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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

From reciprocity to collective empowerment: Re-framing university-school partnership discourses in the South African context

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Abstract

While partnerships are key to sustained engagement between universities and schools, structural and historical differences exist between partners at the level of both organisational boundaries and socioeconomic borders. Differential relations, particularly accentuated in contexts such as South Africa, are frequently masked by normative assumptions that have largely remained unquestioned.

Reciprocity and *mutuality* are two foundational concepts, regularly enlisted in the partnership literature. Applied uncritically, these concepts function to obscure power differentials between partnering institutions – and between people who bring to those partnerships different histories and social positions. Using the example of a South African university-school partnership, the article draws on the scholarship of [Keith \(2005\)](#), [Stavro \(2001\)](#) and [Young \(1990, 1997a, 1997b\)](#) to develop a framework that moves beyond reciprocity and mutuality towards *collective empowerment* and *solidarity*. This discursive shift reflects the complexities of partnerships and partnering – and opens the space for more authentic forms of engagement, particularly in unequal partnering contexts. The article offers insights, from the perspective of the particular case presented, into how dialogic spaces might be created for interrupting normative discourses and practices, and for re-imagining new possibilities for partnering across contexts of difference.

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Keywords

Asymmetrical reciprocity, university-school partnerships, mutuality, collective empowerment

Introduction

Across the margins of interaction between universities and public schools, extreme structural, institutional and experiential differences exist at the level of social divisions and socioeconomic borders. These types of variances, particularly accentuated in contexts such as South Africa, are frequently masked by normative discourses that suggest homogeneity and sameness. Foundational concepts such as reciprocity and mutuality are frequently enlisted in the literature without critical examination and are referred to in ways that assume a shared understanding of their meaning (Dostilio et al. 2012). When used uncritically, these terms function to obscure inherent power differentials that exist between partnering institutions – and between those who bring to the institutions different histories, social positions and power relations.

Building on the work of Christie (2018), in which she critiques traditional concepts of partnership between universities and schools, the aim of this article is to problematise normative notions of reciprocity and mutuality that exist within dominant partnership discourses. The article explores how these concepts might be reframed in counter-normative ways (Clayton & Ash 2004; Howard 1998) so as to reveal power asymmetries that have remained obscured within existing discourses. Ultimately, the purpose of the article is to uncover the complexities of these terms and to contribute towards conceptualising a language that opens new spaces for ‘power sharing, communication, respectful relationships ...’ (Keith 2015, p. iv) and, ultimately, for building ‘collective empowerment’ (Stavro 2001, p. 145).

The article proceeds in three sections: first, the socioeconomic context in which the Schools Improvement Initiative operates is presented. The relevance of history and context is key to understanding what it means to partner across unequal contexts and to comprehend how social dynamics inform understanding, positionality and intentionality of the partners (Soudien 2018). Against this background, an overview of the Schools Improvement Initiative’s work is described as an illustration of a current South African university-school partnership. Notions of partnership as normatively used in the initiative and in the literature more broadly are defined, with a specific focus on reciprocity and mutuality.

The second section spotlights some of the ways in which notions of reciprocity and mutuality are broadly used in the partnership and civic engagement literature. Iris Marion Young (1990; 1997a), Elaine Stavro (2001) and Novella Zett Keith (2005) are drawn on to unravel some of the taken for granted assumptions that underpin these concepts, and to help develop a language which considers an ethics of communicative engagement based on ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ (Young 1990; 1997a). What is suggested in this section is that an understanding of reciprocity and mutuality that is *unequal* and *asymmetrical* enables an epistemological shift beyond mutual benefit towards co-creation (Clayton et al. 2013) and the collective empowerment of all those engaged in the partnership.

The third section attempts to connect the theoretical elements discussed in the previous two sections to the case presented, by considering new possibilities within our particular university-school-community partnership context. Such insights, while informed by one particular partnership model, might be applicable to other partnering contexts in which there

exist expectations of commonly held ideas of mutuality and reciprocity against a backdrop of embedded social differences and unequal power hierarchies.

Section One: Context and Background

South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of income distribution ([Woolard 2002](#)). Cape Town, like all other South African cities, is characterised by deep socioeconomic inequalities and social divides, with locked-in spatial structures, reflective of its apartheid past. Khayelitsha, the area in which the partner schools of the Schools Improvement Initiative are located, is a large sprawling township situated on the Cape Flats on the eastern edge of the metropole. The township, itself, is a typical example of late-apartheid town planning in that it is geographically located over 30 km from the city centre. Khayelitsha's 450 000 inhabitants are therefore dislocated from the city's economic drivers, which include major concentrations of work and industry. With few factories and relatively limited small business opportunities, unemployment in the township is high, particularly amongst the youth: more than 50 per cent of young men up to the age of 23 are unemployed ([Clark 2018](#)). The high levels of poverty and unemployment in Khayelitsha mirror persistent inequalities for the majority of black South Africans in the rest of the country in all aspects of existence: land, housing, health and education. Within the country at large, income poverty continues to be strongly associated with race: 65 per cent of African youth live below the poverty line, as compared with just over 4 per cent of white young people ([Orthofer 2016](#)). The structural inequalities in South Africa are characterised by extreme disparities in the schooling system. Twenty years after apartheid, stark differences continue to exist in educational achievement, particularly with regards to literacy and numeracy levels between the wealthiest 25 per cent of schools and the vast majority of schools serving largely poor black students ([Spaull & Hoadley 2017](#)).

In an effort to address the structural inequalities in the schooling system, the Schools Improvement Initiative was established by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2012 as one of the university's key strategic initiatives. The university's focus on social responsiveness is reflected in Goal One of its Strategic Plan 2016–2020:

To forge an inclusive identity for UCT through changing institutional practices that re-produce power relations based on patterns of historical privilege, and re-configuring structures, policies, procedures and systems that impede transformation (UCT, *Strategic planning framework, 2016–2019, draft*).

Goal Five of the Strategic Plan is similarly relevant in its aim to enhance the university's scope, quality and impact of engaged scholarship with an emphasis on addressing development and social justice.

The above two strategic goals suggest that UCT has in recent years been engaged in reconceptualising its institutional culture towards deeper forms of community engagement with a clearly articulated social responsiveness agenda. The shift, both locally and internationally, towards promoting institutional practices that prioritise and deepen social engagement and transformation signals a new 'geography of opportunity' ([Cantor & Englot 2015](#), p. 21), with significant implications for how we, as university staff, do our work, where we do our work, who we do our work with and how we think about scholarship.

In his discussion of transformation of South African universities, Soudien suggests that Higher Education Institutions must organise themselves to deliberately engage with their contexts. It is this, he suggests, that places socially responsive work at the forefront of the university's transformation agenda (*Social responsiveness report 2015*, UCT).

In keeping with this imperative, the overarching aim of the Schools Improvement Initiative has from the outset been to develop a strong, engaged university-school partnership between the university and a targeted group of schools in the Western Cape township of Khayelitsha (Silbert, Clark & Dornbrack 2015; Silbert, Galvaan & Clark 2018). The partner schools in this context fall into the category of what Christie, Butler and Potterton (2007, p. 100) describe as 'mainstream' schools in South Africa, which are populated largely by black students and teachers, with limited physical resources and high levels of under-achievement.

NOTIONS OF PARTNERSHIP FOR THE SCHOOLS IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE

In the context of the Schools Improvement Initiative, *partnership* refers to the ongoing engaged collaboration between the university, its partner schools and the community, represented by education district officials, community-based organisations, and parents. This idea of partnership acknowledges that improvement in the quality of education requires multiple levels of collaboration between the university, the district, the school and the community. While the community is regarded as a key partnering subject, this article focuses on the partnership as it exists between the university and the schools (for a broader discussion of the community as partner, see Silbert, Galvaan & Clark 2018).

Since its inception, the Schools Improvement Initiative has been informed by a Western model of a specific university-school partnership that originated at the University of Pennsylvania's Netter Center (Harkavy 2006; Harkavy & Hartley 2009; Harkavy et al. 2016). Intrinsic to the Netter Center's approach to partnership are two fundamental concepts: *reciprocity* and *mutuality* (see also Corrigan 2000; Deppeler 2006; Groundwater-Smith & Dadds 2012; Islam 2011; Li 2017; Nehring & O'Brien 2012). *Reciprocity* may be defined as 'the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit' (Murray 1971). The term originates from the French *réciproque* and the Latin *reciprocus*, suggesting 'moving backwards and forwards'. The meaning of reciprocity is conveyed by its Latin counterpart, as used in law, *do ut des*, translated as 'I give so that you will give' (Keith 2005, p. 14). While reciprocity implies an exchange of both giving and receiving, the term, *mutuality*, means 'having the same feelings for each other; standing in a reciprocal relation to each other' (Murray 1971).

Both reciprocity and mutuality, as defined above, imply an exchange of value of some kind, and are instantiated through partnership arrangements constructed through some form of shared engagement, complementarity and joint benefit. Significantly, these concepts assume a basis of equivalence in terms of the value or worth of the exchange, thereby obscuring any possible power differences or asymmetries between the partnering subjects (Oswald 2016). Moreover, these terms adopt a shared interpretation in the literature, despite their complex and contested meanings (Dostilio et al. 2012; Miller-Young et al. 2015).

Yet UCT exemplifies a historically white, privileged institution located in an affluent, middle-class area, while the partner schools linked to the Schools Improvement Initiative epitomise a township community afflicted by high levels of poverty and unemployment. This partnering context signifies a space, as Soudien (2018, p. vii) highlights, in which 'understanding, intentionality, history and negotiation carry inside of them the accumulated

baggage of more than 350 years of people managing their social differences'. It is this disparity between the partnering subjects that provides the context and basis for the article.

Drawing on a wide range of resources and expertise, the Schools Improvement Initiative works in close collaboration with groupings both within the university and in the broader community, thereby extending its partnership model to include key role-players who are involved in the public schooling sector such as district based education officials. Based on its work over the past six years (2013–2019), the Initiative acknowledges unequivocally that partnerships are key to building effective and sustained relationships between universities and schools for the purpose of whole-school development. A whole-school approach to school development implies a multi-dimensional strategy that comprises a variety of interventions, including in-service teacher professional development, mentoring of principals and school managers, learner-based academic programs and psychosocial support for learners.

The purpose of whole-school development is to support schools in challenged contexts to create an integrated and enabling environment for teaching and learning. In each of the above areas of support, the Schools Improvement Initiative, in consultation with the schools, collaborates with a range of departments at the university, as well as the broader community, to strengthen the school-based support. Interdisciplinary collaboration takes place across the university to facilitate student professional practice in the partner schools. This includes students undertaking their degrees in Social Work, Drama, Information Sciences, Architecture, Occupational Therapy, Audiology, and Speech-Language Therapy. Additionally, students completing degrees in Medicine are involved in service learning projects in the partner schools. External partnerships with community-based organisations enable expertise within the community to be channelled into the schools in ways that are responsive to the specific needs of the schools. In all of the above examples of collaboration, the schools are directly involved in the particular projects.

The various types of engagement outlined above are facilitated by the Schools Improvement Initiative and have been developed through the partnerships established with the schools. It is indeed on the basis of strong, enduring partnerships that the initiative has strengthened its interaction with its six partner schools (three primary and three secondary), and it is through this engagement that knowledge which has enhanced the university's understanding of the types of processes required to build public partnerships within challenged community contexts has been generated. As an illustration of engaged scholarship, new insights have emerged into the ways in which partnership-based practices can build enabling environments for teaching and learning in disadvantaged schools. Such insights have contributed to the growth of the partnership and, significantly, to the university's ongoing social responsiveness agenda. Details of the initiative are developed in the following section.

While significant gains have been made at different levels of the partnership ([Silbert & Bitso 2015, 2018](#); [Silbert, Clark & Dornbrack 2015](#); [Silbert, Galvaan & Clark 2018](#); [Silbert & Verbeek 2016](#)), a critical reflection of its work by university staff and school-based partners has yielded some important new areas of learning. We acknowledge that the Schools Improvement Initiative was conceptualised according to particular assumptions, and it is these normative assumptions that the article seeks to confront, critique and disrupt. Below, some of the key aspects of the initiative are outlined, thus providing a contextual framing for the conceptual discussion that follows.

THE SCHOOLS IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE: AN OVERVIEW

In response to an in-depth needs analysis undertaken in the schools at the start of the partnership, the initiative has, over the years, focused its interventions on building capacity at the level of teacher professional development and school organisational development. University approved short courses and two-year qualifications are offered to participating teachers, principals and members of the school management teams. Professional development in the partner schools extends to classroom-based support for teachers in the areas of mathematics, the sciences and languages (isiXhosa in the early Foundation Phase and English First Additional Language in the Intermediate and Senior Phases). Furthermore, through the Schools Improvement Initiative libraries have been established in the partner schools (see [Silbert & Bitso 2015 & 2018](#)), and in one of the secondary schools the library also houses a number of computers purchased with donations from UCT alumni. In 2017 the initiative helped fund the refurbishment of one of the school's science laboratories, thereby enabling ongoing support to the natural and physical sciences teachers.

At the level of the university, the focus on interdisciplinary collaboration has generated a new understanding of some of the ways in which 'research without boundaries' ([Wilson 2018](#)) can effectively inform engaged scholarship across various departments and faculties. For example, departments such as Occupational Therapy and Speech-Language Therapy in the Faculty of Health Science have sought ways through the Schools Improvement Initiative to broaden and reconstitute their academic curricula to prepare students more effectively for community sites such as those offered by the partner schools.

In addition to mobilising professional practice in the partner schools, as outlined above, the initiative has facilitated numerous opportunities for university-wide student volunteerism. After-school programs (both credit and non-credit bearing) coordinated by university students and offered to learners in the primary and secondary schools include career guidance, life skills, academic tutoring, computer literacy, constitutional literacy, reading, homework tutoring and leadership development. The value of these programs, both for the university and the schools, is indicated in their dual gain: while university students are able to enhance their experience of service-learning within their areas of interest, school learners are offered an assortment of enrichment programs to which they would otherwise not have been exposed. By virtue of their mutual benefit, student volunteerism and service learning exemplify the initiative's approach to reciprocity. Indeed, this explicit modelling of reciprocity constitutes one of the initiative's key objectives.

An additional example of reciprocal engagement is the university recruitment program 100-UP which is operational in all 20 secondary schools in Khayelitsha, including the two secondary partner schools. At the beginning of Grade 10, academically high-achieving learners are identified by each school to participate in this three-year program, which prepares them for all aspects of tertiary studies. The success of the program is reflected in the fact that enrolments at the university from all secondary schools in Khayelitsha have almost tripled in recent years. From one of the two partner secondary schools, for example, prior to the start of the program in 2012, only one matriculant in the school's history had been eligible for admission to UCT. To date, since the start of the program, fifteen matriculants from that same school have successfully achieved university admission. The benefits of this recruitment program to the university, the schools and learners are noteworthy: while learners who successfully gain entrance to the university are directly benefited, the positive impact on the school community as a whole is significant. The boosting of morale for teachers, learners and parents is reinforced

by positive reputational effects within the community. From the perspective of the university, it is able to expand its student profile through this program by redressing social exclusion and inequality, while at the same time responding to the education crisis in the province.

In ensuring the continued relevance of all the programs outlined above, offered through the Initiative, ongoing dialogue between university-based project staff on the one hand and collaboration between project staff and school-based partners on the other have been critical in navigating challenges and in ensuring that the initiative has remained relevant and effective in addressing the needs of the schools (Li 2017). Collaborative planning and reflection across the various levels of engagement has created numerous opportunities for sharing diverse perspectives on specific aspects of the interventions, mostly with a focus on planning and implementation. This, in turn, has informed further strategies relevant to the schools' particular needs and context. Joint discussion and action have generated new knowledge and practice (Silbert, Galvaan & Clark 2018), which has become integral to the partnership and to activating beneficial change within the schools.

Despite the positive outcomes suggested above, an important insight that emerged from these engagements was the need to develop more robust and appropriate platforms for dialogue with school-based partners. Previously, opportunities for collaborative engagement had not been systematically established across the partnership, and it was agreed that such platforms were needed for critical reflection, review and planning. Through dialogue, it was hoped that partners would be drawn into collaborative discussions, which in turn would deepen collaboration, trust and collegiality, and create opportunities for partners to raise concerns, explore ideas and critique normative practices, rather than uncritically adopting one another's perspectives in the interest of consensus. This supports the concept of community engagement for social change: a notion, as explained by Wood and Zuber-Skerrit (2013, p. 2), in which 'beneficial change emanates from a process of social transformation (Gauthamadas 2005), which has to be driven by the involvement of the community concerned'. The relational nature of this approach makes meaningful change possible and sustainable as participants see themselves as active agents in processes of change. The notion of dialogue in this regard is explored more substantively in later sections.

While there has been an ongoing effort by the partners to create collaborative opportunities for planning, reflection, review and implementation, most of the discussions typically focused on operational aspects and on strengthening the learning environment for the purpose of school improvement. However, the deeper, more difficult political and social questions linked to power and privilege have not been confronted. And it is these signifiers which lie at the heart of the partnership, influencing 'how people think, their understanding, intentionality, history and the ways in which they enter into processes of negotiation' (Soudien 2018, p. vii). In this regard, Soudien suggests that addressing the complexities of partnering across contexts of inequality requires a new kind of learning, one that is contingent upon the 'attainment of trust and mutual agreement for *learning* one's way into the development of new spaces of possibility' (pp. x, xi). A deeper, more careful understanding of the social dynamics that constitute the partnership and an inquiry into the discourses that frame it would enable the type of learning that Soudien refers to. Keith (1999, p. 226) similarly reminds us:

... Disentangling and taking a critical look at these discourses requires going beneath the surface, to where the interest positions and power plays masked by seemingly neutral research findings and well-meaning research-based initiatives become more visible.

It is with this in mind that the discussion now moves in the second section to a deeper level of critique. By building on [Saltmarsh, Hartley and Clayton's \(2009\) *Democratic Engagement White Paper*](#), a more critical lens has been developed to frame a broader set of partnership discourses. Iris Marion Young's (1990, 1997a) notion of 'asymmetrical reciprocity' is enlisted and extended by drawing on [Elaine Stavro \(2001\)](#) and [Novella Zett Keith \(2005\)](#).

Section Two: Problematizing Notions of Reciprocity

[Saltmarsh, Hartley and Clayton \(2009\)](#) view reciprocity as the ideal form of participation emanating from civic engagement. These authors distinguish between *place* and *activity* on the one hand, and *process* and *purpose* on the other. They argue that a focus on *place* or *location* reduces civic engagement to some kind of externalised activity that occurs in the community, and that this overlooks the deeper complexities relating to the *processes* and *purposes* of the activity. An emphasis on *activity* and *place*, accordingly, privileges the institution as the knowledge producer. This delineation, as the authors suggest, is problematic for at least two reasons: firstly, locating expertise within a single domain assumes that the knowledge generated within the university can be externally applied to address particular problems within the broader society. Secondly, the implicit distinction between academic knowledge and community-based knowledge positions the 'community' as singular, homogenous and separate – often reducible to historically disadvantaged and marginalised groups ([Badat 2013](#)). Furthermore, the notion of community as external to the context inhabited by the university reinforces the separation of social, cultural and institutional practices. This, as the authors suggest, highlights a normative problem-solving approach, often applied by universities to social responsiveness and community engagement.

According to [Saltmarsh, Hartley and Clayton \(2009\)](#), focusing on *processes* and *purpose* of community engagement rather than *place* and *activity* redefines the meaning and intentionality of the engagement, enabling a co-constructed and collaborative problem-solving approach. In terms of their framework, 'partnerships' and 'mutuality' are associated with *place* and *activity*, while 'reciprocity' is linked to *processes* and *purpose*. The authors therefore differentiate between *partnerships* and *mutuality* on the one hand, and *reciprocity* on the other, arguing that the discursive shift from 'mutuality' to 'reciprocity' is crucial in generating democratic values of engagement that 'seek the public good with the public and not merely for the public as a means to facilitating a more active and engaged democracy' ([Saltmarsh, Hartley and Clayton 2009](#), p. 9). 'Reciprocity', in this sense, reflects intentional participation that is relational, localised and contextual, and implies that scholarship should be conducted with those in the community by way of shared authority, expertise and power 'in all aspects of the relationship ...' (p. 10). Although the authors emphasise the need for forms of participation that are relational and contextual, their analysis does not extend beyond this point, thus falling short of the opportunity to grasp and problematise the deeper complexities of reciprocity, especially in contexts in which partners inhabit a range of subject positions.

Writing within a service-learning framework, [Clifford \(2017, p. 12\)](#) challenges traditional notions of reciprocity by asking whether reciprocity has become 'a code for an exchange of goods and services that reinforces unequal practices'. She examines ways in which reciprocity might be connected instead to processes of building relationships with the community, thereby emphasising the importance of *solidarity* over reciprocity. Solidarity, in this sense, is the recognition of structural inequalities that allows issues of power and privilege to surface.

[Clayton et al. \(2013\)](#) usefully draw a distinction between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ types of reciprocity, emphasising the importance of moving beyond mutual benefit (‘thin’ reciprocity) towards co-creation, so that ‘... all participants are co-educators, co-learners, and co-generators of knowledge’ ([Clayton et al. 2013](#), p. 246).

It is against this conceptual background that Iris Marion Young’s (1990, 1997a) work on ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’ is introduced. In challenging conventional formulations of reciprocity, Young proposes a deeper, more nuanced understanding which encompasses communicative interaction through dialogue. In the context of this article, the term *dialogic exchange* implies an ongoing conversation ([Oswald, Gaventa & Leach 2016](#)) or process of communication between partnering subjects, and accommodates notions of *asymmetrical reciprocity*. The idea that knowledge is co-constructed and situated within a particular context, and exists in multiple forms, suggests that processes of knowledge production take place by bringing together diverse perspectives within these dialogic spaces ([Wegerif 2008](#)). Writing within a service-learning context, [Keith \(2005\)](#) calls for dialogue as an *encounter*, rather than a *reciprocal exchange*. In this sense, instead of building a language of reciprocity between partners, Keith proposes that it is their *interdependence* that needs to be promoted.

ASYMMETRICAL RECIPROCITY

Normatively, according to [Young \(1997a\)](#), the act of communication, which aims to establish mutual reciprocity, entails people with different perspectives engaging with each other in ways that require impartiality and the ability to look at issues from the standpoints of others who are differently situated. [Young \(1990, 1997a, 1997b\)](#) argues, however, that the idea of abstraction from the particularities of a situation promoting impartiality is impossible, and that reversibility of perspectives tends to close off the space for dialogue and differentiation among subjects. Reversibility here means the ability to separate oneself from one’s own positionality and experiences in order to fully identify with the other.

The problem with impartiality for Young is that it legitimises the normative perspectives of those with power and results in such perspectives appearing universal and ‘normal’. Impartiality therefore obscures difference by masking ‘the ways in which the particular perspectives of dominant groups claim universality, and helps justify hierarchical decision making structures’ ([Young 1990](#), p. 97). A universalist ideal serves to decentre issues of difference in the search for a common good, and continues to threaten the exclusion of minority groups. Young therefore argues that one cannot extricate oneself from the particularities of one’s life through dialogue with others who represent different positionalities, histories and experiences ([Young 1997a](#)).

Seyla Benhabib (1992), on the other hand, believes that reversibility *is* possible and indeed necessary to maintain ‘the ties of reciprocity that bind human communities together’ ([Stavro 2001](#), p. 140). While [Benhabib \(1992\)](#) believes that the act of seeing our actions through the eyes of another allows us to transcend the limits of our perspectives, dialogic communication cannot, according to [Young \(1990, 1997a, 1997b\)](#), produce universality or consensus of thought. Instead, it is a ‘way of testing political and moral norms by articulating multiple interests, diverse needs and standpoints’ ([Stavro 2001](#), p. 137). Rather than adopting an impartial or objective standpoint, dialogic communication for [Young \(1990\)](#) should be grounded in a politics of difference. Reciprocity should therefore be based on presumed differences between people, as opposed to assumed sameness and the reversibility of subject positions.

While the notion of asymmetry in [Young's \(1990, 1997a, 1997b\)](#) argument is useful in disrupting normative discourses of reciprocity, the inferred absence of the potential for connectedness is limiting. It is on these grounds that [Stavro \(2001\)](#) challenges Young's framework of asymmetrical reciprocity, arguing that the ability to find points of common interest is crucial in opening spaces for dialogic communication. She therefore extends Young's analysis, proposing instead a communicative interaction based on 'bonds of connectedness that allow us to approach the other' ([Stavro 2001](#), p. 139), in order to forge alliances and make compromises. Stavro's notion of a 'situated relational body-subject' (p. 140), acknowledges that, while communication is not unproblematic, we are nonetheless able to share our experiences through dialogue and conscious collaboration. *Situatedness* for Stavro suggests that participants enter into communicative spaces as subjects with different histories, knowledges, experiences and social positions – and that they engage with each other from these particular subject positions. The idea of the *relational* body-subject implies the ability to develop collective understanding and to work together across difference. It is this understanding, as [Keith \(2005, p. 18\)](#) argues, that allows one to see 'difference itself as an asset rather than a deficit'.

Section Three: Towards Collective Empowerment

The notion of 'asymmetrical reciprocity', as outlined above by [Young \(1990, 1997a, 1997b\)](#) and extended by [Stavro \(2001\)](#), is useful in grasping the complexities and challenges inherent in the types of partnerships that exist across unequal contexts, such as those exemplified in this article, and between people who bring to those partnerships different histories, experiences, understandings and power relations. [Stavro's \(2001\)](#) divergence from Young highlights the possibility for communication and collaboration across difference, in that she views communicative dialogue as not being synonymous with reversibility. In other words, dialogic interaction is not necessarily contingent upon adopting one another's perspectives, or reversing one's position to understand the other. Developing some understanding of the situations of others does not require that we take up their standpoint.

Returning to the case of the Schools Improvement Initiative at UCT, and to the question raised earlier of what is possible within this particular partnership context, a move to broaden and deepen the conversation was made at the beginning of 2018 in the form of a two-day symposium. The rationale for the dialogue, which included representatives from the partner schools as well as the broader community, was based on the need to dig deeper into the work of the partnership to explore what it means to partner across contexts of difference. The symposium, which also included representatives from a second South African university that is also engaged in university-school-community partnerships, was intended to open the space for self-critique, reflection and dialogue. The sentiment that emerged from the symposium was that, because education is a societal issue, we need to engage more broadly, critique more deeply and work more collaboratively to ensure collective responsibility that encompasses solidarity, reflection and action. Emerging from the dialogue, furthermore, was the need to bring greater focus at a national level to the question of what it means to create authentic partnerships across social divides. This pertains to the need to strengthen university-school-community partnerships to cultivate optimal conditions for learning and, more broadly, to generate actions that address the multiple complex challenges facing South African education. The discussions that took place at the symposium and the outcomes reached were documented in a summary report (see [Hartford 2018](#)).

The key outcome of the symposium was a collective agreement between participants for a broader conversation involving a wider spectrum of South African universities and community representatives who are engaged, or have an interest in engaging, in university–school–community partnerships. This national dialogue, scheduled for September 2019, is intended to focus on the following questions, collaboratively formulated by the participants during the 2018 symposium:

- What are the multiple forms of consultation that need to take place to establish authentic partnerships among the various stakeholders?
- How do we build relationships across our partnerships and explore at deeper levels what our individual and collective understanding of partnerships may be?
- How do we understand concepts of mutuality and reciprocity across unequal partnerships and how do we build solidarity into multi-stakeholder collaboration?
- How do we ensure that no voices are left behind in the co-construction of relevant, contextual responses to the challenges confronting education?
- What kinds of spaces need to be created to ensure that these multiple voices are continuously heard and validated in the process of responding to these challenges?

The aim of the 2019 national dialogue was for maximum participation and multiple forms of expression to enable vibrant dialogue and divergence of opinion. The above questions were therefore framed to provide a vehicle by which conversations could take place across power differentials. Through dialogic exchange, it was hoped that processes of establishing collective empowerment would be deepened and taken forward by university representatives into their respective partnership contexts.

The notion of dissensus ([De Souza 2008](#)) requires an awareness of asymmetry at the level of internal and external differences – both within and between individuals. An openness to the plurality of voices within a shared space of dialogue involves a degree of surrendering one's own subjectivity to be receptive to the experience of others. Drawing on Hannah [Arendt \(1958\)](#) and Emmanuel Kant, Young (1997a, p. 360) describes this as *enlarged thought*, in which dialogue participants take account of the multiple perspectives of others, enabling an understanding of others across difference:

They have had to listen to those expressions with a moral humility which recognises that they stand in relations of asymmetry and irreversibility with others. By means of openness and questioning, as well as efforts to express experiences and values from different perspectives, people sometimes understand one another across difference, even when they do not identify with each other.

Herein lies the potential for 'openness to difference' which, as [Christie \(2018, p. 242\)](#) maintains, 'makes possible creative exchanges and new modalities of understanding'. [Young \(1997a, p. 358\)](#) refers to this as 'a respectful stance of wonder toward other people', which brings to the interaction an openness and the capacity to '[await] new insights about their needs, interests, perceptions, or values'. The act of wonder, however, must involve a re-centring of our own subjectivities, a self-distancing – the ability to see our own position, assumptions and perspectives as strange or 'other'. If not applied to ourselves, the idea of wonderment,

as [Stavro \(2001\)](#) suggests, runs the risk of limiting communication altogether, with the assumption that our experiences are too different and therefore irreconcilable.

Moving beyond the traditional goal of mutuality and/or reciprocity, the project of partnerships, especially those that include diverse partnering subjects, might more usefully be conceptualised as co-creating dialogic spaces through which partners can achieve collective empowerment and solidarity. Whereas striving towards mutuality or reciprocity assumes a shared identity of sameness ('collective will'), the idea of *collective empowerment* acknowledges that social dynamics inform different understandings, intentionalities and histories, while making possible authentic points of connectedness.

The idea of the *situated relational body–subject* opens the dialogic space for the multi-dimensional co-construction of relevant knowledges as well as for generating pluralistic 'problem-solving ecologies' ([Hunter Quartz et al. 2017](#)) across partnering contexts. It is through the situated relational body–subject that we are able to grasp the irreducible differences between subject positions and social groups, while simultaneously respecting their potential for interaction. Through acknowledging reciprocity that is *unequal*, new knowledges can be generated with 'multiple actors' ([Oswald, Gaventa & Leach 2016](#)).

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this reflective article has been to shed light on some of the key foundational concepts in the partnership literature by critiquing traditional notions of mutuality and reciprocity. By building a more robust, complex and critical language of partnership, all those involved, including university staff, students and school-based role players, might be better equipped to cultivate a communicative ethic which encompasses dialogic engagement and moral humility; an ethic that is not bound by uniformity of perspective, or assumptions of meaning, but accommodates instead the possibility for divergence and dissensus. Rather than aspiring towards reciprocity and seeking to know the world of others based on one's own position, this would require an openness to difference – a commitment to 'build engagements through "appearance" or presence in speech and actions that ensure the vitality of the partnership around the common focus' ([Christie 2018](#), p. 241). As [Young \(1997b\)](#), pp. 52–53) says:

Communication is sometimes a creative process in which the other person offers a new expression, and I understand it not because I am looking for how it fits with given paradigms, but because I am open and suspend my assumptions in order to listen.

[Christie \(2018\)](#), p. 241) reminds us that the communicative 'interactive spaces of this world-in-common need to be respected as fragile and its [sic] existence not taken for granted but consciously nurtured'. Strengthening partnerships across unequal contexts requires building a new language of collective empowerment based on asymmetrical reciprocity rather than on assumptions of equivalence. Discourses of partnership that push beyond the limits of reciprocity and mutuality might help inform the development of more authentic partnering practices. The implications of stronger partnerships across social divides and socioeconomic differences are important for all partnering subjects, both in terms of processes of partnering and indeed the purpose of the engagement. Co-constructing authentic interactions requires that we build upon our differences rather than attempt to overcome them, so that we

understand who we and our partners are ([Keith 2015](#)) and what is possible within our particular partnership context.

A deeper understanding of these social dynamics might enable greater insight into how problems and potentialities of power inform understanding, intentionality and negotiation, and how this may be worked with as a 'generative force rather than reproducing, or even exacerbating existing inequalities' ([Soudien 2018](#), p. viii). The importance of understanding, negotiating and building upon our differences has implications for developing more authentic forms of community engagement through solidarity and collective empowerment.

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