



University-community-government Engagement: Insights from the Funda Ujabule Teaching School in South Africa

S'negugu Khohliso & Mondli Hlatshwayo

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Article History

Received: 2026-03-08

Revised: 2026-07-10

Accepted: 2026-07-12

Published: 2026-08-22

Keywords

Community engagement

Learning

Teaching school

Triple helix

How to cite:

Khohliso, S., & Hlatshwayo, M. (2026). University-community-government Engagement: Insights from the Funda Ujabule Teaching School in South Africa. *Research Journal of Education, Teaching and Curriculum Studies*, 4(1), 256-273.

Abstract

Community engagement has become an essential component of university partnerships aimed at improving education and promoting social development. This paper explores how community engagement is implemented in the collaboration between the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and Funda Ujabule Teaching School in Soweto. The Funda Ujabule is a unique model in South Africa, as it is both a foundation school and a teaching school, located on the university campus in a largely working-class area of Soweto, Johannesburg. Academics who were part of its conceptualization and execution have evaluated the school. However, this article is an outsider's examination of the school and its practices, using the triple helix framework. The research draws on qualitative data obtained through interviews with 3 Faculty members involved in CE initiatives at UJ, two School Management Team (SMT) members, two Educators working in the Foundation Phase, two community members (1 food handler and 1 School Governing Body (SGB) member), and one fourth-year student. The findings indicate that the collaboration promotes community engagement through service-learning projects, literacy initiatives, parental workshops, and outreach programmes that foster a reading culture and support community development. In addition, the data demonstrates that the university maintains active engagement with both the school and the broader community. The findings are interpreted through our Triple Helix framework, which conceptualizes collaboration among universities, government, and community to address complex social challenges.

Copyright © 2026



Introduction

The role of universities in innovation and their partnerships with the state and industry emerged as a model in the late 1960s in response to the global economic crisis and stagnation. According to Cooper (2011), industries had to turn to universities and the state to support further innovation by using knowledge available only in universities to advance production in new spheres, particularly information and communications technologies (ICTs), which contributed to the rise of disciplines such as quantum physics and computer science and enabled technological developments including artificial intelligence



and robotics. In the same vein, Alam (2024), Chowdhury and Alzarad (2025), and Mbah (2019) emphasize that higher education institutions have extended their traditional role in innovation to include addressing pressing social and developmental challenges through community engagement initiatives, highlighting their growing relevance in both knowledge production and societal transformation. This evolution reflects a broader shift in universities' functions, from primarily centers of academic knowledge and industrial innovation to active agents in addressing complex societal needs through integrated partnerships with schools and communities.

Similarly, in childhood education (CE), Lewis et al. (2016) and Sanderson (2016) report that universities are increasingly partnering with government departments and local communities to enhance teaching quality, learner development, and broader community well-being. Such collaborations enable universities to extend their teaching, research, and service missions beyond campus boundaries and contribute meaningfully to community engagement and development. Sarah et al. (2023) and Mbah (2019) highlight that partnerships between universities, government, and schools strengthen educational practices, support teacher training, and create opportunities for community empowerment through knowledge exchange and social programmes. Guided by the Triple Helix Model of Innovation, which conceptualises collaboration between universities, government and industries as a driver of innovation and development (Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2017), in this paper we develop a TRIPLE HELIX Model that has university, government, and community explores how stakeholders implemented community engagement at the Funda Ujabule Teaching School, which is a project of the university, and argues that the partnership between the UJ, Funda Ujabule Teaching School (Funda Ujabule) and the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) enables meaningful 1. university (school)-2. government -3. community engagement through programmes such as service-learning projects, literacy initiatives, parental workshops, and outreach activities that promote a reading culture and support community development. By examining these initiatives, the study contributes to understanding how teaching-school partnerships can function as sites for collaborative engagement that benefit both educational institutions and the communities they serve.

The Partnership of the Teaching School

For this article, a partnership between UJ and the GDE established the Funda Ujabule in Soweto as a collaborative initiative to support teacher education, research, and community engagement (Gravett & Petersen, 2020; Gravett & Henning, 2020). The teaching school serves as a training site for pre-service teachers and a platform for implementing educational and social initiatives for learners, parents, and the surrounding community (Gravett & Petersen, 2022). Although universities use university-school partnerships in teacher education, most South African universities rely on traditional school placement models rather than formal “teaching school” structures, and not all institutions operate dedicated teaching schools. This paper focuses on the unique model of Funda Ujabule Primary School, which represents a more integrated approach to partnership. Unlike standard placement systems, this model enables deeper collaboration among the university, school, and community, strengthening the links among teacher education, community engagement, and social development.

This is because the Funda Ujabule is the first of its kind in South Africa. However, studies by Gravett et al. (2019) and Jiyane and Gravett (2019) have demonstrated that teaching schools in South Africa can provide structured opportunities for community engagement, particularly through student-teacher



involvement in school-based and outreach programmes, highlighting the potential of these models to contribute to social and educational development.

Community Engagement in Higher Education

According to Sibhensana and Maistry (2023), Ćulum (2018), and Yamamura & Koth (2023), researchers increasingly conceptualise community engagement in higher education as a collaborative process in which universities, government institutions, and local communities interact to address societal challenges, reflecting the principles of the Triple Helix model (Leydesdorff, 2020; Cai & Amaral, 2021). For this paper, the UJ engages with the community through Funda Ujabule, resulting in university-government-community engagement within a *professional practice school model*. This model provides structured spaces where student teachers, school educators, faculty members, and community members collaboratively implement educational initiatives, outreach programmes, and service-learning projects (Erickson & Anderson, 2023; McNaught, 2021; Jiyane & Gravett, 2019), these engagement initiatives enable universities to translate theoretical knowledge into practice (Ramsaroop et al., 2024; Ramsaroop et al., 2025), fostering learner development, promoting literacy and educational equity, and empowering communities through participatory programmes (Fernández-Terol & Domingo-Segovia, 2025; Cook & Nation, 2016; Padayachee & Harris, 2023).

Moreover, Johnson and Hlatshwayo (2025) argue that universities play a powerful role in anchoring themselves in society by engaging with communities and the public beyond traditional academic missions, suggesting that community engagement must be central rather than an afterthought in institutional practice. Their study underscores that meaningful engagement requires conceptual frameworks that more deeply integrate universities with community partners and societal actors, aligning with Triple Helix perspectives that emphasize collaborative knowledge production and mutual development among universities, government, and society (Ranga & Etzkowitz, 2013; Cooper, 2009).

Therefore, this highlights that teaching schools, when positioned as active sites of university-community engagement, can foster meaningful collaboration that benefits both educational outcomes and local communities and enhances pre-service teacher competence. In contrast, McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins (2007) and Henning et al. (2015) caution that university-driven engagement initiatives can prioritize institutional and student-centered objectives over genuine community needs, resulting in top-down interventions that may be short-lived or misaligned with local priorities. Nevertheless, partners design university-school engagements as collaborative, inclusive, and responsive to community contexts; they exemplify a Triple Helix approach in practice, producing mutually beneficial outcomes that advance educational quality, social cohesion, and community development.

Theoretical Framework

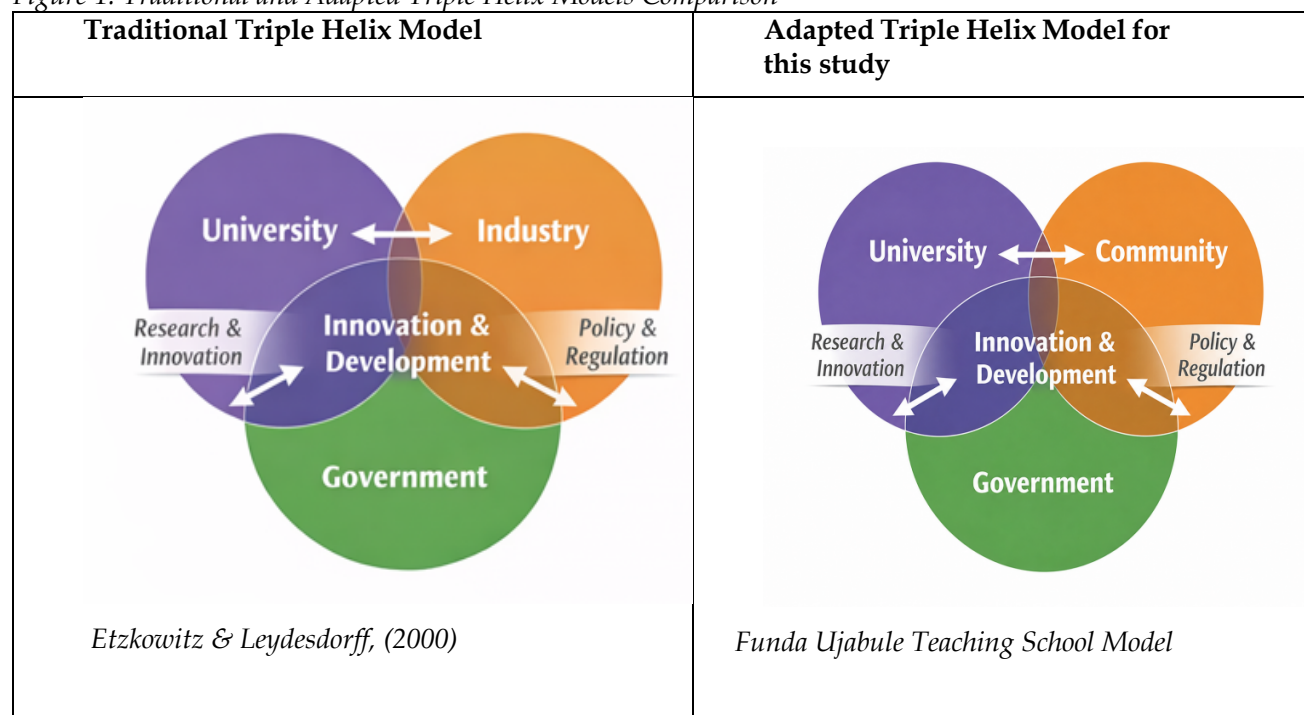
We frame the paper through the lens of the Triple Helix model, originally developed by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (1998), which conceptualizes innovation and social development as emerging from the interactions between universities, industry, and government. In the traditional model, universities are knowledge producers, industry drives economic innovation, and government provides policy guidance, regulatory oversight, and institutional support, with collaborative interactions fostering hybrid networks that promote research, development, and social advancement (Leydesdorff & Etzkowitz, 1998; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). However, this paper adapts the model by replacing the *industry* sphere with a



community, recognizing the role of communities in shaping partnerships with government and universities. In this adapted framework, universities, through the school, continue to generate knowledge and conduct research; governments provide policy direction and institutional support; and schools act as sites for applied practice, teacher development, and community engagement. The interactions between these three spheres form collaborative networks that facilitate the co-production of knowledge, educational innovation, and community development.

Scholars, such as Carayannis and Campbell (2009); Nguyen (2022) and Cooper (2009), argue that the conventional Triple Helix model does not adequately account for the role of civil society in innovation and development processes, a critique that has led to the extension of the framework into the Quadruple Helix, which explicitly incorporates civil society and the public as a fourth helix (Cooper, 2009; Roman et al., 2020; Borkowska & Osborne, 2018). However, for this paper the adapted frameworks remain valuable for analyzing how university-government-community partnerships can drive social, educational, and developmental outcomes in a South African context. We located the school under the university, as it is a university project. Figure 1 presents the Traditional Triple Helix model (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000) and the adapted Triple Helix model applied in the Funda Ujabule Teaching School context, in which community replaces industry to reflect the study's focus on education and community engagement.

Figure 1: Traditional and Adapted Triple Helix Models Comparison





Traditional Triple Helix (1.1): Three overlapping circles labeled University, Industry, and Government. Arrows between the circles indicate collaboration and knowledge exchange. Universities generate research and innovation, industry applies that knowledge to drive economic growth, and government provides policy, funding, and regulatory support. The intersections illustrate hybrid networks that foster innovation and social development through collaborations.

Adapted Triple Helix for this study (1.2): We replace the industry circle with the community, and our triple helix has the university, government, and community. The school is subsumed under the university, as it is a project aimed at enhancing community-government partnership.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine the university-government-school collaborative approach through the lens of Funda Ujabule Primary School, focusing on community engagement initiatives. We selected a qualitative approach because it is best suited to exploring complex social processes, meanings, and interactions in real-life contexts, which numerical or statistical methods typically used in quantitative research cannot adequately capture. Unlike quantitative designs, which aim to measure variables and test hypotheses, this study sought to generate rich, in-depth insights into how stakeholders experienced, implemented, and understood partnership. The study further employed a case study strategy, which allows for an intensive, contextualized examination of a single bounded system (Yin, 2014; Gerring, 2017; Yin, 2018; Hancock et al., 2021). The case study approach was particularly appropriate because it enabled a detailed exploration of the specific practices and dynamics of community engagement within a real-world educational setting. By focusing on Funda Ujabule Primary School, the study closely examined how collaborative initiatives among the university, the government, and the school are implemented, experienced, and sustained within the local context.

Location of the study

Funda Ujabule is an isiNguni phrase that can be translated as 'read so you can be happy'. Established in 2010, the school is unique and is one of a kind in South Africa. It is located on the grounds of the University of Johannesburg, in the historic Black township of Soweto, an area that was home to many struggle icons, such as Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe. Furthermore, students in Soweto initiated the historic student uprising for quality education in 1976. Funda Ujabule is the only school in South Africa. What makes the school unique in South Africa is that it is a foundation school with direct partnerships with the University of Johannesburg and the GDE, representing the government. The school is located within UJ's Soweto campus. It serves as a teaching laboratory, a space for developing theories and practices for UJ students who are learning to teach in the foundation phase.

Furthermore, the school is a hub for scholarships on teaching and learning in the context of the foundation phase. The existing literature on Funda focuses on its history, its operation as a teaching and learning laboratory, teaching in robotics and coding, and its uniqueness in South Africa as a teaching school located on campus and with the Black community of Soweto (Gravett et al., 2019; Gravett & Petersen, 2020; Gravett & Henning, 2020; Gravett & Petersen, 2022). While all these accounts on Funda are valid and advance the scholarship on teaching and learning, insiders who are intimately involved with Funda are part of a successful project. However, this article goes beyond internal dynamics and Funda's role in advancing teaching, scholarship, and learning by examining interactions among Funda,



the university, the community, and the government, as well as the underlying molecular processes. In other words, these contributions advance the scholarship of partnerships among the university, the community, and the government. The school was purposively selected because it functions as a Teaching School affiliated with the UJ and serves as an established university-government-school, as defined in this article.

Sampling

This paper employed purposive sampling, a method in which participants are deliberately selected based on specific characteristics or criteria relevant to the research objectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Maxwell, 2018; Adeoye, 2023). The 10 participants included 3 Faculty members involved in CE initiatives at UJ, 2 SMT members, 2 Educators working in the Foundation Phase, 2 community members (1 food handler and 1 SGB member), and 1 fourth-year student. These participants were selected for their direct involvement at Funda Ujabule and UJ, providing comprehensive insights into the collaboration's dynamic successes. Moreover, the sample size reported in this article represents participants whose data were most relevant to the research objectives and is a condensed presentation of the larger dataset generated during the master's study.

Participant selection

Following ethical approval and institutional permission, eligible participants were identified through the school principal, the UJ, and the GDE. Although purposive sampling was the primary sampling strategy, additional participants were recruited through referrals from those directly involved in the conceptualization and implementation of the Funda Ujabule partnership. This ensured the inclusion of key participants with relevant knowledge and experience. Participants whose data did not provide information relevant to the themes reported in this article were not included in the final analysis. The participant groups and selection criteria were as follows:

Table 1: Participant groups and rationale for selection

Participant Group	Reason for Selection
UJ Academic Staff	Selected for their involvement in the conceptualization, planning, implementation, and evaluation of the Funda Ujabule Teaching School Model.
School Management Team (SMT)	Selected because of their leadership in managing the school and coordinating the university-school partnership.
Teachers	Selected for their role in implementing partnership activities and providing classroom-level perspectives on the collaboration.
Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) Official	Selected to provide insights into policy, governance, departmental support, and oversight of the partnership.
Community Members	Selected as beneficiaries and active participants to share their experiences of the partnership's impact on the community.
University Students	Selected because of their participation in teaching practice, service-learning, research, and community engagement activities, providing perspectives on the partnership's contribution to their professional learning.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, on-site visits, and document analysis between August and October 2025 to capture participants' experiences and perspectives. Six face-to-face semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes, were conducted with purposively



selected participants and audio-recorded with their consent. Four participants were interviewed online through Teams; this was not the initial plan. However, due to the UJ Faculty members' busy schedules, Teams was more convenient. Field notes were taken during and after the interviews to capture contextual information and researcher reflections. In addition, five on-site visits were undertaken to observe partnership activities, stakeholder interactions, and the implementation of community engagement programmes, with detailed field notes recorded after each visit. Document analysis was also conducted on twelve documents, including partnership agreements, strategic plans, meeting minutes, programme reports, and policy documents, to provide contextual information, corroborate interview and observation findings, and strengthen the study through data triangulation.

This combination of methods ensured a comprehensive understanding of the university-schools-community engagement initiatives. The use of multiple data collection methods enabled triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility, transparency, and depth of the findings by allowing information from one source to be compared and corroborated with evidence from others.

Data Analysis

This paper employed a thematic synthesis approach to analyze data collected through semi-structured interviews, on-site visits, and document reviews. The analysis involved transcribing and reviewing the data, generating codes, and identifying recurring themes related to university-community-school engagement, in line with Terry et al. (2017). Observational data and document analysis complemented interview responses by providing contextual and institutional insights into the collaboration between the UJ and Funda Ujabule. The integration of the three data sources strengthened the credibility and depth of the findings through triangulation. The analysis was further guided by our Triple Helix framework, which structures collaboration around three interrelated strands: universities, government, and community actors. We organized the findings explicitly according to these dimensions. The university strand reflected institutional leadership in designing and implementing community engagement and teacher education initiatives. The government strand highlighted the role of policy frameworks, funding structures, and regulatory support in enabling collaboration. The community strand has community members' participation in implementing and sustaining engagement activities.

Ethical Considerations

We obtained ethical clearance for this paper from the UJ Ethics Committee following approval of a detailed research proposal that outlined the study's purpose, methodology, and ethical considerations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Williamson, 2016). To protect participants, pseudonyms (*P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P10, P14, P15*) were used, and data were securely stored in line with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) (2013). While full anonymity in qualitative research cannot always be guaranteed (Surmiak, 2018; Roberts, 2015), we took measures to ensure confidentiality and safeguard participants' identities.

Findings

This paper aimed to investigate the collaboration between the government and the UJ, specifically through the Funda Ujabule school community engagements. The main theme from the data is (1) community engagement initiatives, with four sub-themes: (1) community outreach and developments, (2) Community capacity building and social support, and (3) School-University engagements. Table 1



below presents a synthesis of participant contributions across the four sub-themes, illustrating how different forms of engagement, evidence, and meanings collectively inform the interpretation of the findings. The table highlights the multi-dimensional nature of the partnership and its impact on community development, capacity building, institutional collaboration, and professional learning.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Participant Contributions Across Sub-Themes

Sub-theme	Category of Engagement		Participant Evidence	Key Insight	Interpretation
1. Community Outreach and Development Projects	Community (gardening, learning)	projects service	P2, P14	Gardening supports food security; student service learning	Practical engagement addressing immediate needs
	Social programmes	outreach	P4	Father-son programmes, soup kitchen, Mandela Day	Strengthens social cohesion
	Literacy initiatives	promotion	P2	Reading campaigns and events	Research-informed literacy support
	Parent-focused programmes		P5, P6	Parental involvement workshops	Enhances home-school relationships
	Educational impact		P1, P2	Quality teaching benefits learners	Long-term community development
2. Community Capacity Building and Social Support	Parent empowerment		P4, P5, P6	Financial literacy and workshops	Builds family capacity
	Family strengthening		P4	Father-son initiatives	Promotes positive parenting
	Psychosocial support		P5	Social workers and psychologists are involved	Holistic support
	Multi-disciplinary collaboration		P5	Different faculties involved	Integrated expertise
3. School-University Engagements	Meetings and communication		P5, P7	Regular meetings and feedback	Responsive partnership
	Problem-solving		P7	Joint gap identification	Adaptive collaboration
	Government involvement		P2	GDE engagement	Policy-practice link
	Workshops		P5, P15	Teacher training	Capacity building
	Relationship building		P2, P4, P14	Mutual respect	Sustainable partnership

Sub-theme 1: Community Outreach and Development Projects

The findings show that the Funda Ujabule partnership engages the community through a range of outreach and development initiatives that address both educational and social needs. Participants indicated that the university-government collaboration extends beyond the school, involving the broader



community, particularly in Soweto and surrounding areas. The data further reveals that community engagement occurs through practical initiatives such as gardening projects, service-learning activities, and social outreach programmes. P2 reported that the school has initiated a gardening project to grow vegetables to support learner nutrition and benefit the community. She further indicated that community members became more aware of the school's purpose through engagement meetings. This was supported by P14, who noted that student teachers participate in service-learning activities where they teach learners about gardening and its benefits in schools and communities.

Participants also described social outreach initiatives aimed at strengthening relationships between the school and the community. P4 reported that the school organized programmes such as father-and-son initiatives and community activities, including soup kitchens and improvements to community facilities, during Mandela Day. The participants described these activities as efforts to position the school within the community. The findings further indicate that community engagement initiatives have expanded beyond the immediate school population. P2 explained that initiatives initially focused on parents of learners at the school were extended to include the broader community. Research identified a limited reading culture in African languages and the need to address reading challenges. As a result, the school held reading promotion events at Maponya Mall in Soweto to encourage reading among a broader group of children.

Moreover, the data show that the partnership supports community development through parent-focused initiatives. Participants reported that the school organized workshops to support parents' involvement in their children's education (P5; P6). Furthermore, participants highlighted the partnership's contribution to educational quality. P1 indicated that student-teacher training contributes to the delivery of quality education, while P2 noted that learners benefit from being taught by student teachers in this collaborative model.

The findings demonstrate that community outreach and development at Funda Ujabule include a combination of community-based projects, literacy initiatives, parental involvement programmes, and educational support activities.

Sub-theme 2: Community Capacity Building and Social Support

The findings indicate that the Funda Ujabule partnership extends beyond outreach activities to include initiatives that focus on community capacity building and social support. Participants described this sub-theme as reflecting a deeper level of engagement, where the emphasis shifts from addressing immediate needs to empowering parents and community members through knowledge sharing, skills development, and access to social support resources.

The data show that the school offers a range of programmes to support and empower parents and families. Participants reported that the school organizes workshops to guide parents in supporting their children's education and strengthening parental involvement in schooling. For example, P6 noted that there are "workshops which involve parents here in the school," while P5 explained that the school invites parents and teaches them "about parental support and involvement." In addition, the university provides financial literacy training, with P4 stating, "We invite UJ to teach parents how to manage their finances." Participants also reported family-focused initiatives, including a father-and-son programme that guides fathers in positive parenting practices; P4 indicated that it aims to show fathers "how to raise



their sons.” Furthermore, participants highlighted the provision of psychosocial support through the involvement of professionals such as pastors, social workers, and educational psychologists. P5 noted: “They bring pastors, social workers, and educational psychologists.”

These findings show that the partnership supports not only learners but also the broader family and community context by providing structured opportunities for parental engagement, skill development, and social support. The results demonstrate that community capacity-building initiatives complement outreach activities by strengthening the social and educational resources available to families.

Sub-theme 3: School-University Engagements

Regular meetings, workshops, and continuous communication between the school, the university, and government stakeholders sustain the Funda Ujabule School partnership. Participants reported that these engagements serve as a structured mechanism for collaboration, enabling stakeholders to identify and address challenges and fostering a positive, functional working relationship.

The data show that the university and school meet regularly to address identified gaps in teaching and learning. P7 explained that “UJ and Funda Ujabule meet in terms of gaps so that we close those gaps,” highlighting the focus on collaborative problem-solving. In addition to formal meetings, participants indicated that ongoing communication occurs via email and with the principal to review progress and address emerging challenges. P5 noted that “we communicate through emails and through the principal to review what is working and what is not.” Participants also identified workshops as an important component of the engagement, where stakeholders collaborate to address specific needs within the school. Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of collaborative decision-making, with P4 stating, “If we went wrong, we would come back to the table and discuss the matter,” reflecting a shared approach to reflection and improvement.

The findings also show that the engagement extends to government participation. Participants reported that officials from the GDE visit the school to observe and learn from its practicum approach. P2 indicated that “the Department of Education came to the school to see our approach to the practicum,” suggesting that the collaboration provides opportunities for broader system learning. In addition, participants consistently described the relationship among stakeholders as positive, with mutual respect and shared goals guiding the partnership.

Taken together, these findings show that regular interaction, ongoing communication, and collaborative decision-making characterize university-school engagement at Funda Ujabule. The results demonstrate that these structured engagements enable stakeholders to address identified needs, maintain a positive working relationship, and support the partnership's ongoing functioning.

Discussion

Community Outreach and Development Initiatives

The findings indicate that community outreach and development initiatives at the Funda Ujabule School are not isolated activities; rather, they operate within a broader collaborative system that links the university, the school, the government, and the community. This suggests that the partnership operates as an integrated model of engagement in which educational and social development reinforce each other.



The school serves not only as a site of learning but also as a community hub where outreach initiatives are conceptualized and implemented.

This theme emerged as a key aspect of the partnership, illustrating how the university-school collaboration extends beyond the classroom to actively address social, educational, and developmental needs within the surrounding community (Provinzano et al., 2018; Eccles & Roeser, 2015) through activities such as gardening projects, soup kitchens, community facility improvements, and reading promotion. This aligns with Horn et al. (2015), Cleveland et al. (2023), and Hands (2023). These initiatives illustrate how the university and government jointly engage with local communities to foster development and social responsibility. Within our Triple Helix framework, universities no longer limit themselves to traditional teaching and research; they increasingly act as key drivers of innovation and societal development (Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2017; Supriadi et al., 2025) and participate in societal development through community engagement initiatives (Shyiramunda & van den Bersselaar, 2024; Cook & Nation, 2016; Mbah, 2019; Chile & Black, 2015).

The gardening project and reading initiatives, for example, not only support learners' well-being and literacy development but also create opportunities for community participation in educational processes. These findings align with Mbah (2019) and Petersen et al. (2022), who suggest that universities play an important role in community development by transferring knowledge and resources to address local challenges. The results further align with the existing literature on university-affiliated teaching schools, as reported by Gravett et al. (2019), who emphasize that teaching schools provide opportunities to integrate theory, practice, and community engagement. These findings on educational and social outcomes align with the conceptualization of Funda Ujabule as a research-informed teaching school; Gravett and Pieterse (2020) describe it as a space where teaching, learning, and community engagement intersect.

As a result, Funda Ujabule serves as a platform through which the university-government partnership facilitates community-oriented initiatives that support both educational and social outcomes. In contrast, Cleveland (2023) argues that although schools often serve as community hubs, successful implementation is complex and constrained by factors such as governance structures, funding limitations, institutional priorities, and the need for strong cross-sector partnerships, which explains why such models do not replicate easily everywhere.

This study identifies adaptive and research-informed community engagement as a key contribution. The findings show that initiatives evolved from being school-focused to community-wide interventions, particularly in response to challenges identified through university research. This highlights a dynamic relationship between research and practice, in which evidence generated by the university informs interventions implemented by the school. Existing literature does not always emphasize such responsiveness; it often presents community engagement as static programmes rather than evolving processes. In addition, the findings demonstrate that the partnership produces both immediate and long-term developmental outcomes. On the one hand, initiatives such as soup kitchens and community events address immediate social and material needs within the community. On the other hand, the focus on teacher development and quality education contributes to long-term community transformation. This



dual impact extends current scholarship by illustrating how educational partnerships can serve as mechanisms for both social support and systemic educational improvement.

Community Capacity Building and Social Support

Another significant finding is that community engagement initiatives build the capacity of parents and community members, as described by Singh (2023) and Stefanski (2016). Workshops on parental involvement, financial literacy, and parenting programmes demonstrate how the partnership extends learning opportunities beyond learners to include families and community members. The involvement of professionals such as social workers, pastors, and educational psychologists further illustrates a multidisciplinary approach to supporting the community, as noted by Shiel et al. (2016), Van Rensburg et al. (2016), and Cook and Nation (2016). This aligns with broader research on inclusive and community-based education, which highlights the importance of multi-sectoral collaboration in addressing the complex needs of learners and their families (Elder et al., 2021). The integration of such support services indicates that the partnership recognizes the interconnected nature of social, emotional, and educational factors in learner development.

Therefore, this finding reflects the evolving role of universities as institutions that contribute to social innovation and community empowerment (Etzkowitz, 2016; Mdleleni, 2022; Sibhensana & Maistry, 2023). Through these initiatives, the partnership between the university and government creates opportunities for parents to develop skills that enhance their ability to support children's education. Such initiatives also strengthen the relationship between schools and communities, a factor that many researchers recognize as key to improving educational outcomes (Rouse & Ware, 2017; Armstrong, 2015).

However, some scholars caution that community engagement may be superficial or instrumental. For instance, Vally (2023), Bidandi et al (2021), and Dube and Hendricks (2023) criticize approaches that treat communities merely as sites for research, student training, or institutional branding rather than as equal partners in knowledge production and social transformation. Critics argue that universities sometimes drive engagement agendas based on institutional priorities rather than community needs, thereby limiting genuine community empowerment (Mbah, 2019; Cook & Nation, 2016).

Similarly, studies on school-community partnerships suggest that although such collaborations can strengthen relationships and support educational outcomes, limited resources, time pressures on educators, and inconsistent parental participation may constrain their impact (Armstrong, 2015; Rouse & Ware, 2017). Furthermore, Yamamura and Koth (2023) and Hart (2024) highlight that without long-term commitment and shared decision-making, community engagement initiatives risk becoming short-term interventions rather than sustainable strategies for community development. Even so, the findings suggest that community engagement initiatives at Funda Ujabule contribute to building social capital within the community, consistent with the collaborative interactions emphasized by the Triple Helix model.

This study identifies community capacity building as a distinct and intentional component of the partnership. While previous research has often focused on outreach or parental involvement, the findings demonstrate that the Funda Ujabule model incorporates structured initiatives to empower families and strengthen community resilience. This highlights the potential of university-school partnerships to move



beyond traditional engagement models toward more sustainable and transformative forms of community development.

Conclusion

This paper examined community engagement initiatives implemented by the university and the teaching school through their collaboration. The findings demonstrate that these initiatives contribute to community development through parental workshops, service-learning projects, literacy programmes, and outreach activities. Using the adopted Triple Helix framework, the study shows how collaboration between universities and government communities supports innovation and social development in community engagement activities, with the teaching school serving as a key platform to facilitate these interactions and promote community empowerment at Funda Ujabule Primary School.

However, the findings also revealed important challenges that temper these successes. These include limited community awareness of certain engagement initiatives and uneven levels of participation among parents and broader community members. The paper further suggests that while institutional collaboration is well-structured, the visibility and accessibility of these initiatives at the community level may not be fully optimized. Therefore, this paper provides a critical insight that may remain less visible to internal stakeholders: strong institutional design does not always translate into equally strong community uptake and awareness. Community engagement is an issue that has not been explored by the “insiders”; our article addresses this gap, which is merely mentioned on the school's website but not examined in a scholarly manner.

Moreover, to strengthen and sustain these initiatives, we recommend that, as outsiders, we establish structured mechanisms for community participation, such as formal community advisory committees to co-design and monitor engagement programs. Furthermore, the study recommends institutionalizing ongoing capacity-building workshops for parents and community members to enhance participation and ownership. The study also recommends strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the impact and responsiveness of engagement initiatives. Finally, future research should explore models that position community members not only as beneficiaries but as active co-creators in shaping and leading engagement strategies. None of our recommendations or suggestions has been advanced by scholars associated with the school or by insiders.

References

- Adeoye, M. A. (2023). Review of sampling techniques for education. *ASEAN Journal for Science Education*, 2(2), 87-94.
- Alam, M. A. (2024). The role of higher education in advancing sustainable development. *New Trends of Teaching, Learning and Technology*, 1, 389.
- Armstrong, P. (2015). *Effective school partnerships and collaboration for school improvement: A review of the evidence*. Department for Education.
- Bidandi, F., Ambe, A. N., & Mukong, C. H. (2021). Insights and current debates on community engagement in higher education institutions: Perspectives on the University of the Western Cape. *Sage Open*, 11(2), 21582440211011467. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211011467>.
- Borkowska, K., & Osborne, M. (2018). Locating the fourth helix: Rethinking the role of civil society in developing smart learning cities. *International Review of Education*, 64(3), 355–372.



- Cai, Y., & Amaral, M. (2021). The triple helix model and the future of innovation: A reflection on the triple helix research agenda. *Triple Helix*, 8(2), 217–229. <https://doi.org/10.1163/21971927-12340004>.
- Carayannis, E. G., & Campbell, D. F. (2009). 'Mode 3' and 'Quadruple Helix': toward a 21st-century fractal innovation ecosystem. *International journal of technology management*, 46(3–4), 201–234. <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijtm.2009.023374>.
- Chile, L. M., & Black, X. M. (2015). University-community engagement: Case study of university social responsibility. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 10(3), 234–253.
- Chowdhury, S., & Alzarrad, A. (2025). Advancing community-based education: Strategies, challenges, and future directions for scaling impact in higher education. *Trends in Higher Education*, 4(2), 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/higheredu4020021>
- Cleveland, B. (2023). A framework for building schools as community hubs: if it were simpler, would it happen everywhere? In *Schools as community hubs: Building 'more than a school' for community benefit* (pp. 11–28). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-9972-7_2
- Cleveland, B., McShane, I., Chandler, P., Backhouse, S., Aston, R., & Clinton, J. M. (2023). Renewed aspirations for schools as community hubs. In *Schools as community hubs: Building 'more than a school' for community benefit* (pp. 3–10). Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-9972-7_1
- Cook, J. R., & Nation, M. (2016). Community engagement: Universities' roles in building communities and strengthening democracy. *Community Development*, 47(5), 718–731.
- Cooper, D. (2009). University-Civil Society (U-CS) research relationships: The importance of a 'fourth helix' alongside the 'triple helix' of University-Industry-Government (UIG) relations. *South African Review of Sociology*, 40(2), 153–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2009.10425106>
- Cooper, D. (2011). *The university in development: case studies of use-oriented research*. HSRC Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Culum, B. (2018). Literature review: dimensions and current practices of community engagement. *Mapping and Critical Synthesis of Current State-of-the-Art on Community Engagement in Higher Education*, 39, 47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980500221934>
- Dube, N., & Hendricks, E. A. (2023). The praxis and paradoxes of community engagement as the third mission of universities. A case of a selected South African university. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 37(1), 131–150. <https://doi.org/10.20853/37-1-5643>.
- Eccles, J. S., & Roeser, R. W. (2015). School and community influences on human development. In *Developmental Science* (pp. 645–728). Psychology Press.
- Elder, B., Payne, M., & Oswago, B. (2021). The community-based actions that removed barriers to inclusive education in Kenya. *Disability and the Global South*. https://dgsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/dgs_08_02_01.pdf.
- Erickson, J., & Anderson, J. B. (Eds.). (2023). Learning with the community: Concepts and models for service-learning in teacher education. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003445715>.
- Etzkowitz, H. (2016). The entrepreneurial university: Vision and metrics. *Industry and Higher Education*, 30(2), 83–97. <https://doi.org/10.5367/ihe.2016.0303>



- Etzkowitz, H., & Leydesdorff, L. (1998). A triple helix of university – Industry – Government relations: Introduction. *Industry and Higher Education*, 12(4), 197–201.
- Etzkowitz, H., & Leydesdorff, L. (2000). The dynamics of innovation: from National Systems and “Mode 2” to a Triple Helix of university–industry–government relations. *Research Policy*, 29(2), 109–123. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0048-7333\(99\)00055-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0048-7333(99)00055-4)
- Etzkowitz, H., & Zhou, C. (2017). *The triple helix: University–industry–government innovation and entrepreneurship*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315620183-14>
- Etzkowitz, H., & Zhou, C. (2017). *The triple helix: University–industry–government innovation and entrepreneurship*. Routledge.
- Fernández-Terol, L., & Domingo-Segovia, J. (2025). Empowering student engagement: A case study of transforming schools through professional learning communities. *European Journal of Education*, 60(3), e12754. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12754>
- Gerring, J. (2017). Qualitative methods. *Annual review of political science*, 20(1), 15–36. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-092415-024158>
- Gravett, S. and Petersen, N. (eds) (2022). *Future-proofing teacher education*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003185499>
- Gravett, S., & Henning, E. (2020). *Glimpses into primary school teacher education in South Africa*. Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429322402>
- Gravett, S., & Petersen, N. (2020). A school–university partnership for teacher education in Soweto, Johannesburg. In *Glimpses into Primary School Teacher Education in South Africa* (pp. 71–86). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429322402-7>
- Gravett, S., Petersen, N., & Ramsaroop, S. (2019, January). A university and a school working in partnership to develop professional practice knowledge for teaching. In *Frontiers in Education* (Vol. 3, p. 118). Frontiers Media SA. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2018.00118>
- Hancock, D. R., Algozzine, B., & Lim, J. H. (2021). *Doing case study research: A practical guide for beginning researchers*. Teachers College Press. <https://doi.org/10.65528/9780807779828>
- Hands, C. M. (2023). Creating schools as community hubs through collaboration. In *Pathways to Community Engagement in Education: Collaboration in Diverse, Urban Neighbourhoods* (pp. 233–260). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-33001-8_10
- Hart, A. O. (2024). Institutional framework for sustainable community engagement for development in Nigeria. *Journal of Humanities and Social Policy*, 10(2), 14–37.
- Henning, E., Petker, G., & Petersen, N. (2015). University-affiliated schools as sites for research learning in pre-service teacher education. *South African Journal of Education*, 35(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.15700/201503070014>
- Horn, M. B., Freeland, J., & Butler, S. M. (2015). Schools as community hubs: Integrating support services to drive educational outcomes. *Discussion Papers on Building Healthy Neighbourhoods*, 3.
- Jiyane, L., & Gravett, S. J. (2019). The practice learning experiences of student teachers at a rural campus of a South African university. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 9(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v9i1.702>
- Johnson, B. J., & Hlatshwayo, M. (2025). Anchor universities and communities: The power of community engagement. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 39(1), 114–136.



- Lewis, L. A., Kusmaul, N., Elze, D., & Butler, L. (2016). The role of field education in a university-community partnership aimed at curriculum transformation. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 52(2), 186–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1151274>
- Leydesdorff, L. (2020). Triple Helix of university-industry-government relations. In *Encyclopedia of creativity, invention, innovation and entrepreneurship* (pp. 2356–2364). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-15347-6_452
- Leydesdorff, L., & Etzkowitz, H. (1998). The triple helix as a model for innovation studies. *Science and Public Policy*, 25(3), 195–203. <https://doi.org/10.1093/spp/25.3.195>
- Maxwell, J. A. (2018). Collecting qualitative data: A realist approach. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data collection*, 19–32. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526416070.n2>
- Mbah, M. (2019). Can local knowledge make a difference? Rethinking universities' community engagement and prospects for sustainable community development. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 50(1), 11–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2018.1462136>
- McLaughlin, C., & Black-Hawkins, K. (2007). School-university partnerships for educational research: distinctions, dilemmas, and challenges. *The Curriculum Journal*, 18(3), 327–341.
- McNaught, C. (2021). *Embedding social justice in teacher education and development in Africa*. S. Gravett (Ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429341212>
- Mdleleni, L. (2022). University as a vehicle to achieve social innovation and development: repositioning the role of the university in society. *Social Enterprise Journal*, 18(1), 121–139.
- Nguyen, T. H. (2022). From the triple to the quadruple helix of innovation: Theory and practice. <https://www.tdx.cat/bitstream/handle/10803/687801/thn1de1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Padayachee, K., & Harris, G. T. (2023). Early Childhood Development: A Case Study of University-Community Engagement in South Africa. *African Journal of Inter/Multidisciplinary Studies*, 5(1), 1–11 <https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v5i1.1279>
- Petersen, I. H., Kruss, G., & van Rheede, N. (2022). Strengthening the university's third mission through building community capabilities alongside university capabilities. *Science and Public Policy*, 49(6), 890–904. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scac036>
- Provinzano, K. T., Riley, R., Levine, B., & Grant, A. (2018). Community schools and the role of university-school-community collaboration. *Metropolitan Universities*, 29(2), 91–103.
- Ramsaroop, S., Mahase, M. F., & Petersen, N. (2024). Bridging the theory-practice divide: Reflections of school-based student teachers. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 14(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v14i1.1558>
- Ramsaroop, S., Petersen, N., & Mashaphu, T. (2025). 8 School-university partnerships: learnings from piloting the University of Johannesburg's School-Based Student Teacher Programme. *Practice & Research Digest*, 51. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2020.bk215.04>
- Ranga, M., & Etzkowitz, H. (2013). Triple Helix systems: an analytical framework for innovation policy and practice in the Knowledge Society. *Industry and higher education*, 27(4), 237–262. <https://doi.org/10.5367/ihe.2013.0165>
- Republic of South Africa. (2013). *Protection of Personal Information Act, No. 4 of 2013 (POPIA) [as amended 2020]*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Roberts, L. D. (2015). Ethical issues in conducting qualitative research in online communities. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 12(3), 314–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2015.1008909>



- Roman, M., Varga, H., Cvijanovic, V., & Reid, A. (2020). Quadruple Helix models for sustainable regional innovation: Engaging and facilitating civil society participation. *Economies*, 8(2), 48. <https://doi.org/10.3390/economies8020048>
- Rouse, E., & Ware, V. A. (2017). Community development in schools – Building connections with and for families. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 84, 24–31.
- Sanderson, D. R. (2016). Working together to strengthen the school community: The restructuring of a university-school partnership. *School Community Journal*, 26(1), 183–198.
- Sarah, W. V., Ismanto, B., & Sanoto, H. (2023). Exploring the role of community-based partnership for enhancing academic achievement: Empowering students through quality teaching. *Jurnal Kependidikan: Jurnal Hasil Penelitian dan Kajian Kepustakaan di Bidang Pendidikan, Pengajaran, dan Pembelajaran*, 9(2), 671–680. <https://doi.org/10.33394/jk.v9i2.7816>
- Shiel, C., Leal Filho, W., do Paço, A., & Brandli, L. (2016). Evaluating the engagement of universities in capacity building for sustainable development in local communities. *Evaluation and programme planning*, 54, 123–134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2015.07.006>
- Shyiramunda, T., & van den Bersselaar, D. (2024). Local community development and higher education institutions: Moving from the triple helix to the quadruple helix model. *International Review of Education*, 70(1), 51–85. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-023-10037-7>
- Sibhensana, B., & Maistry, S. (2023). Conceptualising public-private partnerships for social innovation through community engagement in higher education institutions. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 37(1), 185–205. <https://doi.org/10.20853/37-1-5669>
- Singh, M. K. (2023). Family and community engagement in early childhood education. *Preschool Education and An Integrated Preschool Curriculum*, 90.
- Stefanski, A., Valli, L., & Jacobson, R. (2016). Beyond Involvement and Engagement: The Role of the Family in School-Community Partnerships. *School Community Journal*, 26(2), 135–160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085914549366>
- Supriadi, A., Permana, I., Afandi, D. R., Arisontha, E., & Kusumaningsih, A. (2025). The triple helix model: university-industry-government collaboration and its role in SMEs innovation and development. *International Journal of Financial Economics*, 1(9), 75–90.
- Surmiak, A. D. (2018). Confidentiality in qualitative research involving vulnerable participants: Researchers' perspectives. In *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (Vol. 19, No.3). DEU.
- Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V. and Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology*, 2(17–37), p.25. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555.n2>
- Vally, S. (2023). Reimagining university–community engagement. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 37(1), 53–71. <https://doi.org/10.20853/37-1-5681>
- Van Rensburg, N. J., Meyer, J., & Nel, H. (2016, December). Social innovation, research and community engagement: Managing interdisciplinary projects for societal change. In *2016, the IEEE International Conference on Industrial Engineering and Engineering Management (IEEM)* (pp. 1785–1789). IEEE. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ieem.2016.7798185>
- Williamson, V. (2016). On the ethics of crowdsourced research. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 49(1), 77–81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s104909651500116x>



- Yamamura, E. K., & Koth, K. (2023). *Place-based community engagement in higher education: A strategy to transform universities and communities*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003446323-3>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). Chapter 2, "Designing Case Studies: Identifying Your Case(s) and Establishing the Logic of Your Case Study. *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage. (pp. 25–80). <https://doi.org/10.33524/cjar.v14i1.73>
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case Study Research Design and Methods* (5th ed.). Sage.