

## **BRIDGING THE GAP**

*In schools, in community – emerging lessons from the Schools Improvement Initiative*

Khayelitsha, 22 August 2015

The purpose of the symposium was to present the work to date of the Schools Improvement Initiative (SII), as an output of the NRF Community Engagement Project awarded to the SII from January 2016 to December 2018.

Over one hundred people from various sectors including MEED, UCT, the Poverty and Inequality Initiative (PII), the SII, principals, teachers, practitioners, learners and interested individuals participated in a one-day symposium/seminar. The purpose was, in the words of Professor Crain Soudien, “a deliberate attempt to see how we can learn from one another” from experiences and lessons gained through existing partnerships aimed at bridging the gap between UCT and Khayelitsha, and between learners and institutes of higher learning. The seminar was hosted at the Centre for Science and Technology (COSAT) in Khayelitsha.

With a strong emphasis on conversation and listening, the programme consisted of presentations interspersed with interviews with teams and students from both UCT and schools based in Khayelitsha. A theme that emerged throughout the day was that of taking the learnings from the ‘ivory tower’ of UCT on the mountain slopes to educators on the Cape Flats, and vice versa. “How can the understanding on the mountain be made available and brought into the space of the wider community in ways that are accessible and meaningful?” asked Professor Soudien at the start of the day. Also, how can students and academics learn from the depth of experience and skill of teachers who work in ‘majority schools’ and the challenges that exist in those learning environments?

Another strong theme that emerged was ‘bridging the gap’ between learners’ schooling experiences in disadvantaged communities (ie: Khayelitsha) and institutes of higher learning (ie: UCT). The SII partnerships endeavour to bridge this gap through many initiatives, some of which include: the preparation of learners for higher education, promotion of investment into libraries in schools, improvement of discipline methods and practice, preparation of learners for easier entrance into universities, usage of tools to enhance reflective practices of students, challenges in partnerships of schools with UCT, improving communication in community development, teacher training partnerships where students are mentored by teachers in Khayelitsha, homework programmes where grade 11 learners mentor grade 5s and 6s and a focus on building and maintaining partnerships in healthy ways.

The quality of the conversation was testimony to the quality and effectiveness of the relationships and initiatives. In each of the presentations, regardless of specific area of interest, the overarching thread was that the partnerships were effective in bringing the ‘university on the mountain and the Cape Flats’ closer together and the subsequent relationships were proving to be good for all parties involved. The seminar highlighted key issues that *are being* addressed and *need to be* addressed in order for the shared learning of this collaboration to be capitalised on and the gap between the learnings at UCT and the learnings in schools in Khayelitsha to be ever diminishing. In spite of most of the partnerships being young, the successes on the ground are notable and came through strongly in

the 'In Conversation' sessions of the workshop. Some of the issues that emerged that need to be addressed in ongoing and intentional ways appeared to be:

***Actions***

- Ensuring that investment continues in bridging the gap between learners from Khayelitsha and tertiary institutions.
- Acknowledge the assumptions students have about what a community needs and how often those assumptions are not accurate or relevant. Furthermore it was noted that students need to be aware of the politics, identities and powers they hold.
- Pursuing excellent community development practice in all of these initiatives and teaching students to not rush in with solutions and ideas.
- Considering more focus on parent/child groups in therapy as opposed to 'barriers to learning' groups because what a therapist can transfer to parents in seven weeks is worth more than what a therapist can do with a child in the same time in terms of longevity of impact.
- Libraries were seen as important place for development and are integral to bridging the gap.
- Of importance is the need for collaboration, interdisciplinary approaches. Furthermore, it was noted that there is a need for approaches and policies to be practical.