appropriate in this study.

b.	Are any participant(s) subject to legal restrictions preventing them from giving effective informed consent? **No**

If YES, please justify: **Not applicable**

c.   Do any participant(s) operate in an institutional environment, which may cast doubt on the voluntary aspect of consent? **No**

If YES, state what special precautions will be taken to obtain a legally effective informed consent: **Not applicable**

d.   Will participants receive remuneration for their participation? **No**

If YES, justify and state on what basis the remuneration is calculated, and how the veracity of the information can be guaranteed. **Not applicable**

e.   Which gatekeeper will be approached for initial permission to gain access to the target group? (e.g. principal, nursing manager, chairperson of school governing body) **Principal of the school**

f.   Do you require consent of an institutional authority for this study? (e.g. Department of Education, Department of Health) **Yes**

If YES, specify: **Department of Education**

10.   INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS

a.   What information will be offered to the participant before he/she consents to participate? (Attach written information given as [*Appendix 3*] and any oral information given as [*Appendix 4*])

b.   Who will provide this information to the participant? (Give name and role)

Researcher: CD. Rensburg . I am a teacher at the school where the research will be conducted.

c.   Will the information provided be complete and accurate? **Yes**

If NO, describe the nature and extent of the deception involved and explain the rationale for the necessity of this deception: **Not applicable**

12.   PRIVACY, ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY OF DATA

a.   Will the participant be identified by name in your research? **No**

If YES, justify: **Not applicable**

b.   Are provisions made to protect participant's rights to privacy and anonymity and to preserve confidentiality with respect to data? **Yes**

If NO, justify. If YES, specify: **Not applicable**

c.   If mechanical methods of observation be are to be used (e.g. one-way mirrors, recordings, videos etc. will participant's consent to such methods be obtained? **Yes**

If NO, justify: **Not applicable**

d.   Will data collected be stored in any way? **Yes**

If YES, please specify: (i) By whom? (ii) How many copies? (iii) For how long? (iv) For what reasons? (v) How will participant's anonymity be protected? **(i) CD Rensburg (ii) One. (iii) Until dissertation is approved (iv) Fo**

verification if necessary (v) Nowhere during the research process will participants' names be mentioned.

e.   Will stored data be made available for re-use? **No**

If YES, how will participant's consent be obtained for such re-usage? **Not applicable**

f.   Will any part of the project be conducted on private property (including shopping centres)? **No**

If YES, specify and state how consent of property owner is to be obtained: **Not applicable**

g.   Are there any contractual secrecy or confidentiality constraints on this data? **No**
If YES, specify: **Not applicable**

14.   FEEDBACK

a.   Will feedback be given to participants? **Yes**
If YES, specify whether feedback will be written, oral or by other means and describe how this is to be given (e.g. to each individual immediately after participation, to each participant after the entire project is completed, to all participants in a group setting, etc.): **Progress reports to participants and a copy of the dissertation to the principal.**

b.   If you are working in a school or other institutional setting, will you be providing teachers, school authorities or equivalent a copy of your results? **Yes**
If YES, specify, if NO, motivate: **A copy of the dissertation**

16.   ETHICAL AND LEGAL ASPECTS

The Declaration of Helsinki (2000) or the Belmont Report will be included in the references: **Yes**
If NO, motivate: **Not applicable**
(A copy of the Belmont Report is available at the following link for reference purposes: http://www.nmmu.ac.za/documents/rcd/The%20Belmont%20Report.pdf)

a.   I would like the REC-H to take note of the following additional information:
I am a teacher aiming to build relationships with past pupils to engage them in supporting the school .

18.   DECLARATION

If any changes are made to the above arrangements or procedures, I will bring these to the attention of the Research Ethics Committee (Human). I have read, understood and will comply with the *Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Research* *and Education at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University* and have taken cognisance of the availability (on-line) of the Medical Research Council Guidelines on Ethics for Research (http://www.sahealthinfo.org/ethics/).
All participants are aware of any potential health hazards or risks associated with this study.
I am not aware of potential conflict(s) of interest which should be considered by the Committee.
If affirmative, specify: **Not applicable**

26 August 2013

SIGNATURE: **Dr AJ Greyling** (Primary Responsible Person) Date

26 August 2013

SIGNATURE: **Cheryl Rensburg** (Principal Investigator/Researcher) Date

20. SCRUTINY BY FACULTY AND INTRA-FACULTY ACADEMIC UNIT

This study has been discussed, and is supported, at Faculty and Departmental (or equivalent) level. This is attested to by the signature below of a Faculty (e.g. RTI) and Departmental (e.g. HoD) representative, neither of whom may be a previous signator.

NAME and CAPACITY (e.g. HoD) SIGNATURE Date

NAME and CAPACITY (e.g. Chair:FacRTI) SIGNATURE Date

22. APPENDICES

In order to expedite the processing of this application, please ensure that all the required information, as specified below, is attached to your application. Examples of some of these documents can be found on the Research Ethics webpage (http://www.nmmu.ac.za/default.asp?id=4619&bhcp=1). You are not compelled to use the documents which have been provided as examples – they are made available as a convenience to those who do not already have them available.

APPENDIX 1: Research methodology

Attach the full protocol and methodology to this application, as "Appendix 1" and include the data collection instrument e.g. questionnaire if applicable.

APPENDIX 2: Informed consent form

If no written consent is required, motivate at 4a). The intention is that you make sure you have covered all the aspects of informed consent as applicable to your work.

APPENDIX 3: Written information given to participant prior to participation

Attach as "Appendix 3". The intention is that you make sure you have covered all the aspects of written information to be supplied to participants, as applicable to your work.

APPENDIX 4: Oral information given to participant prior to participation

If applicable, attach the required information to your application, as "Appendix 4".

APPENDIX 5, 6, 7: Institutional permissions

Attach any institutional permissions required to carry out the research e.g. Department of Education permission for research carried out in schools.

REC-H

77 Bougainvillea Drive

Westering

Port Elizabeth

 6025

15 August 2013

The District Director: Port Elizabeth

Department of Education: Eastern Cape

Private Bag X3931

Port Elizabeth

6056

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN SCHOOL

Dear Dr. N. Ntsiko

My name is Cheryl Rensburg, and I am a PhD student in Educational Research, at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth. The research I wish to conduct for my Doctoral thesis is: ***How to facilitate alumni support that would add value to high schools***. The aim of the study would complement the vision and mission of the school. This project will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. AJ Greyling, associate doctor at NMMU.

I am hereby seeking your consent to conduct research at the above school, which will at times involve the school management, staff and School Governing Body. The research will in no respect disrupt the school programme, because the research will be conducted after school hours. I aim to honour the integrity of the school by conducting this research according to the prescribed ethical principles set out by the Ethics Committee of NMMU.

If you should require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me on **083 657 9247** or **cherylrensburg@gmail.com**

Yours sincerely,

 ………………………………..

Cheryl Rensburg

Persal no: 50327585

APPENDIX A.

<div align="right">

77Bougainvillea Drive

Westering

Port Elizabeth

6025

2 June 2013

</div>

The Principal

Arcadia Secondary School

Rensburg Street

Arcadia

Port Elizabeth

6059

Dear Mr. G. Prince

Request for permission to conduct research in school.

I am an educator at the above- mentioned school, as well as a part-time PhD student at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), doing research under the supervision of Dr. A.J. Greyling.

My study is a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) inquiry on how to facilitate alumni support that would add value to the school. The aim of my study is to engage past pupils in order to benefit the present learners.

I hereby seek permission from the principal, the staff and School Governing Body to conduct my research at school. The investigation will be guided by a strict code of ethics, as prescribed by the Ethics Committee of NMMU. All data generated during the research will be treated in a strictly confidential manner.

I am available to answer queries you may have regarding the nature of my investigation.

I thank you in anticipation of a favourable response.

Yours Sincerely,

………………………………………

Cheryl Rensburg

………………………………………

…..

Persal number: 50327585   Date

Response

I, Mr. G Prince, freely and voluntarily grant permission for the school to participate in the research project: ***How to facilitate alumni support for high schools***.

Principal: …………………………………

Name in print: …………………………….

Date: …………………………………

FACILITATING ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT FOR A LOW RESOURCED SCHOOL USING A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

PROJECT INFORMATION STATEMENT

Dear Participant

My name is Cheryl Rensburg, a Doctoral student at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). I wish to conduct research, in a participatory manner, on the value of alumni support for high schools. I am therefore seeking your willingness to participate in the study, because your participation would be a valuable component to this study. You will be required to form part of a working group, participate in focus group discussions, be interviewed and write reflections of your interactions in a personal journal that will be available to me.

Further outcomes of the research are to determine how alumni involvement can add value to their former high school and to develop a model on facilitating alumni involvement for high schools in general.

An application to the NMMU Research Ethics Committee for approval to conduct the study has been submitted. I also submitted applications to the Department of Education as well as the school principal to conduct the research in the school. For more information you may contact me on 083 657 9247 or e-mail cherylrensburg@gmail.com.

I sincerely hope that you will consider this invitation to participate in a positive light.

I thank you for your time.

CD Rensburg.

(Researcher)

……………………………………….

I ……………………………………. agree to be a participant in this study.

Signature: …………………………………

Date: …………………………………….

Place: ……………………………………

APPENDIX A 3.

METHODOLOGY

The research is qualitative, because it portrays multiple views of reality (Cresswell, 2013: 44) particularly the perspectives of the participants. It follows a dialectical relationship between theory and practice (praxis), because the Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology requires an integration of theory and knowledge (Zuber-Skerritt, (2011: 15), especially as new knowledge is created during the research process. The research will be conducted in a democratic and participatory manner, giving voice to the views and contributions of the participants.

The study is situated within the critical paradigm, because it challenges power structures within the school community, it pursues the truthfulness of knowledge, and seeks to raise awareness of how alumni can render support for their former high school, explains Hartas (2012: 46).

PAR methodologies will be used, because the study is undertaken collaboratively with co-participants (alumni), and founded on facilitating action learning and action research. The research is focused on problem-solving, committed to learning, as groups work together; investigating the causes of problems which may adversely affect the school community, and offering opportunities for change, offer Powers and Allaman (2012: 1).

The research focuses on a particular case study within a school community with limited resources. The case study under investigation is a contemporary

phenomenon of: ***How to facilitate alumni support for their former high school.*** The alumni have a well-defined ontological status as citizens in their community, whose voices are more likely to be heard and acknowledged, elaborates Hartas (2010: 162). The participants consist of members of the school management team, teachers, alumni, friends and donors. The participants, mostly the alumni, will be required to generate data through being interviewed, forming part of focus group discussions, writing reflective journals and narratives, which will represent their voice in the study. The narratives written by participants will enable me to understand how they perceive the research process and their contribution to it. The alumni will become narrators, telling their story in their own voice.

The research will follow non-linear action-reflection cycles. As alumni interact with one another, they will share their thoughts, and create a platform for new knowledge. I will review the data with the participants (triangulating), working inductively from the particular data to building patterns and themes. The process of generating data and analyzing it will form a continuous process, because of the cyclical method being followed.

The validity of the research will be ensured, because the research will be done collaboratively. It will become more understandable to participants, and its practicality will be increased, because participants will be involved in the design process, goals and methods of data generation (Springer, 2010: 505).

I purpose to follow ethical procedures throughout the study as suggested by Punch (2012: 50) of free consent, honesty and trust, considering risks attached to the study and ensuring authentic participation. I will follow the codes of conduct set out by the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University which provides a legal framework for ethical research.

APPENDIX C

Dear Alumni,
I am challenging all of US as part of the Arcadia School Community to think about the following:

1. Do we have stories of hope, of questions, of potential, and of prophecy?

2. What challenges or demands us to get involved, participate and act, while simultaneously offering connections of your generation, encouragement or a challenge to excel?

3. What does this school (Arcadia) demands or even propels us to participate, connect or get involved?

4. What does my former school mean to me? DOES IT SPEAK OF A PROUD HERITAGE, a spoken possibility, the ability to survive (against all odds) and achieve? Does it speak of a special creativity amidst strive and an endurance that DOES not quit?

5. Does it call US to invest our cultural wealth, the preservation of our rich cultural goods to the next generation?

6. How do we write about our PERSONAL and INDIVIDUAL triumphs and strategies for success without YOUR participation?

I KNOW there is a sense of pride and recognition of a connection with ARCADIA SECONDARY SCHOOL. There is a UNIQUE heritage that sustained you through your challenges
Let us share it with the NEXT GENERATION (the current learners of ASSS) of professionals, architects, attorneys, doctors, entrepreneurs, artisans, artists, dancers, musicians, etc.
I am looking forward to reading your narratives.
PS. Do not be modest about what you have achieved. Do not sensor the challenges either.
I thank you in anticipation.
Cheryl Rensburg
(Alumni Coordinator)

REFLECTIONS OF MATRICULANTS ON ALUMNI WEEK 28-30JULY 2014

1. What is your evaluation of alumni week?

M1 It motivated me.It convinced me that I am able to rise above my circumstances. It made me realise to strive for better. Made me realize that my matric certificate is the key to success.

M2 It inspired me. It showed me something about life and what I can get out of it. I took the words to heart.

M3 The alumni week was uplifting. Gave me a lot of guidelines on how to achieve my goals. It made me realize that it is good to start at the bottom and how to rise above your circumstances to reach the top.

2. In what ways can alumni influence the school?

M1 They can have a positive impact on learners. They can develop their confidence. They can help learners rise above their circumstances. Remind them of the school's mission and vision.

M2 Can have a positive impact on learners. Mobilise learners to do their best. Influence them to leave the wrong actions. Learners can be influenced by the positive words.

M3 Encourage learners to think about their future and what they want to achieve. Show learners that they can become anything they want to. It gave learners power, hope and ideas. Showed them how the past learners of Arcadia became successful and that this generation can do the same.

APPENDIX D

Dear alumni,

Warm greetings to all. I trust that you are all productively and creatively improving the contexts where you find yourselves. I wish to share the following quote and trust that it will resonate with you.

"We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give"
Winston Churchill – Alumni Handbook, 2002.

I am currently interpreting the research data and writing the findings of my thesis entitled, "**Facilitating alumni support for a low-resourced school using participatory methodologies**". Because we have followed a participatory process throughout this research journey, I continually seek your input. It is also important for sustained alumni participation in the school that your voices are heard. In a previous letter Iappealed to you to **write narratives** depicting how you have overcome challenges in seeking your niche in life. I need to know the impact Arcadia Secondary School had in you overcoming these challenges.

I am also reminding you that we will be having our second Alumni Week during the last week of August 2015. I believe that we have done pioneering work in this regard as 2014 was the first year in the history of the school that we were able to have such a momentous event. This year you have even more to look forward to as we are celebrating our 40th anniversary of the school's existence. I know that we have made an impact on many learners who have sat at these desks and played on the playground.

Along this research journey I have been in contact with so many alumni as far afield as DuBai, the UK, USA, and in different provinces of our country. I have had e-mails from alumni working at UWC, positive input from those working in the municipal treasury, in education, business, health services, justice department, etc. I am proud that Arcadia Secondary School is well represented in all spheres of society.

I trust that our alumni will be well represented during 'Alumni Week 2015'. We are looking forward to seeing you there.

Regards

Cheryl Rensburg
(Alumni coordinator)
Contacts: 041 -4812247/ 0836579247

ACTION LEARNING SET: 8 APRIL 2013

REFLECTION:

The Skype meeting went better than I anticipated. I was initially irritated, because I understood that it was scheduled for 15h00, it only got underway at 17h00. It did however give our group time to discuss aspects of our reflections. Reflecting leaves me with uncomfortable feelings, having to sift what is important and what may seem trivial to others. After the meeting I have come to realize that nothing can be considered to be unimportant, or one should have the courage to reflect, considering that it is something that has been on one's mind.

I have come to learn that one develops greater perspective within a group set up. Improving communication through whatsapp is a great idea. I was so insular in thinking that I'm the only one under pressure- I just have to prioritise. I have motivated when I noticed how some group members send their reflections promptly. I am going to make a greater effort not to leave my reflections for the last minute.

RELATIONSHIPS:

Sharing resource material can improve our projects. Thank you to some of the group members who have already started sharing their reflections, articles, etc. it is much appreciated. Working in a participatory manner in our projects as well as a learning set is very empowering, because we grow together as a group in our understanding of the methodologies of PALAR, and as individuals we are empowered as we are overcoming the obstacles in our practice.

I am also writing my reflections early as I have to prepare for my proposal defense over the weekend. Mandie has shared her experience with Farah and myself. I really appreciate her input. It has put me at ease when she remarked that the panel has your best interest at heart. They ask the questions, because they need to know whether the candidate understand what the undertaking entails.

I am encouraged when I consider that other group members have the same concerns that I have, they grapple with similar challenges and that we'r merely an e-mail apart

RECOGNITION:

As we share ideas, we are also validating each other, because as we have the confidence to share, we also are being validated by group members as they accept suggestions.

OTHER:

The technical challenges we experienced during the Skype session were unpleasant, because we lost some valuable points. We are however moving to a better venue. Initially, I felt that the meeting was extra work, but I left the meeting encouraged, enriched, empowered and enthused for the next step in my research journey: the defense of my proposal on 15 April 2013.

Thank you to all the members of the Learning Set.

CHERYL RENSBURG

APPENDIX E

ARCADIA ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

MISSION

The Alumni association supports and enhances the realization of the school's mission through maintaining and expanding mutually beneficial relationships with its members and through utilizing and maximizing their expertise, goodwill and influence.

Goals & Functions

1. To enhance the image of the association as
   - An important stakeholder of the school
   - An asset of the school who supports the realization of the school's mission and goals
2. To foster loyalty to and pride among past pupils, friends of Arcadia SS through effective communication so that they may positively influence others.
3. To provide and foster the provision of opportunities for Alumni to contribute in financial and other mean to the advancement of the school.
4. To provide Alumni and friends of Arcadia with opportunities to benefit from their relationship with the school.

Alumni roles

- To serve the needs of the school.
- To share your knowledge and skills (volunteer professional services, present talks and assist with mentoring).
- Start chapters and clubs.
- Help secure donations for the school.
- To introduce current learners to a proud school history and positive role models.
- To promote Arcadia as the first choice school to others.
- To raise funds and support specific projects e.g. library/media centre, computer lab, maintenance, bursary fund.

What have past pupils achieved thus far?

- Lay a concrete slab at the assembly point
- Converted classrooms into a school hall
- Computer room for educators
- Donations to complete the flooring.

How you can assist us

- Sign up as an Alumni member
- Support our events and fundraisers
- Recruit more members
- Share ideas, expertise and networks to assist your alma mater to become an even greater school

For more info contact the Principal:

Mr G. Prince on 041- 4812247 or
Alumni Chairperson , Mr. P.Somerset on 0822979200
Alumni Coordinator: C Rensburg on 0836579247