

Principals Upfront Dialogue 12

Exploring the relationship between mentoring and school leadership development

14 October 2019

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01 Setting the scene

Mentoring has come to be regarded as an essential part of developing school leadership capacity in South African schools. This form of professional support is a relatively new practice and marks a departure from the more usual short term development interventions in that it acknowledges the longer term, cumulative nature of professional learning and development. Mentoring offers a continuum of professional developmental experiences that are incremental and complement other initiatives.

Dialogue 12, held on 14 October 2019 at Sasol Place, Sandton, explored the role of mentoring in school leadership development programmes, and the enabling conditions for effective mentorship in complex school leadership contexts.

This overview highlights the key themes and issues discussed by the speakers and participants.

Principals Upfront Dialogue Series

Public dialogues addressing the leadership role of school principals

Presented by Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance, Catholic Institute of Education, Sasol Foundation and BRIDGE

Principals Upfront gives principals a platform to share working practice and information about different facets of school leadership. The dialogues also enable those involved in supporting school leadership to develop a deeper understanding of the roles that principals play.



02 Framing the Dialogue

After a welcoming address by Dr Cynthia Malinga of Sasol Foundation, the Catholic Institute of Education's Mduzuzi Qwabe opened the dialogue with a brief address framing the topic. He explained that principals play a priority role in school management and face numerous challenges every day. They are expected to assume a variety of roles such as lawyer, marketer, psychologist or HR manager. As schools have evolved and the challenges of young people have become more apparent, the roles and responsibilities of principals have increased in scope and complexity.

For these reasons it is vital to assist and support principals, and mentorship is gaining recognition as an effective way of doing this. The concept of mentorship has also evolved. Where previously the mentor was seen as an advisor or guide, mentorship is now regarded as a collegial relationship, involving practical support and reflection that helps principals deal with challenges and develop their leadership capacity.

03 Presentations

The key speakers provided both theoretical and practical perspectives on the role of mentoring in leadership development.

Presentation 1 – Dr Sipiwe Mthiyane – Learning from school principals' and mentors' experiences from KwaZulu-Natal

Click [here](#) to view the presentation



Dr Sipiwe Mthiyane, Wits School of Education

Dr Sipiwe Mthiyane is a Senior Lecturer in the Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (ELPS) at the University of the Witwatersrand's School of Education.

His presentation drew on a study¹ that sought to understand school leadership development from the experiences of school principals and their mentors.

Sipiwe framed the context within which principals work and showed how their role has broadened and deepened since the advent of democracy. Principals are expected to provide both organisational and instructional leadership, while “spearheading staff development, parental involvement, community support, and learner growth” and contending with a changing environment (including major changes in legislation and policy).

As a result principals now require a range of specialised knowledge, skills, attitudes and values if they are to lead and manage schools and school communities effectively. In this regard Sipiwe notes that the demands on principals are particularly complex and challenging in township schools, where “protecting teaching and learning” also involves negotiating with a strong union presence and dealing with the negative effects of an disadvantaged socio-economic environment.

¹ Based on the Advanced Certificate in Education-School Leadership (ACE-SL) programme presented by UKZN to capacitate school principals and other education managers in developing skills, knowledge and values needed to effectively lead and manage schools. The programme's mentoring component was provided by retired school principals and circuit managers.

UKZN’s ACE-School Leadership programme confirmed the value of mentoring in providing support to strengthen principals’ leadership and management skills, and highlighted some key considerations to inform the implementation of future mentoring programmes. Chief among these is the importance of taking context into account when matching mentor and mentee: given the current and historical differences across South Africa’s school landscape, it is vital for the mentor to have experience and a deep understanding of the mentee’s particular school context.



Presentation 2 – Lesedi Makhurane and Alison Newby – SEED Educational Trust: Learning from coaching and mentoring programmes for school and district leaders

Click [here](#) to view the presentation



Alison Newby of SEED Educational Trust

The SEED Educational Trust has been running leadership programmes in schools and districts since 2006, with the aim of facilitating real change in the quality of teaching and learning taking place in the classroom. SEED is presently working in partnership with the Eastern Cape Provincial Department of Education to roll out a leadership development programme for Circuit Managers across the Eastern Cape. The objective is to develop coaching and mentoring skills and reflective practice, and to integrate these into their role as circuit managers.

Alison Newby explained that SEED’s main focus during this time had been on understanding how to navigate the basic change curve² while delivering an approach that is “broad and deep enough to bring about both personal transitions and organisational change that will be sustainable”.

“Implementing coaching and mentoring programmes, especially in low resourced, challenged schools, is a very difficult, complex undertaking. We don’t have all the answers and this is what is so exciting about a group like Principals Upfront seeking answers together.” (Alison Newby, SEED Educational Trust)

Some key ‘quick learnings’ from SEED’s earlier years were:

- Unless the principal is on board there is no point in individual coaching sessions with SMT members. Instead, hold more team sessions to anchor the process.
- School-based implementation cannot gain traction unless a relationship is first established with the district.
- Behaviour change at personal and team level is valuable, but unless there is systemic change in leadership culture and practice at both district and school levels, these changes are not sustainable.

SEED’s approach to leadership development is process-oriented and experiential, rather than content-focused. It is school-based rather than generic, and includes both coaching and mentoring using contextually informed coaches and mentors. The design of the coaching and mentoring interventions follows adult learning journey principles to bring about real learning, development and change.

² Using the classic change curve, after Kubler-Ross, Satir, Schein and Beckhard, to understand the stages of personal transition and organisational change

A period of reflection during 2016 and 2017 led SEED to place greater emphasis on instructional leadership. This change in focus resulted in a “rigorous, integrated coaching and mentoring approach” aimed at supporting circuit managers, principals and teachers to evolve their professional identities as educators.

In explaining this approach, Lesedi Makhurane noted that schools and teachers were beset by many challenges and pressures, and as a consequence, tended to focus on compliance, rather than creativity, in teaching and learning. SEED aims to change this dynamic by using an intentional practice³ approach in its coaching and mentoring interventions. This means going below the surface issues to a deeper level where people “search their own mindsets ... so as to re-discover their own humanity, and to bring that back” to their work in education.



Lesedi Makhurane, SEED Educational Trust

Essentially this method “aligns education with a helping philosophy”. The term *philosophy* is key to the process, in that it creates a mindset that allows the educational needs of children and the learning needs of educators to be aligned. To achieve this, SEED helps educators develop a conscious awareness of their own philosophy of education – this in turn makes it possible for them to re-discover (or develop) their own agency, gives them an intrinsic motivation as educators, and stops them falling into the trap of “merely complying”.

SEED also believes in “stepping out of the centre” to make way for educators to “step in for themselves”, and develop real empowerment within the education system. Other lessons for coaching and mentoring that are emerging from SEED’s current interventions highlight the value of:

- Discouraging competition and building collegiality so that educators can support one another
- Modelling the kind of virtuous, sustainable behaviour that is aimed at
- An emphasis on rigorous design (“because it is easy to miss the targets in this kind of work”)
- The use of critical conversations to build an integrated learning community in the school.

“The most important intervention in the school is the engagement between colleagues themselves – and the coaching and mentoring comes in and supports that.”
(Lesedi Makhurane, SEED Educational Trust)

03 Questions and Comments

After the presentations, Mduduzi invited questions and comments from the floor. Key points from this engagement are captured below.

The time factor in mentorship – The different models all work, but we have never really grappled with the time element. Mentoring requires individualization, but we have a bureaucratic system that works on a time scale for delivery. The conflict between these two factors is the elephant in the room.

Prioritising organisational vs instructional leadership – SEED is focused on whole school development, so it supports both. The idea of whole school development makes this a clear and explicit opportunity at this.

³ Intentional practice refers to bringing moment-to-moment awareness (or mindfulness) of the desired outcomes (the ‘what’) and associated processes (the ‘how’) to the implementation of an intervention (Raymond, 2016)

Is there a risk that mentoring as an intentional activity could lead to regimented, top-down mentoring programmes? Coaches and mentors need to develop formal, rigorous skills but this does not mean their approach will be prescribed or mechanistic. Instead, it allows them to be flexible and to let their personality show through, while maintaining standards to get good quality and sustainability.

Need for school leaders to be mentors – Mentorship is relevant and important for all in education, including learners in special education, who would benefit from mentoring to help them develop.

Readiness for change – There is almost an immunity to change in a lot of ways, but as people gain greater self-awareness, and a better awareness of the gap between where they are and where they are meant to be, they start engaging. The coaching and mentoring approach comes as “quite a shock” but once uptake is achieved (which takes 4-5 months and requires patience and management, such as spreading out the assignment workload) the response in terms of enthusiasm and in actual skills to do coaching and mentoring has far exceeded expectations. The design of the programme has been important in achieving this outcome.

World Café Rotation

Participants engaged in World Café Rotation discussions to consider the elements of effective mentoring relationships, the attributes of effective mentors, and some of the challenges to mentoring in South Africa. This section groups and summarises the responses to give a sense of the breadth and depth of the interaction.

The groups were led by:

Pat Sullivan, NECT
Robyn Whittaker, Partners for Possibility
Siphiwe Mthiyane, Wits School of Education
Lesedi Makhurane, SEED Educational Trust
Anusha Naidu, MGSLG
Anne Baker, CIE

“Don’t think of the mentorship journey as coming into the space without knowing anything, but rather as constantly recharging your batteries.” (CoP participant)

What are the elements of an effective mentoring relationship?

Participants debated both the essential qualities, and how to establish an effective relationship.

- Begin with a **needs analysis**. The mentee should actively identify weak areas and challenges, and present these to the mentor. The mentor and mentee would then work together to define and prioritise the needs, expanding on the identified needs if required.
- **Design the mentoring process around mentee needs**. Expectations in terms of the mentoring relationship (respective roles, time frames, changed behaviour, school requirements) should be clarified, preferably in the form of a contract.
- **Intentionality** – the mentoring should have a clear purpose and set goals (which should be written down).

- **Reciprocity** – A collaborative approach, where there is mutual learning, enables the mentee to benefit from the mentor’s greater knowledge and experience while acknowledging what the mentee brings to the process.
- **Trust and mutual respect** – this speaks to honesty and openness regarding challenges expressed and advice given; maintaining confidentiality; and confidence that support will be provided. Trust is built over time, and there has to be a strong ethical component, as the relationship cannot move forward without it.



- **Contextual alignment** – it is essential for the mentor to have experience and understanding of the mentee’s school context, given the disparity in conditions across South Africa’s different school contexts.
- **An enabling and democratic mentoring environment** – involving open-mindedness and the ability to suspend judgement, allowing both parties to explore their own thoughts; viewing each other as critical thinking partners; patience in allowing the process to unfold and openness by both parties to the process.
- **Effective 2-way communication**, where the mentor does not over-power the mentee – this speaks primarily to the interpersonal qualities and skills of the mentor, but also to those of the mentee.
- The mentor has to have an **understanding of the leadership style** and learning preferences of the mentee.
- **Issues of attitude** – both mentor and mentee being participative, trusting, professional and open to change; having an understanding of their roles and what is involved in developing a professional relationship.
- **Continuous support** over time is needed to sustain change and development. There should be some form of M&E to track and monitor progress towards the set goals, and to evaluate the process.
- An **active mentee**, with a positive, professional attitude, willing to engage actively with the process of being mentored.
- Recognising when it is time to let go of the relationship, and doing so in a **gradual process of reduced interaction**, with the ability to resume in a mature form when new issues arise.

What are the attributes of an effective mentor?

Personal attributes and values

- Must believe in the potential of others
- Be solutionist in approach; positive, hopeful and optimistic
- Be aware of their own intentions, biases and blind spots, and honest about their own limitations
- Must value different views (even when not in agreement with them)
- Be trustworthy and committed to acting as a confidant
- Be approachable, and able to form a warm relationship
- Must have acquired wisdom, based on experience
- Have respect for others; value equality in the relationship; and have the ability to form a reciprocal relationship
- Be open to own learning, and reciprocity in learning
- Be a good listener and communicator
- Be flexible and adaptable
- Be objective and non-judgemental; have the ability to apply values consistently
- Embrace networking and collaboration (non-authoritative style)
- Have emotional maturity and good inter-personal skills (empathy, respect, patience, tolerance, humility, kindness, consideration, supportiveness, compassion)
- Be time-conscious and reliable, with a good work ethic and the ability to 'get things done'
- Be able to hold on to the mentee's sense of overwhelm without becoming overwhelmed oneself
- Be a collaborator, a connector and a networker, with the ability to 'pave the way' for the mentee
- Be able to give difficult feedback in an upfront but compassionate way
- Have integrity; behave ethically
- Be willing to assist others, and to 'be there' when needed.

It was noted that many of these attributes are just as important in the mentee as they are in the mentor.

Professional attributes:

- Have an understanding of what mentorship is and embrace the skills of mentoring
- Need not be highly qualified but must be able to create access to the technical skills the mentee needs (budgeting, financial management, HR etc), through networks that open access to experts in these areas
- Have professional mentoring skills; be equipped to mentor
- Have a good understanding of reflective practice; be able to share this with the mentee and incorporate it into the mentoring process
- Have the ability to gain and to share knowledge (source information, transfer skills)
- Be able to portray the qualities of an ethical leader and inspire ethical behaviour in the mentee
- Be knowledgeable about school matters, and able to transfer the skills of experienced leadership to the mentee, including discipline skills
- Understand the education system and how it works (the education context, the history of education in South Africa)
- Have the ability to empower the mentee, to open a platform of connections, to attract a network
- Have a 'broader' range of skills and experience needed to mentor the leader of a complex system
- Understand organisational change, and what is required in mentoring school leader to bring about change
- Have an understanding of M&E and be able to monitor and evaluate the mentoring process.

What are some of the challenges to mentoring in South Africa?

- There is **no single, agreed understanding of the term 'mentoring'**. The concept of mentoring is not fully understood by many who use the term, and the line between mentoring and coaching is blurred.
- The mentoring **relationship could be constructive or destructive**, depending on how the process is implemented and the expectations of mentor and mentee.
- The **mentor's style of leadership and belief system** would dictate the mentorship approach, meaning that it would not be universal across the country.
- **Political groupings** could dictate the response to mentoring and could limit individual growth. Political allegiances could lead to a lack of authenticity in mentoring.
- A **lack of skilled mentors** in many parts of the country – in rural areas access to networks and potential mentors is severely restricted.
- Ex-principals are not necessarily the best mentors. Multi-skilled people with organisational skills could be better at mentoring principals to lead the complex systems that schools have become.
- Circuit managers are few in number but are chosen as mentors by the DBE – this is an unrealistic and unsustainable situation.
- The need for mentors to relate to the mentees' **school context restricts options** for sourcing mentors and matching mentees and mentors (cultural, geographical and historical diversity).
- When identifying mentors, not giving sufficient weight to whether people have the **necessary personal and professional attributes** to be effective mentors.
- Issue of **who has ownership of the mentoring** and how this influences the process (national department, circuit, school etc).
- **Resistance to mentoring** – group vs individual mentality; impact of different hierarchies within the school; influence of pre-existing negative environment.
- Differences in **attitude toward school leadership**; lack of agreement on, or non-definition of, types of leadership.
- **Training of mentors** – what would training comprise, and how and by whom would it be delivered? A one-size-fits-all programme would be unrealistic. Are universities or experienced practitioners best placed to train mentors? There would have to be agreement on the skills and competences needed.



Reporting back on discussions

“It appears important to distinguish between organisational leadership and instructional leadership, and the characteristics needed for each. The one leads into the other, so one would first create networks that support the development of organisational leadership skills, as well as build confidence and a sense of leadership capability. This would then lead into a more defined relationship around instructional leadership. The difficulty would be finding sufficient mentors able to do that – but creative methodologies could be developed to support them going forward.” (CoP participant)

Closing Remarks

Dr Allistair Witten, Adjunct Professor at UCT's Graduate Business School, brought the afternoon to a close by sharing these reflections:

- The conversation had confirmed the importance of working towards understanding mentoring as part of what it meant to build the capacity of a developmental state, and for that to have a specifically South African flavour.
- The dialogue had brought together scholars and practitioners with on-the-ground experience, which made the discussions particularly relevant for the DBE-proposed induction programmes for teachers and school leaders.
- It was important not to underestimate the significance of defining leadership in terms of intentional practice, as this had the power to lift leadership performance beyond mere compliance.

Dr Witten emphasized the validity and the value of the Principals Upfront dialogues, and invited partners and participants to continue the conversation, delving deeper into issues raised during the session.

The CoP is reminded of BRIDGE's knowledge management role. All meetings, presentations and discussions are captured and shared on BRIDGE's Knowledge Hub. To access the Knowledge Hub, click [here](#).

Principals Upfront welcomes your input for planning future seminars. If there are any burning issues you would like to have addressed, or if you would like more information on this dialogue series, contact Patience Voller at patience@BRIDGE.org.za



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