Learners' perceptions as to what contributes to their school success: a case study

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Some historically black schools manage to do quite well despite their circumstances, such as dire poverty. We aim at explicating some of the causal factors regarding the effectiveness of three schools in deep rural Mpumalanga, South Africa by tapping the perceptions of their learners. Data were collected from learner samples (four girls and four boys from each school, all of them black) by means of semi-structured focus group interviews. The results lead to the conclusion that the perceptions of disadvantaged black learners in this area, with respect to what contributes to their educational effectiveness, may also be understood in terms of hierarchical insights and awarenesses, the ontological basis of which seems to be successful pedagogical dialogue, with mutual acceptance as its fountainhead.

Keywords: educational effectiveness; learner perceptions; pedagogical dialogue; rural South Africa; school success

Introduction

A large percentage of South African schools are failing as institutions of teaching and learning (Johnson, 2009:461-462). In 2008, the matriculation pass rate in South Africa was only 62.5% (Ferreira, 2008). The fact that the borders between the 'effective' and the 'failing' schools are, to a large extent, coterminous with the racial divide remains a cause of concern: the historically white schools are (still) effective, while the majority of historically black schools are (still) ineffective. There are, however, among the historically black schools some that succeed against the odds, and the question is: 'What are they doing right?' The entire South African education system could benefit from the answer to this question.

The research reported in this article was aimed at identifying and explicating the learner-related causal factors of educational effectiveness at three effective historically black schools. This was done to find an answer to the question above as well as in response to calls to explore the perceptions of *learners* when studying educational effectiveness (e.g. Busher, 2007; Rudduck *et al.*, 1996; Howard & Gill, 2000).

The article commences with a conceptual-theoretical discussion of educational effectiveness, followed by an explication of the research method. The findings are then presented and discussed.

Conceptual-theoretical framework

Background

Educational effectiveness studies started in 1979 with publications by Brookover *et al.* and Rutter *et al.* who examined evidence and arguments about the

potential power of schooling to make a difference to learners' life chances (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008a:12-13). Over the years, the main research question in educational effectiveness research has referred to the *reasons* why one school or teacher does better than another when the differences in their performance cannot be attributed to differences in the learner population. Towards this end, a number of models of educational effectiveness from which researchers could build theory, have been proffered, the latest being the dynamic model developed by Creemers and Kyriakides (Creemers *et al.*, 2002; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008a; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008b; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2009).

Educational effectiveness studies have so far revealed that the influences on learner achievement are both integrated and multileveled in nature (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2009:294; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2009:294-295; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). The desire to explore the perceptions of specifically *learners* was informed by the above-mentioned Busher (2007), Rudduck *et al.* (1996) and Howard and Gill (2000). According to them, learners are often aware of the success of teachers' work as a consequence of their lived experiences in the complex socio-political circumstances of school, family and community. Their argument found support in the school effectiveness/ improvement studies of, amongst others, Hopkins *et al.* (1994), Sanders and Rivers (1996), Stoll and Fink (1996), Fullan (1997), Wright *et al.* (1997:63), Bews (2003:17), Rockoff (2003:1-2), Mckenzie and Van Winkelen (2004:6), Pianta *et al.* (2008:367) and Senge (2008).

Despite all these efforts, an EBSCOhost search (descriptors: *academic achievement*, *students' perceptions*, *education*, *school success*) of articles published from 2007 to date yielded no studies on learners' perceptions regarding what may contribute to their academic success at school. The majority of the studies, based on quantitative research designs (*cf.* Creemers & Kyriakides, 2009:296; Kyriakides & Creemers, 2008:189; Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 2009:121), only allude to the role of the learners in their own school success. In addition to this, there remains a shortage of well-developed theoretical models from which researchers can further build theory (Creemers *et al.*, 2002:294; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008a:5; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008b:183). In fact, Creemers and Kyriakides (2008b:184) are convinced that unless researchers succeed in explaining how they managed to measure factors such as offering information, asking questions, providing feedback, application of accountability procedures, providing help to learners, they will not be able to conduct studies that will help to generate and/or test theoretical models of educational effectiveness.

Educational effectiveness: a concept map
Educational effectiveness research is aimed at understanding the lessons to be drawn from existing educational practices (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008a: 3; Van Damme *et al.*, 2006:1; Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2005:90). Among the theories based on such lessons are those that explore the interaction between

school, classroom and learners, and how such interactions may contribute to learners' academic performance (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008a:4; Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2005:89-90). Research has revealed, for example, that the teacher is an important component of the school effect upon learners' progress (Creemers *et al.*, 2002:291; also Creemers & Kyriakides, 2009:295).

At the most basic level of the dynamic model (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2009:294), we find the teaching and learning situation in the classrooms and, consequently, the roles of the two main actors, the teacher and the learner. A number of studies on effective schools have revealed that the classroom level is more influential than the school level in terms of the performance of learners (Creemers *et al.*, 2002:291; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2009:293-296). In the final analysis, it is the quality of teacher-learner interactions that determines learner progress (Creemers *et al.*, 2002:292). McKenzie and Van Winkelen (2004:6) resultantly stress the importance of teachers continuously learning and developing their personal and professional knowledge.

During the past three decades researchers have relied heavily upon presage-product studies of teacher behaviour as predictors of learner achievement (see Kyriakides *et al.*, 2002:292-294). This kind of research has led to the identification of a range of teacher behaviours which have subsequently been proved to relate positively to learner achievement. Although the results of this research produced some consensus on virtues considered desirable in teachers, no information on the relations between these psychological factors and learner performance was provided (Creemers *et al.*, 2002:292-294).

A study by Van der Westhuizen *et al.* (2005:90) attempted to fill this lacuna by identifying three major categories of factors that have an effect on learners' academic achievement at school, namely, teaching-related factors, learner- and/or learning-related factors, and out-of-school factors. They demonstrate the important role that learner and learning-related factors such as learning motivation, achievement motivation, learning styles, learning strategies, abilities and talents, attention, self-efficacy, understanding, aspirations and peer relations play.

Opportunity to learn emerged from the different investigations as one of the major factors that is not only associated with both teacher and school effectiveness, but also with learner performance (Creemers *et al.*, 2002:294, 295). The Hay McBer model of teacher effectiveness (Department of Education and Employment, 2000) is of special relevance here since it highlights three factors within teachers' control that influence learner progress, namely, teaching skills, professional characteristics, and classroom climate (Creemers *et al.*, 2002:300). Combined, these three factors point to essential (i.e. ontic) pedagogical-dialogical features of *opportunity to learn*, such as offering information (structuring), asking questions (soliciting), providing feedback (reacting), the consistent application of accountability procedures, clarity with respect to when and how learners can get help and the options available to them when finished with an exercise (*op. cit.*:295). The focus in the research reported in this article was therefore on *learning-related* factors, and more

specifically on *opportunity-to-learn* (also see Creemers & Kyriakides 2009: 294-295; Teddlie & Reynolds 2000).

The above overview leads to the conclusion that the most important factors that have an effect on *learners*' academic achievement at school (McKenzie & Van Winkelen, 2004) correlate pragmatically with the essential (ontic) pedagogical-dialogical features of *opportunity-to-learn* at school and classroom level (also Creemers *et al.*, 2002) as well as articulate hermeneutically with essential learning-related factors at classroom level (Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2005). The empirical research reported below was designed against this conceptual backdrop, though in full awareness of two caveats, namely, that there is as yet no consensus about what the "content" of school effectiveness/improvement necessarily is (Ololube, 2006:76; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Stoll & Maltimore, 1997), and that any factor impacting on school effectiveness/improvement may be context-contingent (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2009:299).

Empirical research
Research design
Since this study focused on the exceptional, namely, schools that managed to rise above their circumstances, qualitative research methods, i.e. working with purposefully selected information-rich cases, were believed to be more suitable (Cresswell, 2009:174; Leedy & Ormond, 2005:74-75; also see Fairbrother, 2007:41-42; Ivankova *et al.*, 2008:257).

Aim of the empirical investigation
The aim of the investigation was to find an answer to the question: 'What are these particular schools doing right according to this sample of learners; what is it that these particular schools do to achieve these levels of excellence and to maintain their outstanding academic performance?'

Sampling
Three rural, historically black schools in the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa with exemplary results were purposely selected. Since the schools share essentially the same socio-economic background and exhibit the same well-known problems, a brief narrative description of one of them will cover the situation at all three.

The school in question is a combined primary-secondary school (Grades 1 to 12) with a learner enrolment of 1,384 in 2008. The Grade 12 learners were 107 in total, divided into two classes, with 53 and 54 learners in each (widely deviating from the Ministry of Education's norm of 35 per class). Although set in a deep rural area, it has — from 2002 to 2006 — been able to produce and sustain quality results with a 100% Grade 12 pass rate, and in 2007 a pass rate of 97.6%, 62.8% having gained university admission standard.

The school is one of the top 20 secondary schools nationally, and has

been recognised as such by the National Department of Education. The odds are, however, stacked against the school. The unemployment rate is very high in the community, which makes it difficult for parents to pay school fees. The socio-economic status of the community is low. The learners interviewed by the researchers were being assisted by the school staff to obtain school uniforms, and had to be fed at school. Some learners had only one parent, some were staying with their grandparents, while others were staying alone (in child-headed households). There is no fresh, running water. There is a high influx of learners from Mozambique, which poses a problem regarding medium of instruction, as neither Portuguese nor any of the indigenous languages of Mozambique are offered at the school. Basic teaching and learning resources are lacking. The school is also under-staffed and -resourced.

A purposeful sample (n = 24; four boys and four girls from each school) was drawn. The selection was done at the behest of the researchers by experienced teachers who knew all their learners well. Several selection criteria were applied: respondents had to be black, from poor homes, in Grade 12, aged between 18 and 20, and must have spent their entire schooling in one of the three schools.

Although the sample cannot be regarded as representative of the entire Grade 12 population of the three schools (N = 331), the findings may arguably be substantively generalisable to other respondents and schools in similar historical, cultural and political situations.

Research instrument

Focus group interviews as a research technique is described as a semi-structured group discussion, moderated by a discussion leader, held in an informal setting, with the purpose of obtaining information by means of group interaction on a designated topic (McLafferty, 2004:187). Focus group discussions are based on the assumption that group interaction generates a widening of responses, activating details of perspectives and releasing inhibitions that may otherwise discourage participants from disclosing important information. Such discussions produce data rich in detail that is difficult to achieve with other research methods, because participants build on each other's ideas and comments to provide in-depth and value-added insights (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:90). Focus group discussions are amenable to the useful gathering of data regarding participants' experiences, understandings, attitudes and beliefs (McLafferty, 2004:187).

Each of the interviews lasted about 45 to 60 minutes.
The following six questions (all derived from the conceptual framework above) formed the basis of the semi-structured focus group interviews:
• How would you describe your teachers?
• How do your teachers motivate you?
• What do you do to succeed?
• How does the principal support your academic achievement?
• How does your school support your academic achievement?
• How does the community support your academic achievement?

Data gathering
The responses were recorded on a digital audio recorder; the researchers also took notes which were compared after the interviews.

Although the interviews were conducted in a manner that would provide answers to the above questions, the participants were allowed to express their thoughts and bring other facets and insights to the fore.

Processing of data
Before the researchers left Mpumalanga they met with the respondents and read their questions and answers to them. They later e-mailed the transcripts to the three principals and the teachers responsible for the selection of the sample for their comments. The transcripts were followed up by teleconferences with the principals to gain clarity on the participants' responses. Dialogue was thus shared both with the participants (face-to-face) and telephonically. After preparing the transcripts for data analysis, they were subjected to the *Atlas.ti*™ computer-aided data analysis programme. This programme allowed the researchers to graphically create, manipulate and examine the logical relations among codes (Botha, 2009:100). An interpretation, based upon the analysis of interview data, was subsequently formulated. With repeated readings of the data, particular features and characteristics of teachers, learners and the interaction between these two parties became apparent. The transcripts of the recorded passages were analysed several times and increasingly broader, more encompassing and representative themes were identified. Recorded phrases were then placed under each of the identified themes, as prescribed by the qualitative research method of Holliday (2002:58). To ensure validity, the analysis of data was double-checked with all the participants. The researchers also referred to the theoretical-conceptual framework above for additional theoretical insight and support.

The themes that emerged from the interviews were then subjected to open, axial and selective coding (De Vos, 2002; Ertmer, 1997; Punch, 1998) and critical heuristic examination.

Ethical aspects
The Mpumalanga Department of Education as well as the principals of the three schools and the participating learners gave permission for conducting the investigation. The research design had by that time been pre-approved by the ethics committees of the universities involved. The learner participants were informed that their participation would be voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. None withdrew, however.

Findings and discussion
Consensus was reached among the researchers that the themes that emerged as a result of the coding process seem to carry within themselves the ontological genes (onticities) of successful pedagogical dialogue[1] as intimated during the discussion of the conceptual framework: exposure to learning (*opportu-*

nity-to-learn) (Creemers *et al.*, 2002:294-295, 300; Department of Education and Employment, 2000), instructional activities, motivation, support, discipline, vision, care, trust, interpersonal relationships among staff, collaborative partnerships and school leadership. These onticities, typical of these successful and effective schools, also form sub-structures of pedagogical dialogue, an ontologically essential feature of authentic pedagogy. In short, the success and effectiveness of these schools can be attributed to their adherence to authentic pedagogic dialogue, an indispensable feature of authentic pedagogy.

Although the results of the study reflect the perceptions of senior secondary learners as to what may contribute to their school success, the above finding not only confirms, augments and — to a certain degree — consolidates the findings of, for example, Jencks *et al.* (1972), Teddlie and Reynolds (2000), Steyn *et al.* (2003:229), Mckenzie and Van Winkelen (2004:6), Creemers *et al.* (2002), Creemers *et al.* (2008a), Creemers and Kyriakides (2008b), Creemers and Kyriakides (2009:294) and Kyriakides and Creemers (2008) as mentioned above, but also forms a platform for further theorizing these authors' findings, as we will endeavour to demonstrate below.

Our analysis of the data seems to point to the conclusion that all eleven above-mentioned themes (onticities) can be ontologically traced to the phenomenological essence of pedagogical dialogue *per se*. Several of the participants in fact specifically referred to pedagogical dialogue. One of them, from School A, said: "*Although I am in Grade 12, I can talk to Grade 1 teachers. They are supportive*" (related to the theme *Support*). Another, from School B, admitted: "*Mr. Ndlala, when you behave in an unbecoming manner, he counsels you*" (related to the theme *Trust*), while a third, also from School B, responded with: "*Mr. Ndlala often talks to the children*" (related to the theme *Trust*). A participant from School C added: "*We are constantly encouraged to talk to our teachers. They never tell us to keep quiet*" (related to the theme *School Leadership*).

Language as tool for thought and communication (Department of Education, 2007:15) and dialogue (as an expressive mode of language-usage) can both be described as correlatives for being human. This means that dialogue is an exclusive and universal human phenomenon and one of the modes of existence that distinguish human beings from animals (Potgieter, 1991:229). Dialogue is, furthermore, the apparel in which we parade the contents of our thoughts before others (Hendricks, 1988:38). As such, dialogue is not a mere 'form' of communication; it essentially *is* communication and this may indeed be one of the primary reasons why the schools in this case study are such examples of academic excellence.

The themes that were identified from the data, as well as the recorded phrases (the supporting evidence), suggest that the learners and teachers find themselves in a secure pedagogical relationship, one in which educator and learner are intrinsically connected to each other. One participant, from School A, for instance, said: "*When I am lonely, the teachers are there to support me*"

(related to the theme *Support*). Another participant, from School B, remarked: "*Orphans feel welcomed, loved and protected at our school*" (related to the theme *Support*). A third participant, from School C, declared: "*Our teachers always make sure that us learners are protected*" (related to the theme *Care*).

The inter-communication between these two parties provides evidence of the fact that this relationship seems to be characterised by the principle of 'willing communicator and eager listener' (teacher-learner and/or vice versa), as one of the participants from School A pointed out: "*Our teachers really listen to us. They don't look away and they don't interrupt us*" (related to the theme *Motivation*). A participant from School B adds: "*When they [the teachers] listen to us, we really want to talk to them*" (related to the theme *Motivation*). A participant from School C points out the corollary: "*Because they [the teachers] always listen to us, we really want to listen to them when they talk to us*" (related to the theme *Motivation*).

It would seem that it is this *dialogue*, this reciprocal act of *listening* and *responding*, that is fundamental to the academic success in these three schools.

The identified themes and their supporting recorded phrases further suggest that their dialogical basis is such that it assists learners, as essentially meaning-searching and meaning-finding beings, to find meaning in their lives, in their surroundings (*Umwelt*) as well as in their consciences, emotions and spirituality (*Eigenwelt*). A participant from School A, for instance, remarked: "*My friends and I believe Ms M when she tells us every day that to do well at school is what God wants*" (related to the theme *Vision*). A participant from School B observed: "*When they [the teachers] teach us, they tell us how it* (sic) *explains the world around us*" (related to the theme *Instructional activities*). From School C, a participant revealed: "*The more I learn, the more I understand myself. I am starting to see where I fit in*" (related to the theme *Vision*). Another participant, also from School C, said: "*When I am in the class, it's not only about my feelings, but about the other kids' as well. I must consider their feelings and also the teacher's*" (related to the theme *Discipline*).

Both teachers and their learners' actions demonstrate purposivity and intentionality and the evidence would suggest that these pedagogical aspects induce mutual motivation, restoration, empowerment, entrustment, commitment, association (togetherness) and encounter in the classroom. The following three quotes support this finding: A participant from School A said: "*The principal assists us to apply for (sic) higher institutions. She brings us application forms and supports us with bursaries. She is the cornerstone*" (related to the theme *Support*). Another participant from School A remarked: "*We should work hard and prepare for the future*" (related to the theme *Vision*). A participant from School B comments: "*When we had a crisis in Mathematics, the teachers got assistance from other schools to help us reach our goals*" (related to the theme *Collaborative partnerships*). A participant from School C observed: "*The principal gets on well with the other teachers in the school. They*

work hand in hand" (related to the theme *Interpersonal relationships among staff*).

A content analysis of the interview transcripts furthermore reveals that the dialogical basis for the identified themes can, essentially, be characterised by the principle of reciprocal engagement (from the original French: *engager* — to be obliged/compelled to do something), for it is clear that the teachers and their learners are mutually approachable, available, tolerant and devoted; their encounters create and maintain an atmosphere of nearness, simultaneousness, belonging, voluntary interaction, genuine caring, sincere intimacy (closeness) and transparent participation (co-operation/collaboration) as well as acquiescence, equanimity, mutual acceptance and selfless reciprocity (see the conceptual framework above). The following quotes substantiate this finding. A participant from School A, for instance, said: "*They [the teachers] encourage us to study. We are encouraged to go for extra classes*" (related to the theme *Instructional activities*). A participant from School B observed: "*They [the teachers] … adopted children who do not have parents*" (related to the theme *Support*). Another participant from School B declared: "*The principal is like a Godmother and she is supportive, motivational and committed to her work. She is a 'fairy tale'*" (related to the theme *School leadership*). A participant from School C remarked: "*The teachers wish the best for us. They are lovely people. Ma'am Ngoleni (deputy principal) and the principal have adopted children who stay far away from school*" (related to the theme *Care*). Another participant from School C shared the following information: "*My brother died and the principal gave us support. She really cares*" (related to the theme *Care*).

In addition to this, the content and allocation-of-meaning of the dialogue between teachers and their learners reflect reciprocal appeal and genuine influence. It does not only seem to be purposefully geared towards meaningful, constructive response, but also towards honest self-revelation and awareness-awakening. It seems to be, above all, agreement-seeking (i.e. searching for unanimity). It is also resolution-oriented. From the available evidence we can infer that it acknowledges, nurtures and fosters self-determination and characterisation. Lastly, it is evidently and openly skill-based and aimed at open, transparent knowledge-sharing, based on truthful appreciation, normative rationality, honest interpretation and mutually beneficial negotiation and consultation. The following excerpt from a participant from School A's remarks puts this finding into perspective: "*Everything we do in class is co-operative. The teachers are not on a pedestal instructing us. They treat us as equals and if they don't know, we go and find out together*" (related to the theme *Collaborative partnership*).

The learners at these schools are guided, accompanied and equipped (by their teachers and through pedagogical dialogue) to strive continuously towards exhibiting the image of authentic, independent thinkers and of an independent ability to judge, so that their being-guided by their educator may gradually become redundant. A participant, from School B, for instance, put

it this way: "*Most of us are groomed. We started at this school from Grade 1 and we are now in Grade 12*" (related to the theme *Trust*). A participant from School C said: "*They [the teachers] encourage us all the time to think on our own*" (related to the theme *Exposure to learning* [resp. *opportunity-to-learn*]).

It seems that what makes the schools in the case study such examples of academic excellence, could, perhaps, in the final analysis be ascribed to the fact that parents, members of the wider community, as well as teacher-educators aim to instruct the learners with regard to developing and improving their critical life- and social skills, including decision-making, refusal skills, critical analysis and systematic judgment abilities, as well as how to make sound judgments (including how to distinguish between culturally and socially acceptable or unacceptable behaviour). A participant from School A, for example, pointed out: "*When the child reaches level 3 of misconduct, they [the teachers] will discuss with the parents. She [the class teacher] has all our parents' contact numbers*" (related to the theme *Discipline*). A participant from School C said: "*There is a code of conduct here. The teachers make sure that learners are protected*" (related to the theme *Discipline*). It would seem that this particular finding both supports and augments the work of Mckenzie and Van Winkelen (2004:6).

With the assistance of *Atlas.ti*™ we also found that mutual acceptance seems to be the primary condition for the kind of successful pedagogical dialogue described above. From the data it is evident that the teachers and learners at this school are equally prepared to accept each other unconditionally.

Not only were we able to identify from the data the following six essential qualities of mutual acceptance as primary condition for pedagogical dialogue, but also an analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that every one of the identified eleven themes seems to be undergirded by at least one, but in the majority of cases by a combination of these six essential qualities of mutual acceptance:

• appeal (the teacher directs a pedagogical appeal to the learners)
• expectation (the teachers expect their learners to give their very best and the learners expect their teachers to give their very best)
• voluntary capitulation of the learners to the authority of their teacher-educators and a voluntary show of continuous goodwill towards them
• response (the learners — of their own volition — decide to respond to the appeal made by their educators)
• commitment (teachers and learners are equally committed to the latter's academic success)
• Experiencing niveau-promoting reciprocity and mutuality.

The analysis finally suggests that it may be possible to demonstrate a distinct (a) order (classification), (b) (spiralling) sequence, (c) comparison of and (d) interrelationship between these six essential qualities of mutual acceptance: Based on his/her subject knowledge as well as on his/her subject pedagogy expertise, the teacher directs an educative appeal to his/her learners to

participate in the teaching and learning process. This appeal leads him/her to have certain legitimate expectations of the learners — not only in terms of their subsequent behaviour, but also (and most importantly) in terms of their subsequent academic achievement. Because the learners are convinced by (and of) their teacher's proven subject and pedagogy expertise, they voluntarily submit to his/her educative authority. This leads them to respond to their teacher's educative appeal by committing themselves to the task at hand with the result that both teacher and learner experience a sincere and profound, niveau-promoting reciprocity and mutuality that eventually culminates in the learners' academic success (refer Figure 1).
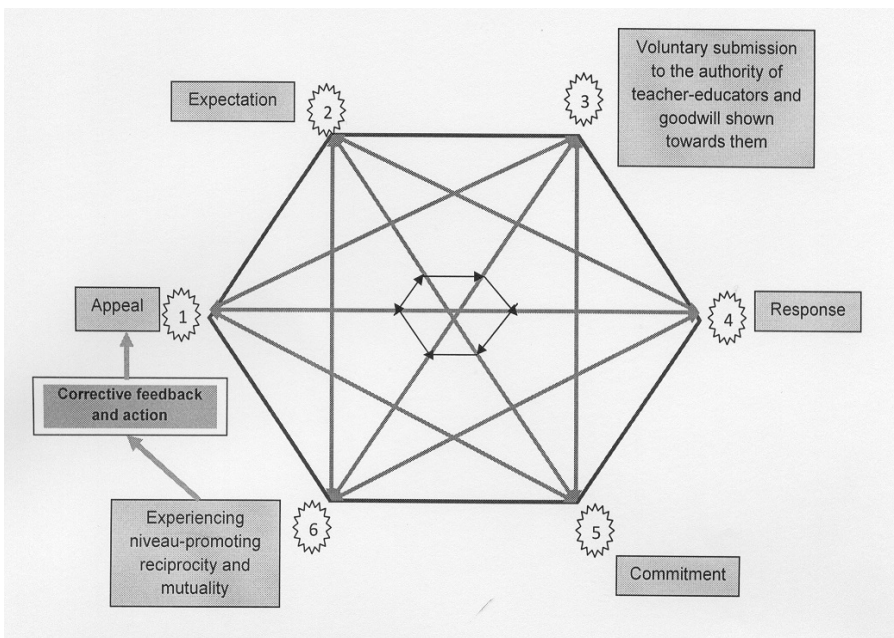

Figure 1 Towards an understanding of why some poorly resourced schools manage to perform academically excellent: interrelationship between the six essential qualities of mutual acceptance as primary condition for successful pedagogical dialogue

Conclusion

This paper reports on a case study in which we set out to explore the perceptions of senior secondary learners as to what contributes to their academic success in their highly effective schools. The research provided the following answer to the question: "What are these schools doing right, according to the

sample of learners that was interviewed?" It was found that the success and effectiveness of these schools can be attributed to their adherence to authentic pedagogic dialogue, an indispensable feature of authentic pedagogy. On the one hand, the results embodied in this answer seem to confirm the findings of, for example, Jencks *et al.* (1972), Teddlie and Reynolds (2000), Steyn *et al.* (2003:229), Mckenzie and Van Winkelen (2004:6) and Creemers and Kyriakides (2009:294). On the other, they also assist in further theorising these authors' findings in terms of their ontological-phenomenological bedrock, namely, successful pedagogical dialogue and — representing the latter's innermost layer — mutual acceptance. The results also suggest that mutual acceptance is not some kind of static, once-off occurrence, but essentially an orderly, sequential, upwards-spiralling, comparative, inter-relational process that allows for systematic feedback and corrective action.

The results further lead to the conclusion that the perceptions of impoverished, formerly disadvantaged, black learners in deep rural schools in the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa with regard to what contributes to their school success may also be understood in terms of hierarchical, stacked insights and awarenesses, the ontological phenomenological basis of which seems to be successful pedagogical dialogue, with mutual acceptance as its wellspring.

These conclusions can be ontologically summarised in terms of Figure 2. Successful academic achievement (C) at a school seems to be the result of optimal pedagogical dialogical relationships among teachers (B) and learners (A) (represented by a reciprocal horizontal line). These relationships take shape in a context consisting of several layers ranging from the wider community in which the school is situated to the actual teaching-learning situation in classrooms. Successful academic achievement can only materialise if and when all the structural elements included in Figure 2 are in place (just as a motorcar can only run if all its essential components are present). Schools can therefore use Figure 2 below as a structural-normative instrument (Taljaard, 1976:59) for determining for themselves whether they are indeed performing in terms of all the essential ontological demands for academic success.

Note

1. Dialogue tends, in this day and age, to be proposed as remedy to a wide variety of issues, including irrationality, multi-cultural strife, ineffective socialisation, the creation of civil society, post-modern ethics and what it means to 'be human' (Lefstein, 2006:1). (Pedagogical) dialogue should however neither be valorised nor portrayed as the ultimate pedagogical panacea for teaching and learning problems. It should also not be assumed that the solution to teaching and learning problems (when dialogue goes awry) is to persist in and with further dialogue (Burbules, 2003:195).
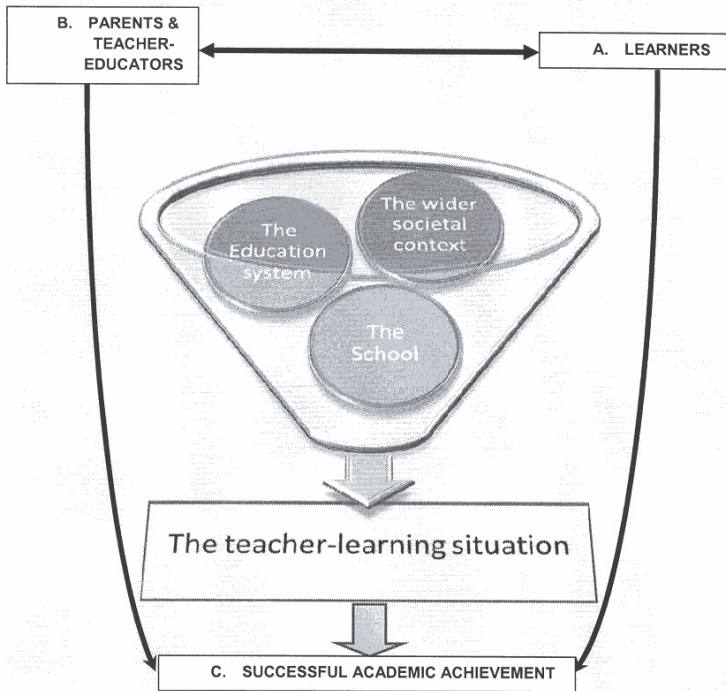
Figure 2 Re-interpretation of Teddlie and Reynolds' (2000) and
Creemers and Kyriakides' (2009) dynamic model of educational
effectiveness: successful academic achievement at school explained
from the fountainhead of mutual acceptance and the bedrock of
pedagogical dialogue

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