



Dialogue 5: Instructional Leadership: What are the challenges of Leading for Change?

Principals Upfront is a series of public dialogues addressing the leadership role of school principals. The seminars are designed to acknowledge the contribution made by principals and to provide a space in which principals and other educators explore the roles, responsibilities and challenges of school leadership.

Dialogue 5 was held on 26 October 2016 at the Wits School of Governance. This article highlights some of the key themes and issues discussed, and gives readers a taste of the perspectives and concerns of the speakers, the panellists and the audience.

Keynote Presentation



Barbara Dale-Jones is a senior digital strategist and education lead in the Digital Practice division of Dimension Data, and was previously CEO of BRIDGE.

She has experience in organisational leadership and management, strategic planning and execution, project management, knowledge management, e-learning and publishing, and is extensively knowledgeable and experienced in the field of education.

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP: LEADING FOR CHANGE

Barbara Dale-Jones opened by noting that the presentation drew on research recently undertaken by BRIDGE in partnership with Wits School of Governance, for the First Rand Foundation (FRF) and the First Rand Empowerment Fund (FREF), the primary purpose of which was to identify levers for improvement in education and to determine where investment would have the greatest impact.

Reflecting on the pivotal role of education in achieving the NDP's goals, Barbara observed that currently our education system is "woefully lacking" in terms of achieving those goals. It is not preparing most young people to become productive citizens and, because of the historical inequities in the system, patterns of under-performance are continuing to be replicated generation after generation.

The research took the form of a "deep dive" into the education sector, focussing primarily on government schools and the relationships, resources and regulations within those schools that govern the activities and behaviour of school leaders, teachers and parents. This offered perspectives on the root causes of dysfunction and the most effective levers for change.

"Principals and school leaders are fundamentally important agents of change. While the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers, effective teachers need good leaders."

“Every child in South Africa should be supported in a caring environment and should learn to read by Grade 3. If we could achieve that, we would really be making progress.”

Unpacking the elements of the three factors, relationships, resources and regulations, led to the identification of 20-30% of schools as “working together schools” where there is evidence that the range of stakeholders making up the school community has shared responsibilities and goals that influence learning quality, and where progress against these goals is monitored and support is provided if the goals are not met.

This is a very important determinant of function in the sector.

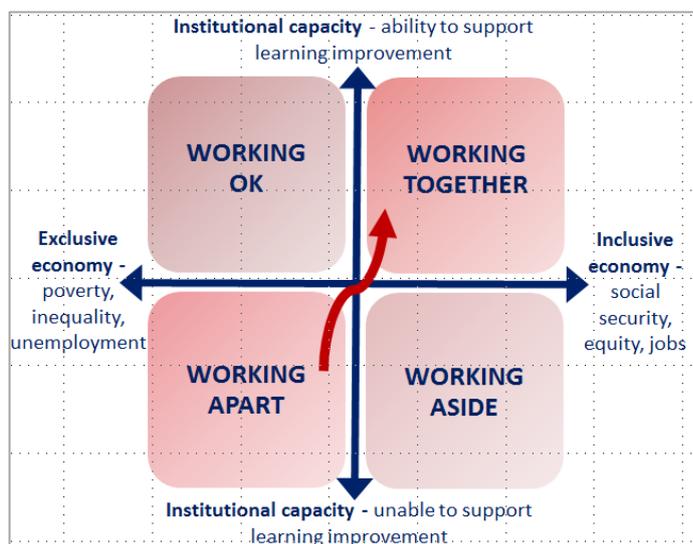
Other characteristics of “working together schools” include stakeholders having equal voice and authority, a distributed leadership pattern with leaders who communicate, inspire and support, teachers being supported to work in teams and communities of practice, parents showing interest in their children’s learning and holistic development, and the district providing support without undue bureaucratic inference.

The “sad reality” is that most school communities do not work together in this way. While some may be described as “working ok”, the majority fall into the category of “working apart”, where stakeholders are divided, distrustful, and do not collaborate or communicate, and schools are under-performing and dysfunctional. Learners in such schools experience a lack of care, and many are subject to violence and abuse in their school situations.

The next stage of the research was prompted by recognition of the need to think differently about the issues. This took the form of scenario planning conducted with a group of educational leaders from a range of stakeholder groupings. The two key drivers identified were the economy and the institutional capacity of the system to deliver on its mandate. In terms of these drivers, the sector may be defined by an exclusive economy and inconsistent institutional capacity.

At the same time there are schools – the “outliers” – that in spite of their dire socio-economic contexts and numerous other constraints are providing a caring environment with meaningful teaching and learning. These are schools that have “beaten the scenario quadrant” by pushing through from lower left to upper right – or, in other words, from “working apart” to “working together”.

Outlier schools are distinguished by a number of characteristics. They place the child at the centre, see leadership as key to change, use values to drive accountability and determine the level of care, regard collaboration, common purpose, sharing of resources and working together as fundamental, and build trust and institutional capacity based on skills, will and supportive enabling environments.



Based on these characteristics, the research identified a number of levers for changing “working apart” relationships. They are very different from the traditional leadership development approaches focussing on managerial competence. Instead, they are about enabling principals and school management teams to be agents of change and collaboration, which involves catalysing change and sharing resources, developing value bases to build an ethic of care, and sharing accountability and responsibility.

The recommendations in the report focus on supporting principals by providing them with skills to unlock change, enabling schools to find resources and support, and starting a social movement on the value of schools.

- The concept of skills to unlock change is not only about capacitating principals to mobilise stakeholders, but also about ensuring that funders, NGOs and others who work with principals collaborate as well to create the kind of influence and momentum that can take this recommendation to scale.
- The recommendation on enabling schools to find resources and support envisages the collection of information to map resources, using innovative digital means, to help schools understand what resources are available around them, who is doing what and where, and how they can access these resources.
- A social movement or campaign with empowering messages about the importance and value of teachers and the role of principals could revolutionise the way teachers and principals are thought of and spoken about.

Support of this kind, placed around principals, would enable them to do their jobs more effectively.

Click [here](#) for the presentation. The [executive summary](#) of the report is available on the BRIDGE Knowledge Hub.

Input from the Panellists

The theme of leading for change was explored further by the panellists who have all successfully introduced new ideas and new ways of doing things in their respective schools.

These questions provided a framework for the discussions:

Please describe a new initiative that was introduced into your school.

- Why was it introduced, how was it introduced, and what role did you play in introducing it?
- How did the school (the teachers, learners, parents, other education stakeholders) respond to the change?
- What, do you think, are some of the effects of the new initiative? What data/evidence do you have for this?
- What are some of the challenges you experienced when implementing the new initiative and how did you deal with them?

Lindelwa Mbingeleli, Principal, Thoko-Thaba High School

When Lindelwa Mbingeleli was appointed to the post of Principal at Thoko-Thaba High School, she found a school where standards had slipped, a laissez faire culture had set in, and morale was low.

Her response was to bring all the elements of the school community together, to conscientise them around the importance of improvement, and to initiate a step-by-step approach, with attention to small things, to improve the institution. This involved strategizing with the SMT and holding SMT, SGB, and parents' meetings. The district office, the municipality and local businesses were approached to provide resources, and parents were asked to monitor their children's activities.

There has been a positive response from all stakeholders. Gradually a culture of grooming the school has built up. Learners have stopped littering and all wear full school uniform. Significant issues such as learning delays and drug abuse are receiving attention. Parents visit the school proactively to address issues relating to their children. Morale has been regained, and people are beginning to see the direction in which the school intends to go. Teachers are receiving support and taking up professional development opportunities, monitoring learners and holding extra classes. After only a year, matric results in 2015 improved to 79.1%, from 45% in 2014.

In describing her approach to leadership, Lindelwa asserted her belief that principals leading for change need to be principled and focussed as managers to avoid collapsing the focus of the people that they are working with. Patience is needed when leading people out of the culture that they have become used to. In addition, as a new person in the environment, one has to be very strategic, as there could be acts of resistance.

Even where the issues are as fundamental as teacher late-coming and absenteeism, Lindelwa's approach is to motivate, to empower people by making sure they understand the policy, their job descriptions and issues of work allocation, to make them aware of the true essence of the issues, and bit-by-bit to change their attitudes and bring them "on-board". She has found this to be much more effective than using a "high tone".

"For people to follow you – I believe – it is for them to make a choice, because no matter how much authority you may have you can't force people to follow you."

Similarly, in dealing with the challenge of uninvolved parents, Lindelwa has taken the approach of holding meetings with the parent body, showing them the benefits of being involved, obtaining their commitment to support their children's learning, and encouraging them to share their ideas on how to take the school and the learners forward.



The panellists:

Pule Kgaratsi, Principal,
Sandown High School

Lindelwa Mbingeleli,
Principal, Thoko-Thaba High
School

Heidi L Augestad, Head of
School, Streetlight Schools

Pule Kgaratsi, Principal, Sandown High School

On taking up his appointment as principal of Sandown High School, Pule Kgaratsi found an intact culture of teaching and learning, but judged the school to be "resting on its laurels", based on its past achievements. He saw the challenge as being that of taking the school to greater heights, and as his primary goal aimed to create a school for excellence in maths and science.

His initial proposals for extra morning, afternoon and weekend classes and holiday programmes were not well received by all teachers. While the existing culture was to respect contact time requirements, there was not necessarily a willingness to go the extra mile.

He introduced the programme gradually, starting with Grades 8 and 9. When teachers showed reluctance, he put the proposal to parents, asking for volunteers conversant with mathematical or science concepts to assist the school. The response was excellent. It led to teachers coming in to guide and monitor the work being done with their classes, and in time the majority of teachers became directly involved with the extra classes.

The concept of marathon classes – from 6pm on Friday evening to 6am Saturday morning – grew out of this process, initially as a form of crises management targeting the Grade 12's. While education specialists would not necessarily agree with this approach, learners are enthusiastic and the level of engagement is high.

At the same time, the school has broadened the mix of cultural and sporting activities offered to learners. Where previously the focus was on rugby, dance, soccer and athletics have now been introduced. Pule believes that academics are strengthened by adding play to work. The school is twinned with Alexandra High School and includes its learners in the extra classes. This has helped build social cohesion, not only in academic situations but also in social, cultural and sporting activities.

There has been some resistance to this initiative on the grounds that an emphasis on maths and science puts children who struggle with these subjects under undue emotional pressure. Pule is hoping that these initiatives will help to “conquer the monster of maths and science” and help learners to believe they are “doable”.

In Pule’s view, a principal coming into a new school environment needs a supportive SGB, and has to be very proactive about leading for change. To this end, Pule recommended a system of incentives and rewards to motivate parents, teachers and learners. These range from incentivising parent involvement and learner achievement through the possibility of being exempted from an entire year’s school fees, to rewarding teacher commitment and contribution by recognising the teacher of the month, quarter and year.

Heidi L Augestad, Head of School, Streetlight Schools

Heidi Augestad heads a school that opened in January 2016 with 70 Grade R and Grade 1 learners, none of whom had had any preschool experience. Within the first half year a strong academic model had been established, but the children’s social and emotional development was progressing more slowly.

Because the school is aiming for high quality education regardless of the learners’ socio-economic circumstances, it takes a holistic approach centred on the whole child and on providing the best care possible. To this end, the school wanted to bring the breaks and lunch breaks, which until then had been noisy and chaotic, into line with the social environment envisaged for the school.

After initially accepting teachers’ suggestions which included implementing more rules and using behaviour charts, Heidi felt they should look deeper as these measures did not hold the answers to discipline issues. Her research led to the concept of responsive classrooms (www.responsiveclassrooms.org). This is an approach to primary schooling that focuses on the strong link between academic success and social and emotional learning. The central concepts include expectations instead of rules, positive language and logical consequences (in the sense of consequences aimed at achieving the expectations).

The approach was taken to the teachers in group and individual sessions, supported by classroom observations and follow-ups. The whole team including admin and cleaning staff has been included so that all the adults in the school act as role models for this approach.

The responsive classroom approach has given the school community a framework and tools that enables them to be very specific and clear on what they want to achieve and how they can achieve it. It has also led to more constructive interaction with the children. Any discipline issues that arise are solved in a calm and positive way, and the children, despite being so young, are able to understand much more about their choices as human beings.

“We tend to think change comes with challenges, but change actually comes with good solutions.

I welcome change – change is positive. This is one of the most important parts of our school culture, for our children as well. We want them to be problem solvers, and for that they will need to welcome change. “

Within a short time this new initiative has resulted in significant improvements in class and break time behaviour. Children have begun using constructive language themselves. Teachers experience the approach as very positive and constructive, quickly adapted to the new concepts and routines, and use them actively in their classrooms.

Heidi explained that in her view, it was important for the school leader not to compromise the target when introducing an initiative such as this. While she agrees that stakeholder involvement is essential, and that parents should be informed and invited in, she does not believe that parents necessarily have the right answers. School leaders remain responsible for the choices they make for their schools, and for finding the best solutions and the best resources to achieve the schools’ vision and values.



“We have heard from three courageous leaders who care for their environments and the children in their care. The diversity in the thoughts of the panellists and the varied circumstances of their different schools reminds us clearly that in South Africa schools and people are very far apart in the socio-economic circumstances and challenges that they face.”

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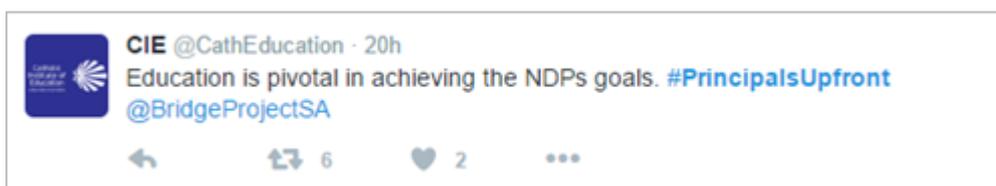
Questions, Comments and Panel Responses

- The concept of the responsive classroom is appealing – how could one achieve the same result with older children, and would there be a need for unlearning?
 - Children coming in to a school, regardless of their age and background, have to work their way into the school and its culture. A school starting at secondary level with the responsive classroom approach would establish the routines and components, and train the teachers and staff to support the approach prior to opening. As long as the approach was consistent and holistic, as well as being thorough and grounded in practice, it would be achievable.
- Educators face many challenges when teaching life skills, not only as experienced by their learners, but also associated with their own environments. Key concerns are their own socio-economic status and the environment they operate in as educators, and how it influences them. The significant differences in learners’ socio-economic status make it very difficult in the classroom to address all learners meaningfully on a specific topic.
- One cannot get around the situation that there are problems associated with principals taking leadership with teachers, and that there is a need for principals to form forums and also to involve their communities in identifying and bringing about necessary change.
- It is instructive to consider what makes principals who successfully lead for change different. The drivers for motivation are both intrinsic and external. In terms of behaviour change, it is the small things that make a difference and bring change about by giving people the belief that they are able to achieve. This is where positive thinking plays such a vital role.
- Politicians keep saying our problems are poverty, inequality and unemployment. However, none of these are the root problems; they are all consequences of poor education, which is the fundamental problem. Because no one is willing to talk about this, it will not be fixed. It is also important to recognise that these are problems and not challenges, and as such need to be fixed – solutions need to be found.
- There seems to be universal recognition of the need for collaboration, but it doesn’t happen properly. There is also not enough follow-on, which is where collaboration largely falls down. Other than communicating the need for collaboration, what else can we do to make it happen?
 - The report recommends that funders insist on open sharing of learnings out of projects, which would be an immediate step in favour of collaboration. The sector will have to address the issue of how to shift behaviour. Despite recognising the benefits of collaboration, the sector is structured non-collaboratively and funding flow is based on competition.



Participant discussions

- As long as ECD centres are not ubiquitous throughout the country and children continue to arrive in school unprepared, there will not be any real improvement in education. By the time the majority of children arrive in Grade R, they are already behind.
 - Patterns of underperformance are set very early. Funding should be channelled into ECD because the return on investment at that level is known to be high.
- As long as principals are not appointed on the basis on responsibility and accountability, and as long as principals are not in a position to appoint teachers and to hold them accountable, the problems in education will remain. Unless union disruption and undermining of processes is stopped, nothing will change.
 - The research report does speak to unions in general and the intractable problems around unions, and also makes recommendations about where spend could be allocated in support of unions, for the professionalising of unions.
 - This discussion would require a whole discourse with unionists. Unions only have observer status at interview sessions and do not form part of the panel that takes decisions, so it is only a perception that unions are able to influence appointments.
 - It is true that principals have responsibility and accountability but do not have authority to take decisions. This is why principals have to take people on board, by building their understanding of the issues. This is particularly true for principals in a new school environment. Principals have to give themselves time to empower teachers, so that they can consolidate a buy-in situation, and collectively take the school forward.
- What today's presentation puts on the table is wonderful, but we will only achieve it if our principals actually lead the educators in their schools. We need to build capacity on every level, starting with principals, if we are to achieve a way forward.



CLOSING THOUGHTS

In drawing together and reflecting on the various threads from the keynote address and discussions, Dr Anusha Naidu highlighted and expanded on a number of issues:

- Core values, moral purpose, entrepreneurship and care all tend to make a school more positive. Even if only a few of these exist, they lead to constructive changes in those schools.
- Despite research which indicates that schools can't fix what is wrong with parents and in society, it is becoming evident that schools can and do become safe havens for children, and for many children these schools are their only source of love and care, and even food.
- PLCs are fantastic drivers of change, especially because peers relate to and support one another.
- Principals can and do act as gate keepers, only allowing in what they are comfortable with. If they feel insecure, funders' investments and interventions in the school will be blocked. Where capacity building of principals does not change this, it is sometimes possible to find pockets of leadership elsewhere in the school, and to try to effect some change through them.
- The innovative recommendation of a social movement for change to restore the value of schools and education could be a key. This should also be about making learners, parents, society aware of what is needed in this century, from education and from schools and schooling, to prepare children for the future in this fast-paced digital era. We need people to understand that it is not just about preparing learners for a matric pass.
- The positive approach to change and especially to disciplining learners is very encouraging. How can we take this to scale, and to other schools? It requires schools to have a strong moral base.
- In all cases it is the commitment, drive, care and vision of principals, and the leadership they give to their teachers, that puts schools on an upward trajectory.



Dr Anusha Naidu,
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