

## Educational development in rural schools: exemplifying the personal dimension of community

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Contemporary South African education is dominated by debates surrounding quality and effectiveness in relation to the implementation of measurement-driven, functional educational policies. As suggested elsewhere qualitative and effective policy initiatives driven by functional or instrumental preoccupations are not only conceptually flawed but also deprive education of its "wider human purposes". The contention in this article is that considering the functional as more important than the personal is not sufficient to improve schooling. The main argument is to show that educational development reduced to the functional domain at the expense of the personal would constrain the improvement of schooling in rural communities. I present my own understanding of the personal in educational development in rural schools and base my critique of functionally driven initiatives on Michael Fielding's recent article. I begin by outlining Fielding's account of community by mapping key philosophical foundations of the concept, in particular picking up on his philosophical distinction between the functional and personal dimensions of community and extending it to my own understanding of education and educational development. I argue against educational development predominantly according to the functional dimension of community. I conclude that the exclusion of the personal dimension of community in the implementation of educational development makes such development inadequate. This may affirm the necessity of the personal dimension of community in facilitating the potential of educators, learners and parents in historically disadvantaged schools.

### Introduction: philosophical foundations of community

Verified against Macmurray's account of community, Fielding (2000:399) distinguishes two strands of the concept: the personal and functional forms of human engagement. According to Fielding (2000:399) "functional relations characterize those kinds of encounter we have with each other that are instrumental, encounters in which we enter into relations with each other in order to get something done, in order to achieve particular purposes". The predominance of the functional dimension of community characterises the essence of education policy documents in South Africa aimed at achieving an outcomes-based education system which represents a break with past apartheid education policies. In contrast to the functional dimension of community, Fielding (2000:399) claims that "personal relations of community are not aspectual, task specific or role defined; rather they are expressive of who we are as persons". His account of the personal dimension of community is heavily influenced by the work of Macmurray (1950), one of the great, less acknowledged figures of twentieth-century British philosophy. At the root of Macmurray's account of the personal dimension of community are two fundamental philosophical principles: *viz.* freedom and equality:

Equality and freedom, as constitutive principles of fellowship (community), condition one another reciprocally. Equality is a condition of freedom in human relations. For if we do not treat one another as equals, we exclude freedom from the relationship. Freedom, too, conditions equality. For if there is constraint between us, there is fear; and to counter the fear we must seek control over its object, and attempt to subordinate the other person to our own power. Any attempt to achieve freedom without equality, or to achieve equality without freedom, must therefore be self-defeating (Macmurray in Fielding, 2000:400).

In taking stock of Fielding's exposition of the personal dimension of community, it is perhaps worth reflecting on the twin principles of freedom and equality that provide the philosophical foundations of the concept. On the one hand, the personal dimension of community emphasises the equal position of all ethnicities, cultures, groups and individuals. They are not superior to one another in order to prevent marginalisation and exclusion. Equality allows everyone to see themselves not as homogenous, but as individuals with "equal worth". Everyone is an equal and should be allowed to acquire the competences to transcend their present social barriers and to act in diverse

areas of social life. Fielding (2000:400) makes the claim that equality involves the recognition of difference and variety amongst individuals.

On the other hand, the personal dimension of community considers the importance of individual freedom of action within diverse social spaces to engender emancipation. In other words, freedom releases the "the whole self into activity ... without constraint (thus making the idea of community) ... deeply emancipatory" (Fielding, 2000:401). Fielding's articulation of freedom resonates with Bowles and Gintis' (1987:4) account of liberty, which "entails freedom of thought and association, freedom of political, cultural and religious expression, and the right to control one's body and express one's preferred spiritual, aesthetic, and sexual style of life". Hence, the personal dimension of community relies on the complementary philosophical relationship between freedom and equality:

For community to become real the mode of relation characterized by freedom to be and become ourselves in and through relations of personal equality must take place within the context of certain dispositions and intentions towards other persons (Fielding, 2000:400).

Having located the personal dimension of community within the complementary relationship between freedom and equality, it emerges that community is not fundamentally about place, time, memory, or even a sense of belonging together in a group. Rather, community is a process in which people regard each other in a certain way i.e. love, care and concern for the other and in which they relate to each other and act together in mutuality as persons. Fielding (2000:401) articulates such an understanding of community as "the shared, mutuality of experience ... informed by the values of freedom (freedom to be and become yourself) and equality (equal worth) which condition each other reciprocally".

Thus far, it seems that Fielding's compelling account of the personal dimension of community has been concerned with two aspects: firstly, and most importantly, to explain community as a process of human engagement; and secondly, to ground the notion of community in purposes that are expressive of individuals as persons with both the freedom to be or become themselves and to experience a sense of equal worth. I shall now elaborate on these two key principles of the personal dimension of community in detail with specific reference to educational development initiatives in two rural secondary schools in the Northern Cape.

### Exemplifying personal instances at Maikaelelo Combined, Ratang Thuto and Blinklip secondary schools

#### Illustrating the personal dimension of community

Community as a personal process of human engagement seems to be a more satisfactory notion of community than current thinking has thus far produced and it is best illustrated in the work of Anderson (1983), *Imagined Communities*. Anderson (1983:17) articulates a concept of community which is grounded in a notion that to imagine ourselves as members of a community implies that there exists a certain bond or recognisable feeling of closeness amongst us. My concern with such a notion of community is that it explains the concept in terms of feeling "well-disposed towards each other". People can tacitly recognise a certain bond of closeness amongst themselves without even engaging willingly with each other's interests or pedagogical commitments. Academics at a particular university might recognise a certain bond of closeness amongst themselves in educating students through an educational programme. Yet they cannot claim to constitute a community of educators. In this sense, merely for academics to be in each other's presence and to recognise a sense of closeness in delivering a common educational programme is not sufficient to achieve a sense of community. What constitutes a community is, that human beings engage personally and willingly in collective action, rather than allowing themselves "to float freely and inconsequentially in the ambience of wistful and merely sentimental aspiration" (Fielding, 2000:403). Also, that their form of human engagement triggers a sense of caring towards one another — where caring involves a mutual action whereby human beings do not want to let themselves and others down (Fielding, 2000:408).

First, whilst making a strong case for community as a personal process of human engagement, I want to bring out the expressive purpose of its application in the domain of education. The concept of education is shaped by a necessary condition that human beings engage in a transaction. In this human transaction educators and learners are initiated into an inherited tradition of human activities, aspirations, sentiments, images, opinions, beliefs, modes of understanding, customs and practices, that is, "states of mind" (Oakeshott, 1998:284-287). In this instance, a necessary condition which guides education, is that human beings are initiated into an inheritance of human achievements, understanding and belief. To be initiated into an inherited tradition of knowledge — what Oakeshott (1998:287) refers to as "world of meanings and understandings" — is to engage with such knowledge. This implies that one not only does certain things but also understands and learns to understand what one is doing.

The concept of education sees to challenge the very idea that inherited meanings and understandings are transmitted to "newcomers" who uncritically accept and apply such knowledge. For this reason Oakeshott (1998:287) suggests a notion of education as follows:

Education is not acquiring a stock of ready-made ideas, images, sentiments, beliefs etc.; it is learning to look, to listen, to think, to feel, to imagine, to believe, to understand, to choose and to wish.

This concept of education explains that human beings ought to engage not to do "this or that", but to learn how to think, understand, imagine and enact themselves in relation to a "world of meanings and understandings". In addition, human beings also learn "to listen" to what others have to say. In other words, they may be willing to engage personally with the other. They agree to act in community (Gutman, 1998:34); to hold a sort of dialogism. Dialogism is a notion explained by Jones (1998:150) as follows:

Citizens of different ethnic, national and cultural backgrounds can participate in an investigation of one another's acknowledged prejudices (in particular their feelings about the sort of life they want to lead) with the aim of arriving at a compromise to which all participants can acquiesce without resentment and which aims at the optimal satisfaction of the conflicting prejudices of all participants.

Dialogism for the sake of compromise opens up the possibility for in-

dividuals or different groups as persons to interrelate among themselves with the aim of revealing their preferred perspectives. Talking together in different voices, aimed at addressing the differences of opinion which emerge through dialogism, participants have an opportunity to acquire a better understanding of each other. They also develop a greater self-understanding whereby they bring their prejudices to the fore and express them to others (Jones, 1998:150). The notion of dialogism seems to be grounded in the personal dimension of community as articulated by Fielding. His idea of the personal dimension of community rests on the premise that "understanding emerges from ... it, in which both parties have the confidence and the courage to raise difficult issues, in which the course of the conversation (dialogue) is a genuinely joint endeavour" (Fielding, 2000:412).

I want to relate Fielding's (2000:399) idea of the personal dimension of community as "a genuinely joint endeavour" to the educational development initiatives I have been involved with for the past two years. But first I shall explain what I mean by educational development. My understanding of educational development builds on the ideas which emanate from debates surrounding transformation of higher education as contained in education policy documents such as the Education White Paper 3 on Higher Education (1997b:12). This policy document emphasises the importance of development as creating conditions to facilitate transformation of the higher education system:

... to enable it to contribute to the common good of society through the production, acquisition and application of knowledge, the building of human capacity, and the provision of lifelong learning opportunities.

One finds that the preamble of the Higher Education Act (1997a) emphasises restructuring and transforming programmes at higher education institutions as imperative to respond to the human resource, economic and development needs of South African society. It is significant that both these education policy documents explain educational development as the production, application and acquisition of knowledge, capacity enhancement and lifelong learning opportunities for all South Africans, in particular those who have been previously denied access to educational programmes. In a different way, educational development is primarily aimed at correcting the inequalities of the past concerning access to and development of historically disadvantaged communities in educational matters. Educational development should at least be progressively tilted towards increased participation on the part of previously disadvantaged communities. Development in this sense contains possibilities for previously disadvantaged communities to improve themselves and their situation through knowledge use, capacity enhancement and opportunities for lifelong learning, if the condition of access is satisfied. Hamlyn (1998:144) supports this view by claiming that educational development is constituted by "conditions that merely make possible the actualisation of the potentiality that was already there; they are not so much independent and direct causes of what happens".

#### Illustrating the functional dimension of community

The educational development initiatives I am actively engaged with in the Northern Cape (1999-2000) want to establish conditions and possibilities for school communities (parents, educators, learners and education managers / administrators) whereby their potentialities can be evoked. In the Postmasburg area of the Northern Cape province, I worked mainly in three secondary schools: Maikaelelo Combined, Ratang Thuto and Blinklip. The first two are ex-Department of Education and Training (DET) schools and consist mainly of black learners and educators, whereas Blinklip, an ex-House of Representatives (HoR) school is predominantly comprised of coloured learners and educators with about five white staff members. These schools are fairly isolated from the nearest towns, namely Olifantshoek and Postmasburg. Learners are mainly from the surrounding rural areas whose parents are mostly farm workers, with some of them working at the nearest military base in Lowatla approximately 100km from both

Olifantshoek and Postmasburg. The lack of employment opportunities is alarming and is further exacerbated by the absence of big business operations. The nearest higher education institutions are in Upington and Kimberley, approximately 200km from both Postmasburg and Olifantshoek. My joint endeavour with the three schools involves improving the school governance which, we contend, can cultivate a climate of dialogism among various stakeholders. This situation in turn, can lead to improved teaching and learning with reference to Mathematics and Science subjects. Over the past two years I have conducted six three-hour workshops with Maikaelelo Combined and Ratang Thuto and two three-hour sessions with the senior management team of Blinklip (I shall later explain in a discussion of the functional dimension of community why my involvement with Blinklip was minimal).

The question arises: what made the dialogical process of community through which various stakeholders engaged in at Maikaelelo Combined and Ratang Thuto "a genuinely joint (and personal) endeavour"? From the outset educators at both schools had the confidence and courage to raise sensitive issues related to lack of learner and educator discipline, such as late coming of learners, absenteeism from classes and learner loitering. Other difficult issues include: the lack of educator motivation, conflicting staff relations, time wasting, lack of teamwork, unco-ordinated planning on the part of educators, vandalism, unruly learner behaviour and daily interruptions. At both schools educators, learners and parents serving on the school governing bodies (SGBs) agreed to formulate the following strategies in order to address various problems identified at the schools:

- A vision which embraces notions such as producing effective learners, improving the status of the schools, developing educational standards, re-skilling teachers and harnessing the civic responsibility of learners;
- Mission statements which relate to improving discipline, student achievement, educator development, parental involvement and collaboration with neighbouring schools;
- Short- and long-term action steps related to late-coming such as the implementation of detention classes, vandalism through the implementation of a ground duty system, unruly student behaviour, poor school attendance and the devaluation of the schools; and
- Action plans to deal with motivation, self-management and time-management of educators including how to motivate learners.

What emerges from the compromise reached among educators and parents at the two schools is that their dialogism extended and radicalised the notion of community. This made possible a situation whereby different stakeholders in the education process could share and live together in solidarity, whereby educators, learners and parents wanted their actions to be directed by the community of which they are members. Jones (1998:150) adequately summarises this sort of dialogism:

This is not the usual debate about truth and who is right or wrong. It is an attempt to understand others and ourselves as people from different backgrounds and is the basis for a compromise aimed at allowing us to live together as a functioning and unified social unit rather than as a collection of warring factions living in geographical proximity.

The various stakeholders at the two schools throughout our workshops sessions always considered rationally how conflict can be avoided and how tolerance and compromise towards different points of view can be encouraged. Educators, learners and parents acknowledged that to maintain unjustifiable partiality for their respective prejudices, without encouraging dialogism, would have been a violation of the personal dimension of community. They knew that mutual respect for one another, without educators imposing their views on learners and parents, made the personal dimension of community through dialogism even more unavoidable. In this regard it is worth referring to Jones (1998:152), who clarifies the following:

A violation of the principle of impartiality (and community) is

simply the first step towards the gross violations of the principle of respect for persons (my italics) which racist practices constitute, because they involve imposing the views of a dominant group on another without acknowledging the members of the subordinate group as potential or actual autonomous agents, beings of praxis or centres of practical reason.

For educational development, to be a genuinely joint endeavour, dialogism and the recognition of the universality of prejudices should constantly be asserted. We cannot hope to succeed in achieving a community where the personal dimension is predominant (such as one achieved at the two schools) if we do not rationally consider dialogism to be a requirement for collective action.

Moreover, in collaboration with the circuit manager and regional director of the Postmasburg area, both the SGBs of Maikaelelo Combined and Ratang Thuto willingly agreed to mutual action whereby they wanted to support one another. They emphasised their concern and care about solving educational problems at the schools. Some of the strategies they suggested involve the following:

- Implementing a "Matric Intervention Programme" initiated by the circuit manager from 28–31 March 2000 to support educators with subject content and methodological strategies;
- Using uniform examination question papers for schools involving Grades 10 – 12;
- Providing guidance to school management teams (SMTs) with the aim of turning around the low performance levels at the schools;
- Assisting with the training of SGBs, bearing in mind that illiteracy in the community is increasing;
- Monitoring the schools with respect to preparation for teaching, completion of syllabi and management and leadership; and
- Initiating the schools into the complexities of labour relations, policies and procedures, in particular the envisaged rules of contract between educators and school administrators advocated strongly by the teacher unions.

These initiatives on the part of SGBs and the Northern Cape Education Department (NCED) administrators are very much attuned to what can be understood as the personal dimension of community, whereby people trigger a sense of caring towards one another. In other words these role-players' strategies are grounded in a kind of mutual action whereby they do not want to let themselves and others down. Mutual action whereby people do not want to let themselves and others down suggests that people have a responsibility to develop a sense of care in their relations with each other at an individual level and at the same time relate their care to societal issues. Dewey and Bentley (1989:247) suggest that the notion of caring in community "ranges from solicitude, through caring for in the sense of fondness, and through being deeply stirred, over to caring for in the sense of taking care, looking after, paying attention systematically, or minding".

If we do not care, then we do not engage personally in community. Thorough educational development, what I assume happened at the schools and among the various role players, must be care-full. Fielding (2000:407) framed his understanding of the personal dimension of community by linking it to a heightened sense of caring which engenders "confidence and trust" amongst people, as well as enhancing people's interest in one another in a way that would enable them to exhibit "a generosity of spirit and a willingness to contribute in some way".

In essence, what constitutes the personal in community, is that human beings engage willingly in collective action, through caring they develop confidence and trust in one another in order not to let themselves and others down. For people not to want to let themselves and others down means they want to develop a deepened and shared mutuality, that is, a sense of community. In such a community they feel that the real point of engaging in educational development is the hope that their creative capacities would come to the surface and that they would acquire new forms of human freedom to solve educational problems. In this sense, the point of human engagement and caring is

to encourage the widest possible social co-operation and trust among different people. Fielding (2000:408) argues that educational development through human engagement which is constituted by care, co-operation and trust "is at once a profoundly personal (my italics) undertaking, that is to say one that is ultimately about human being and becoming and also an undertaking that is, if not utopian, then infused with hope". This is what happened at both Maikaelelo Combined and Ratang Thuto. For educators, learners and parents to improve the conditions at the two schools is a profoundly personal undertaking. These people are aware that their broader community is "ill-informed and poorly educated", which impacts negatively on their effectiveness in functioning as SGBs. Yet, they are optimistic and hopeful that their SGBs would be successful in achieving the following:

- Creating structures and opportunities to accommodate participation on the part of community members;
- Playing an important role in fostering awareness amongst the community of its indispensable role in the process of providing quality education to learners, in particular, considering the poor 1999 matriculation results of learners. If this situation continues, the possibility exists that the new matriculants (2001) might be sent to another school in the area. This would result in certain staff members having to be redeployed and the principal demoted;
- Gaining more clarity about the different roles the SGBs should perform in the effective governance of the school. For them our workshops were held at the "correct time", as the SGBs had only been recently constituted.

I have discussed Fielding's notion of the personal dimension of community as primarily a process of human engagement dictated by care, co-operation and trust. I shall now examine the implications of implementing educational policies in South Africa along the lines of the functional dimension of community with specific reference to Blinklip secondary school at the expense of community as "a profoundly personal undertaking".

### **Blinklip Secondary School and the functional dimension of community**

Earlier I mentioned that the functional dimension of community brings about an understanding that human relations are primarily aimed at getting something done — what Fielding refers to as achieving particular purposes. I shall now elaborate on this understanding of community with reference to educational development initiatives at Blinklip. During the first of our two visits to Blinklip the principal and senior management team (SMT) emphasised the need for administrative restructuring in the light of the appointment of the new deputy principal. The SMT strongly advocated the need for uniform national guidelines that would facilitate the process of disciplining students. In fact, they attributed the inadequate mathematics and science results of the school to the presence of under-qualified educators and learner indiscipline. Whilst these are important functional dimensions to schooling which need to be addressed, it is more important to bring the reason for better learner performances in mathematics and science "within the compass of human well-being and not the other way around" (Fielding, 2000:402). Learners may perform better in Mathematics and Science, but whether this would make them better educated or their educators better teachers is not a question that can be addressed with conviction as long as we persist in disengaging the functional from the personal.

According to a senior management member there are strong racist overtones among educators and learners at school which offer little hope for reconciliation in the community. This suggests that better Mathematics and Science performances would not necessarily make learners and educators better performers. This is so because high performance efficiency for the sake of the functional at the expense of the personal does not provide for real change in the attitudes of people. It further betrays the immediate lives and prospects of learners who are

suffocated by a condescending climate of teacher conflict. Small wonder, then, that another senior management member expressed the need for more "personal co-operation" among staff members who seriously care about their students.

What I have argued for is not the abandonment of the functional, but rather that it is *through* the functional that the personal dimension of community "becomes real and authentic" (Fielding, 2000:403). Thinking along these lines, the senior staff members and I agreed to the implementation of development teams aimed at improving the competence, skills and attitudes of all personnel. Despite the acknowledgement that closer co-operation should be perpetuated through which the personal dimension of community could be exemplified, our intended workshops with the Blinklip staff never materialised. According to the principal the staff was not informed of the workshop, although we had been in contact with the school on numerous occasions to confirm our intended and mutually agreed upon plans. Moreover, in a two-hour discussion the principal confirmed that at this stage it would be inadvisable for his staff to participate in our workshops. He thought that Blinklip is not an academically under-achieving school and that workshops on governance and management would not necessarily have the desired impact. This suggests that, for the principal at least, the functional dimension of community was far more important than the personal. It seems as if conversations about better learner and educator performances are dominated by the senior management staff's agenda and by the principal's perceptions of what needs to be done, instead of being informed by the personal concerns of all educators through dialogism, in which staff members, learners and parents have the confidence, trust and courage to embark on a "genuinely joint endeavour". What makes this situation even more functional and marginalises "profound aspirations for the development of persons" is the circuit manager's suggestion that the following functional objectives should first be achieved:

- Implement all departmental (NCED) procedures related to decentralised school management, governance and quality assurance measures in the school;
- Initiate educational development that would complement the NCEDs' quality assurance measures for effective teaching, learning, management and governance;
- Monitor the implementation of the school's action plans related to aspects of good management and governance as emphasised in the first and only workshop.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I have shown that the personal dimension of community should co-exist with the functional. This should happen if educational development in historically disadvantaged rural schools in the Northern Cape is going to contribute significantly to shaping the human capacities of people, especially evoking their potentialities in relation to good schooling. The personal dimension of community should resonate with notions such as confidence, courage, trust and the willingness of educators, learners and parents to sustain co-operative, mutual relations for purposes of enriching educational development. In short, the "functional is for the personal" (Fielding, 2000:402), such as the situation which emerged from deliberations and strategies for improved schooling at Maikaelelo Combined and Ratang Thuto. When the functional gains priority over the personal, as at Blinklip, then disunity, conflict and an insubstantial disengagement from developments in the community would feature prominently in Blinklip educational development, hence undermining any co-existence of the personal and functional dimensions of community.

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