THE ROLE ALUMNI CAN PLAY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF
DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS

By

Paul Gustav Garnett Geswindt

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in Developmental Studies at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University

January 2013

Supervisor: Dr A.J. Greyling
DECLARATION BY STUDENT

I, Paul Gustav Garnett Geswindt (186605300), hereby declare that the research report titled THE ROLE ALUMNI CAN PLAY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS is my own work and that it has not previously been submitted for assessment or completion of any postgraduate qualification to another University or for another qualification.

Signed:__________________________________

Paul Gustav Garnett Geswindt

Date:____________________________________

Official use:

In accordance with Rule G4.6.3,

4.6.3 A treatise/dissertation/thesis must be accompanied by a written declaration on the part of the candidate to the effect that it is his/her own work and that it has not previously been submitted for assessment to another University or for another qualification. However, material from publications by the candidate may be embodied in a treatise/dissertation/thesis.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I hereby express my gratitude and appreciation to the following individuals and groups who contributed to the completion of this research report:

- My supervisor, Dr. A.J. Greyling, for her encouragement and guidance throughout this study.
- Each research participant for their support of the study and their individual and group contributions.
- My wife, Yvette Geswindt, for her encouragement and support of my studies, work and various community development activities.
- My family, friends and role models who contribute to my development and life experience in many different ways.
DECLARATION BY LANGUAGE EDITOR

6 January 2013

I, Natalie Stear, have undertaken and completed the editing of the research report entitled, The Role Alumni can play in the Development of Disadvantaged Schools, submitted by Paul Geswindt towards a Master of Arts degree in Development Studies, in the Faculty of Business and Economic Sciences, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

Natalie Stear
041 373 3646
083 258 3776
nstear@iafrica.com
ABSTRACT

The majority of South African public schools are not performing well considering the overall learner success rates in specifically so called disadvantaged schools. Many factors contribute to this situation, however, all education stakeholders contribute in some way to the success or failure of schools. In this regard alumni of disadvantaged schools in South Africa have not played an active role in supporting their alma maters.

This research sought to identify the various roles alumni can play in the development of disadvantaged schools. As innovative strategies to the public education crisis in South Africa are required, one such strategy is to involve a neglected stakeholder group such as alumni to share their skills and resources towards improving the different aspects of school development.

There are very few examples of functioning alumni associations at previously disadvantaged schools in the Eastern Cape. Sharing information on a study of two selected schools with already established alumni associations could be of value to other schools in the establishment of their own alumni associations in order to support school improvement and development initiatives. Therefore, based on the findings of this study and from evidence in literature, the researcher concludes that alumni associations can play a meaningful role in developing and transforming disadvantaged schools in a young and developing democracy as in the case of South Africa.

This study looked at, amongst other aspects, at the roles and contributions that alumni may play in the development of their alma maters and finally offer guidelines in the establishment of alumni associations.

Keywords: Alumni, Alumni association, school development.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION BY STUDENT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION BY LANGUAGE EDITOR</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER ONE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTEXT, PROBLEM STATEMENT, RESEARCH DESIGN AND STUDY OUTLINE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 CONTEXT OF STUDY</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 PURPOSE OF STUDY</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.1 Primary research question</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.2 Secondary research questions</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.3 Research aim</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.4 Research objectives</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8 RESEARCH DESIGN</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8.1 Qualitative methodology</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8.2 Sample</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8.3 Data collection instruments</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9 DATA ANALYSIS</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9.1 Validation of data</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.10 ETHICAL MEASURES</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.11 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.12 SUMMARY</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW OF ALUMNI ROLES, EDUCATION CHALLENGES AND SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>ALUMNI ROLES</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>SUMMARY</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>PROBLEM STATEMENT</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.1</td>
<td>Primary research question</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.2</td>
<td>Secondary research questions</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1</td>
<td>Research aim</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2</td>
<td>Research objectives</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>RESEARCH DESIGN</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.1</td>
<td>Qualitative methodology</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>SAMPLING</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.1</td>
<td>Questionnaires</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.2</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.3</td>
<td>Documents</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6.4</td>
<td>Observation protocols</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>DATA ANALYSIS AND VALIDATION</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 1: Questions for interviews with alumni association chairpersons 49
APPENDIX 2: Questionnaire for alumni association members 50
APPENDIX 3: Letter to alumni association chairman at the targeted schools 51
APPENDIX 4: Summary of alumni questionnaire responses 52
APPENDIX 5: Summary of alumni interview responses 54
CHAPTER ONE
CONTEXT, PROBLEM STATEMENT, RESEARCH DESIGN AND STUDY OUTLINE

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In 2009 South Africa had 25 906 ordinary schools of which 14 380 were primary schools, 6 304 secondary schools and 5 222 combined and intermediate schools catering for 11 834 516 learners - the majority from disadvantaged communities. Independent schools constituted 4.7% of the 25 906 schools (Department of Basic Education, 2010: 5). Unfortunately, the number of schools is no indication of the quality of education in individual schools. In many of these schools, especially the schools situated in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, the teaching and learning are at risk due to the vast array of socio-economic factors that negatively impact on learner performance. There is often a shortage of educators, administrative and cleaning staff, teaching and learning material shortages, school transport problems, feeding scheme problems and inadequate school infrastructure. Teaching and learning are thus affected by the government’s inability to support disadvantaged schools adequately by, amongst other things, supplying appropriate educational resources on time and ensuring that educators and support staff are appointed according to school staff establishment formulas (Mbabela and Kimberley, 2012: 1).

There is an urgent need to find innovative solutions to South Africa’s educational crisis. In this regard, alumni can play an important role to assist their alma maters as alumni most often represent the institution’s largest and most permanent constituency (Feudo, 1999: vi). Millions of learners have gone through the educational system over the years and have a link with their alma maters based on the education they received there; therefore they have a legitimate stake in their alma maters. Alumni, as citizens, have the right to step forward to raise issues about the state of the school infrastructure, school resources, quality of education and even the school’s reputation. It therefore
seems obvious that alumni should be encouraged to get involved in their former schools and become active in their school communities by sharing expertise and resources. No government strategies or additional supply of funding can bring the level of change that is required to turn around the crisis situation in education where school infrastructure is in a bad state and learner academic performance is low, as is the case in the majority of disadvantaged schools. Communities, of which alumni form part, should therefore take up the issue of bad service delivery in the education system with relevant politicians, educators, officials, pupils and parents; who are often all part of the problem in our schooling system. Alumni, however, can also contribute directly to possible solutions by getting directly involved in addressing the needs of their alma maters. Paolo’s Freire’s (1985: 106) process of conscientization deals with people participating critically in a transforming act to create a new reality. As change agents who have a legitimate stake in a school and the community it serves, alumni can indeed play an important role. As such, this study intends to look at possible involvement of alumni in the transformation and development of disadvantaged schools and to what extent such involvement can be formalized.

1.2 CONTEXT OF STUDY

As the Alumni Relations Director at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), I was approached by a number of high schools’ alumni to assist them with their efforts to establish alumni structures at their schools to support their alma maters. The local Department of Education (DoE) became interested in the discussions, since they too were interested in finding innovative solutions to improving the quality of education in the district. Subsequently, I was invited to address a DoE, Port Elizabeth District Schools’ Workshop during June 2012 to discuss the developmental value alumni involvement could have for schools. Based upon the interest from schools and in partnership with the DoE, Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage Districts, an alumni workshop for high schools was held on 28 August 2012, dealing specifically with the value, and establishment of alumni structures. Sixty-eight representatives from high schools were
present at the workshop with thirty-eight high schools signing up to be part of a high school alumni forum.

My personal journey as a professional university alumni relations officer, former educator and DoE deputy chief education specialist, as well as former marketing manager for the university, made me consider the value of alumni involvement as a school development strategy. Being exposed to rural and urban, public and private, as well as South African and foreign schools, I have been most intrigued by schools that achieved much in spite of limited financial resources, as it appeared that in many cases the achievements were due to individuals being passionate about making a change for the better at their alma maters.

The South African political past cannot be denied or ignored and the development of schools and communities is unfortunately tightly linked to the past reality. For improvement in poorly functioning schools we need a new consciousness, a consciousness of self worth, of new beginnings and of personal involvement and personal sacrifice in order to turn the situation of inequality around in many of these historically-disadvantaged schools and communities. Taking ownership of our schools should bring about change and should lead to partnerships and friendships that could help improve the resource levels and quality of academic service delivery in schools and communities. The academic work of Paulo Freire is very relevant in this context because Freire insisted that the pedagogy of the oppressed is also one of questioning that applies to both the school and political environment (Gadotti, 1994: 60). The school and its development contexts furthermore cannot really be separated since the level of people’s education and the quality of the education they receive is normally also linked to their class.

Alumni relations as such are not an established culture in the South African school context, and even less so in the case of historically-disadvantaged schools; however, most alumni should endeavor to contribute time, skills or financial resources to their alma maters. More importantly, alumni can also share their concerns about the general
quality of education, not only as alumni with an interest in their alma maters, but also as citizens of South Africa. Van der Westhuizen (1996: 136) states that the aim of change is always improvement. However, change takes time to bear fruit and is affected by individuals through highly personal experiences. Alumni should therefore be willing and have a personal sense of duty to support their alma maters over time in order to improve the quality of education at their alma maters specifically, but also in South Africa in general.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

With the aforesaid in mind and as a concerned alumnus myself, I perceived that alumni support for their alma maters can help address some of the challenges faced by disadvantaged schools. Although alumni are a recognised stakeholder group in terms of having a link to a school, they have not been specifically recognized by the South African Schools Act (1996:18) to form part of public school governance. Elected members of school governing bodies include parents of learners at the school, educators, members of staff who are not educators and learners in grade eight or higher at the school. Although the governing body may co-opt members of the community to help discharge its functions, no specific reference is made to alumni of the school. The focus of this study is therefore the development of historically-disadvantaged schools in the Port Elizabeth area by looking at the advantages of alumni involvement and ways to establish formal and informal alumni structures in bringing about change at these schools.

1.4 PURPOSE OF STUDY

Due to the limited availability of literature and research done with regard to alumni relations in South African high schools, it is hoped that this study will make a meaningful contribution in assisting with promoting further research in this area.
Based on the general focus of the study, the following primary and secondary research questions were posed:

1.4.1 **Primary research question**

*What role can alumni play in the development of disadvantaged schools?*

1.4.2 **Secondary research questions**

- *How can alumni use their skills and resources to address problems experienced in disadvantaged schools?*
- *What operational factors must be considered when an alumni group is established?*
- *What can be done to create a conducive environment for greater alumni participation in the development of their alma maters?*

1.4.3 **Research aim**

The research aim and objectives were derived from the primary and secondary research questions. The research aim is as follows:

*To determine the role alumni can play in the development of disadvantaged schools.*

1.4.4 **Research objectives**

To determine:
- *ways in which alumni can use their skills and resources to address problems experienced in disadvantaged schools;*
- *operational factors to consider when establishing alumni groups;*
• how to create a conducive environment for greater alumni participation in the development of their alma maters.

1.5 CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

For the sake of clarity the following concepts are defined according to the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2008):

- **Alumni** (plural for alumnus) refers to former students of a school, college or university. Clifford and Feudo (2002: 2) state that alumni are an army of advocates that can help an institution achieve its goals but their energy must be focused. Alumni can be broadly defined as students who spent at least one year at an institution. Some institutions broaden the alumni categories to include former educators, support staff, governors and trustees who were formally involved with the school for at least one year as well. For the purpose of this study, alumni will refer to former pupils of a school only.

- **Alma mater** refers to the school, college or university where someone studied.

- An **association** is defined as a group of people who work together in a single organization for a particular purpose. An alumni association can thus be described as an organized body of alumni established to support their alma mater.

- The term **disadvantaged schools** refers to schools classified as black, coloured or Indian schools under apartheid and continue to function, serving mainly the poorer sections of the community.

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review helped with providing background information on the role of alumni relations, the educational challenges in South Africa and the importance of school development planning. Most of the existing literature on alumni relations is American,
due to the Americans having an advanced alumni relations system and culture compared to the rest of the world. In South Africa, literature on alumni relations was found to be very limited.

Considering the typical stumbling blocks to effective teaching and learning in South Africa, especially as experienced in the majority of disadvantaged schools, not only creative, but also bold solutions are required to address the crisis in public education. Newspaper front page headlines such as, “PE schools voted worst in country” (Butler, 2012: 1), which carried the story of thousands of pupils still without textbooks midway through the school year, are common, while articles reporting on teachers not being paid, calling on the Minister of Basic Education to come to the aid of teachers in temporary posts who were working for months without being paid (Butler, 2012: 1), also made headlines. Related to this, the Herald reporters, Mbabela and Kimberley (2012: 1), were involved in an extensive investigation into the crisis in Eastern Cape Education and highlighted, apart from the corruption, wastage and unproductively of the officials that only three out of every ten grade one pupils in the province make it to matric. When textbooks are not delivered, educators are not paid their salaries and school buildings fall apart, the citizens, including alumni of schools, should see it as their duty to act for change.

As part of the school development process, Bainbridge (2007: 49) emphasises the fact that schools must take into account the views of all stakeholders so that no participant should feel overlooked, especially if he/she can contribute to achieving the end goal. Previously, Xaba (2006: 18) stated in this regard that development planning relies heavily on stakeholder participation and emphasized that it’s a collaborative process that draws the whole school community together in shaping the school’s future. However, alumni have generally not been involved in the affairs of most disadvantaged schools in spite of them being able to make a meaningful contribution to the development of the school. According to Abrahams and Abrahams (2008: 5), alumni can, however, play a very important role with regard to the development of any school.
1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Against the background of Freire’s theoretical framework of change and social justice this research has made use of an interpretive paradigm. A new interpretation of the role of alumni was advanced as suggested by Mouton (2001: 113), in this case within a disadvantaged school context. The interpretive paradigm finds substance and significance in social action to which people attach meaning and is therefore well suited for this study where the primary aim is to emancipate people so that they can help and empower themselves as well as improve their own circumstances (Neuman: 2005: 69). In this regard the role alumni can play as an important and neglected stakeholder group who can help to improve circumstances at disadvantaged schools is central to this study.

1.8 RESEARCH DESIGN

Mouton (2001: 55) refers to a research design as a plan or blueprint of how you intend conducting the research while McMillan and Schumacher (2010: 20) elaborates on the point by stating that the term describes the procedures for conducting the study, including when, from whom and under what conditions data will be collected. The researcher must in the final instance answer the research questions, having collected, analysed and interpreted relevant and credible data.

1.8.1 Qualitative methodology

This is a qualitative study. The qualitative approach was chosen because it made provision for the examination of a social phenomenon by means of research participants’ perspectives as suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (2010: 16).
1.8.2 Sample

According to Babbie and Mouton (2001: 164-175), sampling is the process of selecting participants with the ultimate purpose of selecting participants who will be able to contribute to information rich data. Based on the research questions, the researcher wanted to use the examples of the two historically-disadvantaged high schools with functioning alumni associations to highlight the development potential of alumni in support of schools in general. The number is so small as there are no other schools in the area that have been able to establish formal functional alumni structures. The sample size was also determined by the scope of the study and the level of involvement by the researcher with these schools.

1.8.3 Data collection instruments

For the purposes of this study, data about the value and functioning of alumni associations have been sourced from individuals who serve on the executive committees of alumni associations at the identified schools. This was done by means of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. According to O’Leary (2010: 180) questionnaires and interviews put the researcher in charge of the research and data can be custom built for the research project.

Other sources of information for this study included evidence in support of statements made in the interviews and questionnaires. These sources included minutes of meetings, reports, photographs of events, newspaper reports, newsletters and information on the Internet, including the schools’ websites and information on Facebook pages of former learners from the selected schools.
1.9 DATA ANALYSIS

Differences between the operations of the two selected alumni associations have been scrutinized and leading questions asked in order to find answers that could shed light on particular views. A qualitative analysis of the data has been made through an analysis of the various contributions received from the questionnaire and participants interviewed. Emerging themes were identified through the analysis of coded data as suggested by Struwig and Stead (2001: 169).

1.9.1 Validation of data

According to Whitehead and McNiff (2006: 97), validity deals with establishing the truth and trustworthiness of a claim to knowledge by comprehensively questioning it. The main issue is the accuracy of the findings and the interpretation thereof. Personal experience and perceptions can lead to bias, but when the feedback from interviewees is compared to theory and reflected on and confirmed in discussion forums, the data become more credible. Data validation will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

1.10 ETHICAL MEASURES

The Ethical measures followed were in accordance to the prescriptions of NMMU’s Ethical Committee. Strict confidentiality procedures were followed throughout this research process. All the participants received written letters to explain the process and purpose of the research and this was explained verbally as well. No documents contained the names of the participants or the schools and alumni associations involved. A more detailed discussion follows in Chapter Three.
1.11 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Chapter One deals with the context, problem statement and purpose of study. This chapter provides the rationale for the study. The literature review of alumni roles, education challenges and school development, which forms the theoretical basis in support of the empirical evidence to be provided, is covered in Chapter Two. Chapter Three outlines research design and methodology while Chapter Four deals with the findings of the research and interpretation of the data. Finally, Chapter Five draws certain conclusions based on the findings and makes recommendations that could be beneficial to people interested in the findings of this study.

1.12 SUMMARY

In Chapter One the purpose of this study and the context has been briefly discussed. This was followed by stating the research questions and aims and objectives, after which the research design was outlined.

Chapter Two deals with the literature review of alumni roles, education challenges and school development.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW OF ALUMNI ROLES, EDUCATION CHALLENGES AND SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The literature review is a critical review of past research according to O’Leary (2010: 74). This chapter reviews the available literature and provides an overview of alumni roles and ways in which alumni can assist with school development in a very challenging educational context facing the vast majority of public schools in South Africa.

2.2 ALUMNI ROLES

Buchanan (2000:263) refers to alumni as an institution’s most numerous, loyal and dedicated constituency and states that institutions must direct this resource to accomplish the institution’s mission which, in this case, can include providing quality education. It is important for schools to identify all possible resources to achieve their educational objectives. Due to alumni not being a recognized stakeholder group that forms part of public school governing body (SGB) membership, they remain one of the most neglected stakeholder groups in the case of the vast majority of disadvantaged schools in South Africa. This state of affairs could be the primary contributory factor to alumni’s non-involvement or very limited involvement in school affairs of their alma maters. It is therefore imperative to understand the various roles alumni can play in school development and alumni’s formal and informal inclusion in school structures.

Regarding the role alumni can play in school development, Binns and Dove (1991: 3) identify the primary purpose of alumni relations as creating a mutually beneficial relationship between the institution and its alumni. In the case of developing
disadvantaged schools, the issue of mutually beneficial relationships can be disputed because the focus will be on giving rather than directly receiving something in return. However, it can be argued that if giving makes an individual feel good about him-/herself, the relationship can be regarded as mutually beneficial. Furthermore, often the benefits of such relationships contribute to the quality of education of the contributor’s own and others’ children, and so positively influencing the broader community in which the school is situated. Important to remember though is that, when relationships between a school and its alumni are established the nature of that relationship must be clear, such as with what aspects of school development, and to what extend, alumni will become involved.

Worth (2002: 337) elaborates on the number of roles alumni can play with regard to fundraising, such as donating money, helping to secure donations, serving on fundraising committees, helping to plan fundraising campaigns and organizing events for fundraising. The list of alumni contributions is extensive and those mentioned merely highlight involvement in fundraising. It is important though to also consider sound financial management and planning on how available funds are to be allocated if the fundraising is not for a specific goal such as specific extra-mural activities or facilities.

There are also many other meaningful roles alumni can play within the disadvantaged school environment to assist in the holistic development of the school. Other such contributions, according to Abrahams and Abrahams (2008: 9-10), include the school using the success stories of alumni to be part of its marketing and communication campaigns and getting alumni to help market the school. Alumni identified as role models can be approached by the school to assist with alumni association member recruiting. Mentorship programmes can also be developed where alumni give guidance to learners and even the management and educators of the school. Sharing skills with learners and being their role models are very relevant to schools considering the public image of many disadvantaged schools, as well as the lack of extramural activities and facilities at those schools; which directly impact on the holistic development of learners. Many disadvantaged schools have rich and proud histories and have alumni who have
excelled in their chosen careers, but the overwhelming majority of these stories are not shared, recorded or celebrated. The current learners of such schools are often unaware of the history of the school or the names of celebrated alumni and their journeys to success. Alumni who are passionate sport and cultural enthusiasts can return to their alma maters to encourage learners to follow their example and benefit from the value of their experiences.

More examples of typical contributions may include sharing expertise and experience in financial management, legal advice, medical-, social- and/or psychological guidance, information technology and most important time and commitment on all levels, including sport and cultural coaching, maintenance and security of the school, feeding schemes or even help with after school care and homework supervision.

Alumni can also for example commit time and labour to help paint classrooms, run a second-hand school clothes store, setup a vegetable garden, fix plumbing and electrical problems, set up a computer network and even cook for the school feeding scheme, in fact they may get involved in any aspect that would add value to the school’s effectiveness.

The NMMU Alumni Relations brochure (2010:14) furthermore lists a variety of roles alumni can play, including being employers, marketing the institution, giving talks to learners, staff and parents on identified topics and providing expertise and professional services. Alumni can offer pupils part-time jobs or even full-time employment after their school career and can help promote the school to prospective pupils and parents, as well as to donors and any parties who could be in a position advance the interests of the school. Schools can also benefit from the expertise of alumni in various areas, such as governance and management matters, as well as marketing and technical guidance. The list of expert services is endless.

Extremely important is also the role of alumni acting as a lobby group to address issues of government non-performance with regard to educator, support staff and resource
allocations to schools. As tax payers alumni have a vested interest in government fulfilling constitutional obligations with regard to a quality basic education and delivering services in line with policy requirements. In this regard, Freire holds the opinion that, the principle issues and most problems in education are rooted in politics and that it is the responsibility of society to change the schooling system (McLaren and Leonard, 1993: 125). As alumni are often educated and privileged members of society who have a perspective on the quality of education in the country, alumni can collectively be a major voice of support to educators and parents if government is not fulfilling its responsibility and alumni as involved stakeholders may act as critics of the general academic performance at their alma maters, as well as of the general state of affairs at the school. Obviously such roles become more meaningful if alumni are involved in supporting the school financially or as volunteers rendering services.

A survey report (CASE, 2010:10) identifies successful alumni relations programmes according to the number of attendees at alumni events, the number of volunteers to support alumni programmes and the number of donors to alumni projects. These measures relate to the active involvement of alumni at institutions where they get involved for various reasons. Pre-requisites for success require that databases, communication systems, cases for support and donation systems must be in place. Such databases need to include the correct alumni contact details to communicate with alumni via their preferred medium of communication. Communication from schools to alumni regarding events has to be well formulated in order to convince alumni to support a worthy cause. It is also important to provide different donation channels to alumni to make it easy for them to donate money or give feedback of other means of support. An alumni programme’s ability to attract alumni to events, to involve alumni in projects and to get them to donate is already an indicator of progress of a school’s alumni relations programme. It seems obvious that alumni can only play a role if schools know their alumni and where to find them.

In the case of disadvantaged schools, alumni are required to assist with specific challenges the schools face. Some such challenges will be discussed next.
2.3 EDUCA TIONAL CHALLENGES

According to the National Planning Commission (2011: 9-17) educational and economic facts show both development and decline of the economy and human development in South Africa. Only one percent of African schools are top performing in high school certification results versus thirty-one percent for formerly privileged schools. Furthermore, the report shows that many teachers scored less than the minimum scores expected from the average learner in their own subjects, meaning that there are still many educators not adequately trained to teach their subjects or being appointed in posts they are not qualified to teach in.

However, the fact that a large percentage of South Africans are unemployed is the first challenge highlighted by the National Planning Commission (2011: 21). A Council for Higher Education report shows that the greater a group’s level of education, the lower their level of unemployment and the higher their income; which clearly highlights the value of education (Asmal and James, 2001: 192). Unemployment directly impacts on the socio-economic well-being of the school going children in families, by virtue of not having money to travel to school, buy school clothes or participate in extramural activities. The National Planning Commission (2011: 25) also states that the quality of education of school education for most black people is sub-standard as the poor generally gets poorer quality of education due to the lack of resources, such as proper laboratories, teaching aids and sporting facilities. Another report on the topic of educational infrastructure and resources stated that in 2007 only 7.23% of South African public schools were operating functional libraries (Equal Education, 2010: 7). The vast majority of disadvantaged schools do not have school halls and other specialist educational infrastructure such as computer rooms, gymnasiums and libraries. Alumni can help with fundraising for such facilities or putting pressure on the government to supply such facilities to their alma maters.

The School Governance Ministerial Review Committee (2003: viii) also mentions some challenges related to school governance, such as insufficient capacity to deal with
governance issues. Naidoo (2005: 89) states that participation of stakeholders in the decision-making processes of well-resourced schools has been more empowering than for schools in poor areas. Such schools often have less educated and even illiterate parents serving on SGB’s, where due to the lack of educated parents, the SGB may be under the control of the school principal who may also lack key skills. As schools cannot function properly if they are not well governed and managed, alumni with skills and resources should be co-opted to add value to SGB’s at such disadvantaged schools.

2.4 SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

According to Prew (2009: 824) the majority of schools of more than 25 500 schools in South Africa struggled to improve over the last few decades. Key school development issues include determining what communities want from schools and what cost effective things can be done to create effective schools. The link between development planning, classroom practice and pupil learning is further highlighted. Pupil performance depends on the quality of education and the school’s value is ultimately determined by the academic performance of its pupils.

The existence of a shared vision and goals for schools remains a major challenge and if such a document exists the question remains whether it is being implemented (Prew, 2009: 824-827). A school improvement model as discussed by Khosa (2011: 9) should result in improved support and monitoring of schools by districts, better functionality of schools, improved teacher performance and educational outcomes and increased community involvement. It is furthermore easier for alumni to support a school if the school’s development objectives and needs are already outlined in a school improvement plan. What is of concern regarding the outcomes listed by Khosa (2011: 9), is that alumni (as tax payers and stakeholders) do not seem to keep education officials, managers and educators accountable to fulfil their roles responsibly. Furthermore, schools that fall from grace because of declining academic performance cannot expect to attract the best learners or sponsors. However, schools that have an
improvement plan will have a vision and goals to share with alumni to encourage them to support their alma mater.

2.5 SUMMARY

This chapter highlighted the skills and resources with which alumni can support schools as reflected in the literature. The challenges in education are many and varied, but without a plan to develop schools and involving all possible stakeholders, it would be difficult for schools to achieve any form of real success. The issue of a shared vision involving a generally neglected stakeholder like alumni must be considered more seriously. The contribution made by alumni, as stakeholders, could be significant if properly applied, especially considering the challenges facing public education in South Africa.

The next chapter deals with the theoretical aspects of research methodology.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

A research design can be defined as the strategy and structure of the investigation used to obtain evidence to answer a research question (McMillan and Schumacher, 1997: 33). This chapter discusses the research design and the procedures to be followed. It also describes the sample and data collection instruments and how the data were analysed and validated.

The problem statement and research aims and objective will first be restated before the research design and methodology is discussed below.

3.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

South African public schools are not performing well considering learner success rates. Many factors contribute to the situation in schools and all education stakeholders contribute in some way to the success or failure of the schools. Alumni of disadvantaged schools in South Africa have not played an active role in supporting their alma maters.

Innovative solutions to the public education crisis in South Africa are required and one such strategy may be to involve a stakeholder group, such as alumni, that previously were not actively and formally engaged by the school authorities to share their skills and resources.

There are few examples of functioning alumni associations at previously disadvantaged schools and a study of two such associations is considered to shed light on problems
and practicalities other schools may consider in the establishment of their own alumni associations in support of school improvement initiatives. Against this background, the following research questions were formulated.

3.2.1 Primary research question

- What role can alumni play in the development of disadvantaged schools?

3.2.2 Secondary research questions

- How can alumni use their skills and resources to address problems experienced in disadvantaged schools?
- What operational factors must be considered when an alumni group is established?
- What can be done to create an environment for greater alumni participation in the development of their alma maters?

3.3 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The following are the research aim and research objectives that were developed from the research questions above:

3.3.1 Research aim

- To determine the role alumni can play in the development of disadvantaged schools.

3.3.2 Research objectives

To determine:
• ways in which alumni can use their skills and resources to address problems experienced in disadvantaged schools;
• operational factors to consider when establishing alumni groups;
• how to create a conducive environment for greater alumni participation in the development of their alma maters.

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

According to Cresswell (2005: 51), the research design outlines the procedures that the researcher follows to collect and analyse data in order to draw conclusions and write the report. The research design is centred on the direct involvement of the researcher with high school alumni associations. The researcher firstly identified the need for a better understanding of the role of alumni associations in developing schools through his own involvement. Through observation, studying documents and asking questions to key role players, the researcher further gained a better understanding of the perspectives of some of the alumni association’s key role players.

3.4.1 Qualitative methodology

According to Lichtman (2010: 7), a paradigm is a way of viewing or making assumptions about the world. A qualitative research paradigm is concerned with how people experience, perceive, participate and interpret the world and environments in which they function. The researcher chose a qualitative methodology because it examines the social phenomena of alumni involvement through the research participants’ experiences and perspectives on the matter in accordance to McMillan and Schumacher (2010: 16). Qualitative researchers, being primarily interested in describing the perceptions and beliefs of the research participants in great detail, attempt to understand these perceptions and beliefs in terms of the participants’ history and context (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 271).
3.5 SAMPLING

According to Springer (2010: 100), a sample is a selected representative section of the wider whole. As such the two selected schools, both located in the same lower socio-economic suburb, can be described as representative of disadvantaged schools in different townships. The one school was established in 1925 and moved sites twice before occupying its current premises in 1950 in an area designated for black South Africans in the 1930’s. The other school was established in 1975. The schools existed through different periods of South Africa’s apartheid history and based on their own reputations also attracted pupils for different reasons. The one school, being older, attracted pupils from more diverse class backgrounds while the other attracted pupils from generally lower socio-economic backgrounds. The researcher did however, guard against bias and generalizing data as highlighted by Struwig and Stead (2001: 115).

3.6 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

Data were collected by interviewing executive members of the two alumni associations, as well as getting some of the members of the two alumni associations to complete questionnaires. See Appendix 1 for the list of interview protocol and Appendix 2 for the questionnaire used for this study.

3.6.1 Questionnaires

De Vos (1998: 152) defines a questionnaire as a form with a set of questions to be completed by the respondents participating in a research project. Primary data were collected through written questionnaires that were completed by six alumni association committee members of the two alumni associations that formed part of the study. The written questionnaire allowed the participants to complete it in their own time. The questions covered the participants’ reasons for involvement with the alumni
associations, their perception of the impact of their involvement and the achievements and challenges of the structures. See Appendix 1.

3.6.2 Interviews

Semi-structured individual interviews were held with four alumni association executive members, two from each of the two selected associations. The alumni association executive members were chosen based on their direct involvement with the planning and implementation of the various activities of the associations. Unstructured questions in the interviews provided flexibility for probing and clarity or elaboration to provide more information rich data as suggested by Greeff (2005: 287-292). The interviews focused mainly on governance issues, such as the type of structures established, type of relationship with the school, financial and administrative issues and strategic focus areas such as fundraising and learner support.

3.6.3 Documents

The researcher was supplied with a range of documents related to alumni activities at the two schools that formed part of the study. These documents were supplied with the agreement that the school and alumni association member names will not be disclosed. These sources included minutes of meetings, programme reports, photographs of events, newspaper reports, newsletters and information on the Internet, including the schools’ websites and information on Facebook pages of former learners from the selected schools.

3.6.4 Observation protocols

According to O’Leary (2010: 209) observation is a systematic method of data collection that relies on a researcher’s ability to gather data through his or her senses. In this study the observation helped with getting a better understanding between what is said
by alumni members when interviewed, what appears in documents and what takes place in practice.

3.7 DATA ANALYSIS AND VALIDATION

Springer (2010: 383) defines data analysis as a process in terms of which the researcher sorts data until overarching conclusions or theoretical understandings emerge. The interviews with the participants were transcribed by the researcher so that coding and analysis to give meaning to the relevant information, could be easier. Organizing the information in order to identify broad themes and recurrent patterns took place after repeated readings. Codes were then allocated to themes before interpretation took place.

The data was validated through participant and alumni professional feedback to ensure that the researcher and the participants shared the same understanding of the interpretation of the data. The constant interaction with and feedback from alumni stakeholders with regard to the issues related to the study also helped with the validation of the findings as information was constantly being shared.

3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethically informed research promises confidentiality, negotiates access with authorities and participants, safeguards rights, ensures good faith and maintains the trust of the participants (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006: 97). It was important for the researcher to gain the confidence and trust of the participants and for them to ensure that they understand the value of the study.

Full disclosure was made to all research participants regarding the research being undertaken and permission was sought to collect information at meetings and during
school visits and use it for the research. The researcher guaranteed the protection of the identities of the schools and the individuals involved.

The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University’s rules and ethical code were adhered to. Individuals were guided on what the research was about so that they could refuse to participate or answer specific questions. Permission was requested from participants in writing (see Appendix 3) after they received a verbal and written explanation on what the study was about. The identities of the schools and individuals involved were protected through the use of code names. Individuals had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and they were allowed to refuse to answer questions they did not feel comfortable to answer.

3.9 GROUP SUMMARIES

In Chapter Three the research design, sampling and data collection techniques were outlined. The reasons for the use of a qualitative approach were explained while the data analysis procedures were discussed. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the adherence of Ethical issues.

Chapter Four deals with the findings and interpretation of the data.
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings, analysis and interpretation of the data. The findings were based on the data gained from questionnaires and during interview feedback. Three themes were identified and have been individually discussed.

The first theme that emerged deals with alumni skills and resources that could be used to the benefit of the development of disadvantaged schools.

The second theme focuses on the alumni operations and the alumni’s relationship with the school. A solid relationship between school and alumni is a good point of departure for effective and positive involvement towards change.

The third theme deals with growing alumni support for their alma mater. A well functioning alumni association will create an environment for other alumni to want to get involved and for plans being followed through to completion.

The detailed analysis of key issues is discussed as part of the themes identified below.

4.2 PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

There were a total of six alumni association members who completed the research questionnaires and four alumni association executive members who were interviewed. Research participant codes were developed for reference purposes e.g. AQ/1 refers to questionnaire (Q) respondent 1 from School A while BI/1 refers to interview (I) respondent 1 from School B and so forth.
4.3 THEME 1: ALUMNI SKILLS AND RESOURCES

4.3.1 Findings

Alumni groups can play a much greater role in societal development, especially at disadvantaged schools and in disadvantaged communities. The study identified the key roles alumni can play, such as helping with fundraising, being positive role models, being mentors to learners, sharing professional and practical skills, offering employment to learners and being a lobby group for their alma maters. The examples of roles alumni can play mentioned by the research respondents corresponded with the roles mentioned in the theoretical study in Chapter Two.

Alumni can help to ensure that the school reflects and remains a place of hope rather than a depressing physical structure, by giving back time and resources so that communities can take greater ownership of their destinies and have a greater sense of pride. Respondent AI-1 mentioned the ‘Adopt a Classroom’ programme their alumni association is developing which involves alumni taking responsibility for the maintenance and renovations of classrooms. An individual or a group can adopt a classroom by either buying the paint or helping to paint the classroom. This programme is a good example of alumni sharing both skills and resources because they can give money to buy building material or contribute their time and maintenance skills.

Respondents all noted that being presented to learners as role models who came from similar backgrounds and managed to rise above their circumstances could have a major impact, especially if they were seen to be supportive of their alma mater. Not only would they be seen as role models, but they could also help to create a culture of giving back amongst the current learners who could learn from their example. These roles do not cost money but require time to address learners at assembly in grade groups or at breakaway camps. Society needs people who can live their values and learners can definitely learn from alumni role models, especially where learners lack role models at home. Respondent BI-2 felt strongly about alumni having a presence in the community
and at schools to motivate learners and educators. In the same regard respondent BI-1 stated that alumni can address pupils on their responsibility to play their part in their own development and make the school a place of personal development.

During the pre-democracy period black learners from affluent households had no option but to attend the township schools. Respondents all referred to the pre-democracy period when social class was not really a major issue at disadvantaged schools. Disadvantaged schools enrolled learners from different social classes and with different academic and sporting abilities which also helped with the general development of other learners because of mixed ability class groups. Today in South Africa, many disadvantaged schools enrol learners from other communities and many schools have learners with generally the same academic ability, as well as similar social issues. Respondent BI/1 mentioned that the best academic and sport performers at these generally poor schools are offered bursaries to attend better resourced schools, leading to a talent drain.

The vast majority of disadvantaged schools do not have the same financial support from parents as in the past due to poverty, but many alumni of those schools have progressed in life and can support their alma maters financially. The National Planning Commission (2011: 11) highlights something promising in that the black middle class in South Africa grew by 421 000 new families or 30% in 2005 and between 2001 and 2004 by 300 000 new families. It further states that more than 12 000 new middle class families are moving from the township into the suburbs every month. These new middle class individuals often were pupils at the poor township schools that need their help. Respondent AI/1 stated that although many alumni don’t live in the townships anymore they can still support their township alma maters.

Alumni of disadvantaged schools can also engage other members of the South African community who are not alumni to support the development of disadvantaged schools by sharing skills and resources. An example would be of an alumnus of a township school who now lives in an affluent suburb who facilitates a partnership between the local
school and his alma mater in the township. Respondent AI/1 stated that *alumni can use their networks and influence to add value to their alma mater* and mentioned the example of the factory worker who said he will ask his boss for paint for a class room at his old school.

Another very common finding of the study was that programmes should bring alumni closer to current learners at their alma mater and through their involvement impact on learner educational performance as well as having a positive influence on their self-perception. At School B alumni programmes included the adoption of matriculants. Adopting a matriculant involved academic support, mentoring and motivating them, supporting them financially, helping to make the matric farewell special for some learners who could not afford outfits or even chauffeuring them to the farewell venue if they did not have transport. Respondent BI-1 stated with pride that *alumni made great effort to assist the matric learners and it positively impacted on their final matric results.*

Alumni, as taxpayers, can also hold government responsible to fulfil its basic responsibility and hold school governors, management and educators responsible to ensure the school has a vision and working to realize it instead of being caught up with daily crisis management. The respondents all indicated that government and educational authorities were failing in their responsibility and respondents want to keep them accountable, but questioned whether the ability and capacity exist at that level to effect the required change. Respondent AI-2 said that *even the governing body functions at a low level because parents are generally not interested to get involved in the education of their children.* In this regard Naidoo (2005: 35) emphasises that community participation as a variant of democracy is viewed as the capacity of the different beneficiaries of the educational system to influence decision-making, inform and hold the responsible stakeholders accountable for the provision of a service which they have a constitutional right to receive. The respondents all indicated that alumni can be a voice or lobby group for the school. Organized alumni groups have a legitimate stakeholder right to address educational issues related to their alma mater, such as the DoE not filling vacant school
establishment educator and support services posts. The non-delivery of educational resources, such as textbooks, furniture and equipment by the DoE, is another important factor that impacts negatively on the quality of education, as well as the lack of maintenance of school infrastructure. Other areas alumni can raise are the issues of the DoE not dealing effectively with non-performing education officials, school managers and educators and generally not dealing effectively with non-performing schools. The lack of proper academic facilities, such as libraries, laboratories and computer centres, as well as the lack of sport and recreational facilities, remain a major problem for disadvantaged schools.

4.4 THEME 2: ALUMNI OPERATIONS AND THE SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP

4.4.1 Findings

Key findings that emerged from the data analysis of the activities of the alumni groups of the two selected historically-disadvantaged schools include the fact that alumni associations have been initiated by the alumni themselves and not by the schools. Feedback indicated that alumni associations can most probably be much more successful if schools start playing a more active role to help establish such structures. Both Schools A and B managements were generally supportive of the alumni initiatives and the principals were involved with the alumni programme decision-making processes. The alumni associations of schools A and B involved all relevant stakeholders on their executive structures, including representatives from the SMT and SGB.

The alumni associations of both schools A and B also identified their own set of concerns to be addressed, which highlighted the fact that in the absence of a shared vision of all the parties involved in a school, different sets of foci emerge which might not be aligned. Respondent BI/1 mentioned that in the absence of a very clear school development plan, alumni just identify areas they feel they can support. This results in
many schools operating on a crisis management mode of existence rather than on a vision-led strategy. There was agreement that schools must have school development plans in place to guide actions and serve as a reference for support groups such as alumni associations. According to respondent AI/1 *any alumni support is generally welcomed because the needs of the school is so great but the alumni members do not always know what the priorities of the school are.* An alumni association might be interested to establish a computer centre, but a few data projectors and laptops might have been of far greater immediate educational value if the school situation was better evaluated.

Respondent AI/1 mentioned that *a workshop was organised by the alumni association to discuss school challenges, role clarification and to discuss a shared vision but school management is not leading the way.* The lack of a shared vision, inclusive planning and mutual trust and support can also lead to the failure of alumni associations and school development in general. Schools must thus firstly understand and recognize the role alumni can play and be prepared to support and be part of alumni activities. The school improvement plan must be an inclusive document and guide the planning process for alumni activities. The roles of the various school structures, such as the SMT, SGB and alumni association must be clear, but the structures must all work together in the interest of the school and community.

Both alumni associations studied have as their seat of business, the school. Most of the meetings take place at the school with full knowledge of the principal as was confirmed by the respondents. This is important as alumni associations should not be seen to be operating totally independently from the school that should benefit from its existence. As respondent BI/2 noted; *if alumni associations meet at the school to discuss issues, they can maintain the link with the school, but also personally experience the conditions at the school.*

The alumni realized the importance of keeping accurate records of all activities as such documents also impact on its ability to report on activities to alumni in general and to the
school specifically. Both the schools investigated agree that their alumni association administration need to improve by keeping more detailed records of activities and developing a centralised filing system. Respondent BI-2 felt that although *meeting minutes and reports are time consuming activities, it must be regarded as very important governance activities. There must be a record of decisions and reports about activities.*

Respondent AI-1 mentioned that *it would be ideal if the school can offer an office to the alumni association to meet and store documents, since there is space available.* Records should be kept at the seat of business, but alumni volunteers do not work at the school and often keep documents linked to their area of responsibility at their homes. A centralised office and administration support can help solve this issue, but the schools are already under administrative pressure with their core business and cannot support the association.

The alumni associations of both schools A and B have constitutions. These documents were presented to the researcher as evidence. Both constitutions seem to be well structured. These constitutions have been adopted and are supported by the SMT and SGB at both schools and serve as a guide to the association’s actions. As the goals and roles have been clearly defined, annual programmes could be drafted in line thereof.

4.5 **THEME 3: GROWING ALUMNI SUPPORT**

4.5.1 **Findings**

The researcher is aware of very few disadvantaged schools in Port Elizabeth with functioning alumni associations. According to respondent AI/1 the *lack of an alumni culture is one of the most serious challenges because it can only develop over a long period.* Schools must start recognizing the value of alumni and involve alumni in its
affairs so that current learners of the school can be exposed at an early stage to the role alumni can play.

The respondents all felt strongly about allowing all alumni an opportunity to contribute. Respondent BI/1 said that even the unemployed have skills and can help clean the school. The researcher came to the conclusion that in a developmental context such as the situation in which disadvantaged schools find themselves, class and status, should not be an issue, but involving as many alumni as possible to support the school. Respondent BI/2 made reference to the role alumni who live close to the school play in helping to safeguard the property.

Respondent AI/2 stated that schools can do much more to create an inviting environment for their alumni, as well as helping to promote the establishment of alumni associations. There are some schools that do not appreciate or welcome external interest or interference in their affairs. Respondent BI/2 mentioned that in some instances alumni seem to be considered a threat if they demand to know more about the situation in a school, as well as enquire about what plans are in place to address some of the challenges the school faces. Some principals control school governing bodies and some might want to control alumni associations. Respondent AI/1 indicated that there is a clear absence of an alumni culture in the disadvantaged schools and most the schools are doing little to help promote alumni involvement.

Both the alumni associations felt very strongly about the inclusion of all levels and classes (socio-economic backgrounds) of alumni through their activities and involvement. All the respondents made reference to this issue based on the fact that prominent individuals normally initiate the alumni involvement with their alma maters and get the support of a few other prominent alumni who normally are professionals or occupy senior positions in organisations. Ordinary alumni sometimes feel that events are targeted at a certain class of alumni, especially since they might also not serve on the alumni association structures. Respondent BI/2 mentioned that not everybody likes
cheese and wine parties or the VIP events, but most people enjoy braai’s. Alumni and school functions must accommodate the different needs and preferences of alumni.

Alumni association membership is often limited to past pupils only but can be extended to include past educators and friends of schools, such as parents of current learners and alumni as indicated by the constitutions of the two alumni associations studied. Respondent AI/1 mentioned that membership can even be extended to donors and anyone who promotes the interest of the school. Respondents felt that different membership categories can add value to the alumni movement and can help to create awareness about the alumni amongst all stakeholders. School B involved educators, parents and even members of the school neighbourhood community in the alumni and school events.

The role alumni play is also often dependent on the limited number of alumni involved to run the few development programmes agreed upon. All the respondents felt very strongly about the amount of time and effort required to make a real difference based on the enormity of the challenges the schools face. Respondent BI-2 stated that more alumni needed to get involved to help with running some of the alumni school support programmes because one could start with ten people on a project but only four would be actively involved.

Alumni want to add value to their alma mater and respondents indicated they wanted to make a difference but the availability of time required to organise major school development programmes was a serious issue. The school problem areas that need to be addressed are too many and often deep rooted and require a lot of attention. Respondent BI-1 stated that alumni can also not be seen as a quick-fix solution to help solve problems when other key education stakeholders, such as the DoE or even school management and staff, are not fulfilling their obligations. Respondent AI-1 made a related statement on the issue that alumni cannot simply fundraise to improve the toilet facilities when learner discipline is a problem and members of the public break and
steal building parts continually, because the school cannot afford security to protect the facilities.

Respondents also felt that their time sacrificed is often not valued in the same way as money donations. Respondent BI/2 felt that time contributions must be properly acknowledged because there are often a few very committed alumni association members who run the administration and play a major role when events are being organised. The acknowledgement of time can be of much greater benefit to schools than a cash donation. Respondents shared the view that alumni will rather share their skills than give money. Respondent AI/1 mentioned that cash donors get more recognition than alumni who spent hours trying to run programmes to benefit the school and recruit other alumni.

Broadening the membership base and involving all types of alumni can allow a greater level of involvement of alumni. Recognising time contributions by alumni, as well as cash contributions, would give all actively involved alumni a sense of value. These strategies could help to encourage more alumni to support their schools. The respondents all agreed that a few committed individuals are the driving force behind their alumni associations and more committed alumni need to get involved. Respondent BI/1 stated everybody says they want to support but very few get actively involved.

4.6 SUMMARY

Data indicates that there are very few alumni associations at disadvantaged schools and some associations are still in their early development stages. Although most schools do not have alumni associations, the alumni of the schools selected for this study agree that alumni associations can make a difference through their support to their alma maters. Participants furthermore agree that more should be done to help build capacity of schools to consider the role alumni can play and for alumni associations to develop into more effective structures that can support schools.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The implications of the findings presented in Chapter Four are discussed in this chapter. Based on the findings and implications, conclusions are drawn and recommendations on how alumni can help develop disadvantaged schools are tabled.

Senge (2000:9) states that schools are increasingly expected to compensate for the shifts in society and family that affect children. In this regard the opportunity exists for alumni to get involved to help communities rebuild themselves with the schools as places of hope at the centre.

5.2 THEME 1: ALUMNI SKILLS AND RESOURCES

Based on the findings of the study and from evidence in literature the researcher concludes that alumni associations can play a meaningful role in developing and transforming disadvantaged schools in a young and developing democracy as in the case of South Africa. The majority of the growing South African black middle class who received their schooling prior to democracy are alumni from disadvantaged schools and they can share their skills and resources to help with the upliftment of their alma maters as was the background of all the research participants.

Based on the Chapter Two literature study and the evidence discussed in Chapter Four, alumni can support schools with fundraising, being positive role models and mentors to learners, sharing professional and practical skills and offering employment to learners and be a lobby group for their alma maters to address education challenges.
Schools should be places of hope and opportunity for communities, especially disadvantaged communities. The researcher observed that the state of the physical infrastructure of many schools is generally depressing. It can be debated whether someone can be educated in dirty and dysfunctional environments. In many communities learners are fleeing and migrating to schools in suburbs other than where they live because of the poor situation in their own neighbourhood schools. Even though many alumni have moved out of the areas where they used to live and attend school, these former schools played a central role in their development and were usually highly regarded by the community it served during pre-democracy times.

Alumni can act as role models and so bring hope to some of the learners and parents as these alumni have a link to the school, passed though its doors and often managed to rise above their circumstances. Alumni can help restore the role of the school in the community by remembering what the school meant to them during apartheid when education was ‘the’ liberation tool for many.

5.2.1 Recommendations

The researcher recommends that schools clearly identify all the roles alumni can play to help develop the school in accordance with the school development plan. Many of these roles were listed in Chapters Two and Four, and can include donations in cash and goods, sharing professional or technical skills and being role models and mentors.

The evidence indicated that disadvantaged school learners must be exposed to positive role models from their communities who achieved success in life against all odds. Schools and alumni associations must identify more alumni who can get actively involved in school affairs and act as role models and mentors to learners. The respondents felt strongly about the importance of role models and the researcher recommends that central to a school’s alumni relations programme should be the identification of alumni as role models.
The total collapse of public education can have disastrous consequences for a young democracy, such as that of South Africa, and a total collapse of public education must be prevented at all costs. Alumni can also share their dissatisfaction with the generally unsatisfactory state of affairs in public education and encourage learners not to contribute to worsening the situation by not taking their education seriously. Alumni can share their personal experiences of hard work to achieve goals and warn learners against an entitlement orientation that will not benefit them, the schooling system and the country in the long term. Alumni can share the examples of successful individuals as well as winning nation cultures so that learners can learn from those examples.

Alumni associations and individual alumni can add their voices in the media and at school and community meetings to those of other groups trying to address the issues in education as highlighted in the previous paragraph. There are many prominent people who are alumni of disadvantaged schools and their voices can have significant impact when it is linked to an emotional cause, such as the affinity of an alumnus to his or her alma mater. The impact of collective voices as part of a social movement to make calls for positive change in education must not be underestimated. The researcher recommends on the basis of the feedback from the respondents that schools consider the value of alumni as a voice and lobby group to help address educational concerns. Schools will have to consider the broader value of involving alumni as a stakeholder group beyond their individual contributions in the form of skills and other material resources.

5.3 THEME 2: ALUMNI OPERATIONS AND THE SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP

The study’s findings confirmed that there is a near total absence of an alumni relations culture in disadvantaged schools due to the limited number of disadvantaged schools with alumni associations and that a culture of alumni involvement will have to be developed considering that such development will be a long term process. Schools should come to recognise the value of alumni as a stakeholder group and engage them
as part of the school development planning process. The alumni associations of the schools investigated were both initiated by the alumni themselves. However, the discussions and negotiations to get school management and the SGB actively involved to share the same vision were a drawn-out process, even though both schools’ management supported the idea of alumni involvement. It is therefore concluded that creating an environment for alumni to get involved is important. Schools must be prepared to accommodate alumni who want to make a contribution to the school. It will be to the school’s disadvantage if it does not know how to deal with alumni when they approach the school with support proposals. In other words; schools should be pro-active and plan how alumni can be engaged to support the schools.

Based on the evidence of the research, it was clear that alumni must buy into and even help craft a shared vision for the school and that the roles and responsibilities of the various structures such as the SMT, SGB and alumni association must be clear.

5.3.1 Recommendations

Schools interested in their own development can play a much greater role in encouraging alumni to get involved. The principal and staff can identify and invite a few prominent and passionate alumni to a meeting at the school to discuss alumni involvement in school development projects. The process of involving alumni must start somewhere and an invitation by the principal to alumni can start such a process. An advertisement could be placed in the local community newspaper or a letter written to newspapers inviting alumni to come to a meeting at the school. The presence of SGB and SMT representatives at such meetings is very important to show support.

Schools need to consider alumni as an important stakeholder group that can add value. Part of being pro-active and being further prepared is to agree on the value of the role alumni can play at governance and management levels and extend an open invitation to their alumni to get involved in supporting the school. The schools must also be able to
tell alumni about their current strengths and priorities and convince alumni that the motivation exists to improve the situation at the school.

The research findings indicated that school development plans are important documents to engage alumni with because it should indicate the priorities and goals of the school. The researcher came to the conclusion that the existence of a clearly defined school development plan can serve as a call for support from alumni. It is therefore concluded that the alumni association must be guided by the vision for the school. There are schools that don’t have school development plans that outline the areas of need and their priority areas. The existence of a school development plan will help the alumni association to identify the priority areas. This area must be addressed to ensure there is agreement among the SGB, SMT and the alumni association on areas of focus and support by the alumni association. If the school has a vision, the alumni association will find it much easier to support the school to achieve that vision.

The researcher recommends that the seat of business of the alumni association be the school as it is the primary focus of the alumni association’s activities. Schools must consider allocating an office at the school to the alumni association which can serve as the administrative site for the alumni association once it is established and operational. The researcher further recommends based on the research evidence that accurate records be kept of meetings and events and that such records be safely kept at the seat of business.

Based on the research evidence it is clear that a constitution needs to be drafted and adopted by the alumni association and ratified by the SMT and SGB. Schools A and B stressed the importance of the constitution as a guiding document. The alumni association can be better focused if a school development plan exists that prioritize the goals and projects that will require support. Furthermore, the association must draw up, in consultation with the school management, a constitution that outlines the goals of the association and the roles and responsibilities of members and how to deal with specific
situations. Formally constituted structures normally have more credibility. Once ratified the document should serve as a guide to conduct the affairs of the association.

There are many examples of constitutions that can be adapted to serve the interests of specific groups and their unique circumstances. The adoption of a constitution that will guide the work of the members of the association is important; and the constitution should in all cases be ratified by the governing body of the school. The researcher recommends alumni associations must formalise their existence through the adoption of a constitution.

Part of the outcome of this study is the establishment of a Schools’ Alumni Association Support Group for Nelson Mandela Bay to assist with the drafting of constitutions. Such a forum could also serve as a forum for discussion and sharing problems experienced and innovative solutions to problems by existing school alumni associations.

5.4 THEME 3: GROWING ALUMNI SUPPORT

Based on the evidence and practices of the alumni associations studied, membership categories can be extended to include the various school supporter groups such as former educators and even parents of learners. The more people the school and alumni association can involve to support the school vision and goals, the less the demand will be on committed individuals involved with alumni programmes at schools. When alumni support groups are small, a few committed members usually do most of the work, get burn out and leave, hence the importance of fully involving as many enthusiastic people as possible.

After studying the responses, the researcher concluded that many alumni who contributed their time only often feel less valued to those who give money. This is also true where alumni give their time in labour. The value of time contributions by alumni is very rarely calculated and adequately acknowledged.
5.4.1 Recommendations

The researcher recommends that schools initiate alumni recognition programmes which will include identifying the various roles alumni can play, inviting alumni role models to the school and encouraging them to be ambassadors and recruit other alumni to get involved to support their alma mater. The SMT and SGB must play a central role in driving an alumni school support campaign which will recognise the value all classes and categories of alumni can play.

The researcher further recommends based on the evidence that schools and alumni associations consider the value of different categories of stakeholders and friends of the school that can be included in the alumni association membership categories. Such membership categories can include former educators and support staff, parents of learners and donors who are not alumni. School A refers to alumni and friends in its strategic documents.

The respondents were all very involved in the respective alumni associations to make it function effectively and dedicated a lot of time to its affairs. It was evident to the researcher that time as a resource and contribution was not equally valued as cash and material goods. The researcher recommends that recognition programmes be developed for all non-financial contributions made by alumni so that the value of time can serve as a motivating factor to alumni volunteers. Alumni can spend time recruiting other alumni, organising alumni events, supervising a class, cleaning the school, painting a classroom, cooking for the feeding scheme and helping secure the school premises. Often these roles do not attract media publicity, but these non-financial contributions usually have a major impact on attitude and relationship building at disadvantaged schools where alumni, staff and parents “take ownership”.

In order to establish a sustainable alumni school programme, alumni, the SMT and SGB must work together to grow alumni support for the school. All the parties involved should share a common vision for the school and work together to achieve it.
5.5 CONCLUSION

This study identified various roles alumni can play and its value in assisting developing disadvantaged schools, especially when alumni organize themselves into formal structures to work with other school stakeholders to achieve the vision and goals of the school.

Based on the evidence of the research conducted, three themes were identified that addressed the primary and secondary questions of this study. In Theme 1, “Alumni skills and resources”, the primary question and first secondary question were addressed. The aim of determining the role alumni can play and ways in which alumni can help with the development of disadvantaged schools were identified and the stated objectives were met.

Theme 2 addressed the research question of what operational factors should be considered when an alumni group is established by meeting the objective in determining the operational factors when establishing alumni groups. Various recommendations were made to assist new groups to establish alumni groups.

Theme 3 answered the research question of what can be done to create a conducive environment for greater alumni participation in the development of their alma maters. By determining the objective and making recommendations on how to create such an environment rendered this study as successfully completing all the goals set in the beginning.

On each theme practical recommendations were provided for others wanting to establish alumni structures at schools. These recommendations may not include all possible plans of action, but may be used as a point of departure for more creative ideas suitable to each school’s specific situation. In order to meet all the recommendations it is important for all the parties to work together in the interest of the school and the broader community.
The role of alumni associations to assist with the development of disadvantaged schools is critical in the development of South Africa because the country cannot afford its education system not to play a leading part in its citizens’ development. Success is when communities can take ownership to do things by themselves for themselves and this is where alumni come to play a strong role.

As a black South African I can never really claim success if the institutions that helped nurture and mould me are falling apart while I remain a spectator. Every effort by any alumni to add value to their alma maters must be regarded as progress and should be valued by the school and community. There are many different roles alumni can play no matter what the status of alumni is in society. The more members of society get involved in such civil society initiatives the better for the overall development of our country. Alumni can make a meaningful contribution to the development of disadvantaged schools, but their contribution can have a much greater impact and be more meaningful if the process is properly facilitated and they can keep on learning from the experiences of others, while also sharing their own journeys.


Equal Education. 2010. *We can't afford not to – Costing the provisioning of functional school libraries in South African public schools.* Cape Town.


Khosa, G. 2011. *Sustainable school improvement – A partnership between the state, the private sector and civil society.* Johannesburg: Jet Education Services.


APPENDIX 1
QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS WITH ALUMNI ASSOCIATION CHAIRPERSONS

1. What type of structure did you establish?
2. Are you a registered trust or separate legal entity?
3. Did you get permission from the governing body to start this group or association?
4. How do you interact with the school governing body?
5. How do you interact with the school management team?
6. How are the alumni association finances managed?
7. Do you have a separate bank account for the alumni association?
8. Where is the seat (meetings held, records kept) of association?
9. How are your activities guided from a governance perspective?
10. Who forms part of the committee?
11. How is the school represented?
12. Do you submit reports and financial statements to the school governing body or principal?
13. How often do you meet as an association?
14. Do you have a minute book where all resolutions are recorded?
15. How do you decide which projects to support?

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS INTERVIEW AND FOR BEING PART OF THIS STUDY.
APPENDIX 2

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ALUMNI ASSOCIATION MEMBERS

1. How did you get involved in this initiative to establish an alumni association at your school?
2. Why did you get involved with this initiative?
3. How long have you been involved with this initiative? What difference do you think this association can make to benefit the school?
4. What have you achieved thus far?
5. What challenges did you experience establishing this association?
6. What challenges do you face operating this association?
7. What interventions or actions are you planning?
8. How will these plans be implemented?
9. Is there a school improvement list of school priorities and needs that inform your activities?

THANK YOU FOR ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS. THE QUESTIONNAIRE WILL BE COLLECTED AS AGREED.
APPENDIX 3

LETTER TO ALUMNI ASSOCIATION CHAIRMAN AT THE TARGETED SCHOOLS

21 September 2012

The Chairman
Alumni Association

Dear Sir/Madam

As an MA Development Studies student at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), I wish to request your participation for this research about the role alumni groups can play in the development of disadvantaged schools with specific reference to alumni programmes at your alma mater and two more schools selected.

The study will include interviews with chairpersons of the alumni associations and questionnaires to members.

This study will be guided by a strict code of ethics, as prescribed by the Ethics Committee of NMMU. All data collected during the investigation will be treated in a strictly confidential manner. Dr L. Greyling will be the supervisor for this study.

Your participation in this study will be highly appreciated as findings from this study could be highly beneficial to your and other schools. Please contact me on 082 826 3246 or email paul.geswindt@nmmu.ac.za should you require any further information regarding this study.

Yours sincerely

Paul GG Geswindt
## APPENDIX 4

### SUMMARY OF ALUMNI QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>School A – 87 years old – alumni group members’ key points</th>
<th>School B – 37 years old – alumni group members’ key points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you a founding member of this alumni group or association?</td>
<td>Most were founding members – generally 40% new members.</td>
<td>Most were founding members – generally 40% new members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you get involved with this initiative?</td>
<td>Started with gathering of a few key concerned alumni.</td>
<td>Started with gathering of a few key concerned alumni.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did you get involved with this initiative?</td>
<td>All want to make a difference and concerned about conditions at the school.</td>
<td>All want to make a difference and concerned about conditions at the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long have you been involved with this initiative?</td>
<td>Average 5 years</td>
<td>Average 3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What differences do you believe this group or association can make?</td>
<td>The potential to do a lot more exists as more alumni and partners get involved.</td>
<td>The potential to do a lot more exists as more alumni and partners get involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What have you achieved thus far?</td>
<td>• Celebrated alumni and teachers with special award events&lt;br&gt;• Held fundraisers such as golf days&lt;br&gt;• Membership drive&lt;br&gt;• Bursary programme&lt;br&gt;• Addressed staff and students about roles&lt;br&gt;• Media and computer room support</td>
<td>• Fundraising events&lt;br&gt;• Sponsorships for school&lt;br&gt;• Cleaning and maintenance of school; painting of building&lt;br&gt;• Support matric farewell&lt;br&gt;• Adoption of Matrics&lt;br&gt;• Learner motivational talks&lt;br&gt;• Sport support&lt;br&gt;• Anti-vandalism campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What challenges did you face establishing this group or association?</td>
<td>Time and effort to keep momentum and to keep all motivated and getting more people more actively involved.</td>
<td>Time and effort to keep momentum and to keep all motivated and getting more people more actively involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What challenges do you face operating this group or association?</td>
<td>• Time limitation and finances to do things&lt;br&gt;• Massive need – learners, educational resources and infrastructure</td>
<td>• Time limitation and finances to do things&lt;br&gt;• Massive need – learners, educational resources and infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you decide what programmes to run?</td>
<td>Generally committee member input which involves principal.</td>
<td>Generally committee member input which involves principal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Is there a school improvement plan or list of school priorities or needs that guide your programmes or activities?</strong></td>
<td><strong>Normally principal states needs. There is a school improvement plan but the plan requires greater stakeholder input.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Normally principal states needs. There is a school improvement plan but the plan requires greater stakeholder input.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 5

SUMMARY OF ALUMNI INTERVIEW RESPONSES

The presentation of the interview information is given in table format for comparative purposes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>School A – 87 years old – alumni association chairperson feedback</th>
<th>School B – 37 years old – alumni executive member feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What type of structure did you establish?</td>
<td>Registered Trust (a separate legal entity) with trustees and an Alumni Club.</td>
<td>An Alumni Association (not a separate legal entity).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you get permission from the governing body to start this group or association?</td>
<td>Group consulted with and involved the school governing body.</td>
<td>Group consulted with and involved the school governing body.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are alumni association finances managed?</td>
<td>A bank account was opened in the name of the Trust.</td>
<td>A bank account in the name of the Alumni Association.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where is the seat (meetings held, records kept) of the group?</td>
<td>At the school.</td>
<td>At the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a constitution or trust deed that guides your activities from a governance perspective?</td>
<td>Trust deed and constitution.</td>
<td>Constitution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who forms part of the committee?</td>
<td>Trustees, alumni, principal, educators and governing body representatives.</td>
<td>Alumni, principal, educators and governing body representatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is the school represented?</td>
<td>Principal, educators and governing body representatives are involved.</td>
<td>Principal, educators and governing body representatives are involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you submit reports and financial statements to the school governing body or principal?</td>
<td>Information is shared via representatives. Reporting done at events and via reports and newsletters.</td>
<td>Information is shared via representatives. Reporting done at events and via reports and newsletters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often do you meet as members?</td>
<td>At least once a quarter and more often if events are held.</td>
<td>At least once a quarter and more often if events are held.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer 1</td>
<td>Answer 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have a minute book where all resolutions are recorded?</td>
<td>No – a better minute system can be in place.</td>
<td>Yes by a committee secretary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you decide which projects to support?</td>
<td>Committee decision.</td>
<td>Committee decision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a school improvement plan that guides your decisions?</td>
<td>Yes, but could be more comprehensive.</td>
<td>Yes, but could be more comprehensive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the relationship with the governing body.</td>
<td>Amicable relationships – there is governing body representation on structure.</td>
<td>Amicable relationships – there is governing body representation on structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the relationship with the principal and/or school management team.</td>
<td>Amicable relationship – principal serves on committee.</td>
<td>Amicable relationship – principal serves on committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to you maintain working relationships with the other key school stakeholders?</td>
<td>Representation and involvement on committee and planning structures or via consultation.</td>
<td>Representation and involvement on committee and planning structures or via consultation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>