

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 4 was held on 18 August 2016 at Holy Family College in Johannesburg. 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 Address

Instructional Leadership: Leading for Learning



Pam Christie is Professor of Education at the University of Cape Town, Visiting Professor at Wits, and Honorary Professor at the University of Queensland. She is a member of the Wits UNESCO Chair Forum on Teacher Education for Diversity and Development. She has written a number of books on educational policy and educational change in South Africa.

Professor Christie opened by noting that debates on the nature and impact of school leadership is still a dominant topic, both globally and locally. In the South African context leadership is a vital issue: post 1994 there has been a real change in the nature of school management and the principal's tasks, as reflected in policy and legislation. With the introduction of school management teams, school governing bodies and performance based appraisal (as well as some inconsistencies in policy), leading and managing a school has become more complex. In addition, other policy shifts such as those relating to curriculum changes from outcomes based education (OBE) to CAPS, ongoing language transition factors, and unequal contexts all make leading a difficult task.

Reflecting on trends in the literature on leadership, Professor Christie said that there is clearly no one definition of instructional leadership, or definitive approach, to leading learning. While leadership is consistently seen as playing a central role in school improvement and school effectiveness models, it is difficult to quantify and define its impact. One reason for this is that the effects of good leadership are often indirect, and manifested through various players: there is a long chain of relations between what the leader does and how this affects learner outcomes. Currently, both 'direct' and 'indirect' approaches to instructional leadership have support. Direct instructional

leadership relates to explicit engagement with the curriculum and teachers, while indirect instructional leadership focuses more on setting the conditions to get the work done.

Other aspects of leadership that need to be considered include:

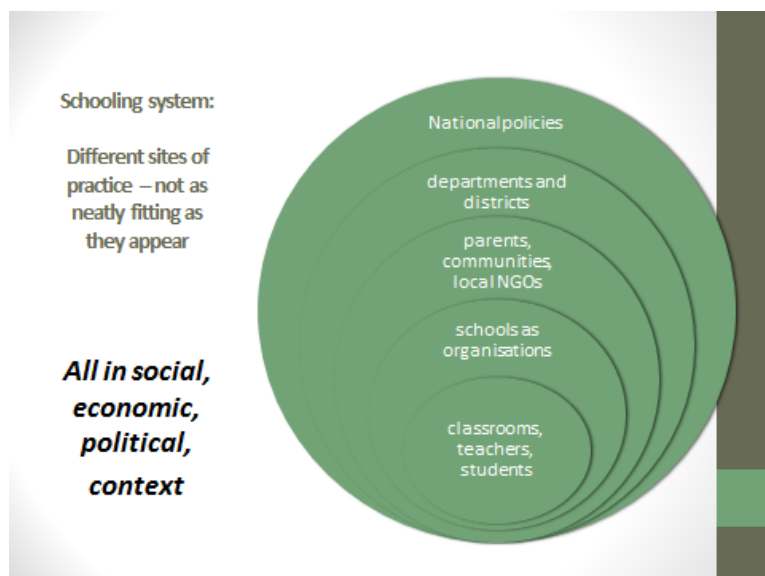
- Leadership can have a dark side as well, in the sense that it can lead others astray, or function as an obstacle in the path of getting things done.
- Leadership differs from management (which is a skill), and differs from 'headship' (which is a position).

"Leadership in a school is not the preserve of one person but is dispersed, and includes the learners themselves. An element of leadership is influence, and anyone can exercise influence."

"Context is everything in leadership. For example, Winston Churchill was considered a great leader as a war time leader, but a problematic one in peace time."

- Successful leadership is always framed by context; what works in one school may not work in another.
- Charismatic leaders can turn a particular school around, but this may not be a sustainable or replicable concept of leadership.

Turning to the South African environment, Professor Christie stressed that her own approach is context-driven: school leaders need to start with actually existing school conditions in their own schools, and match 'leading learning' to 'context'. The implication of this view is that it is difficult to have 'policy standards' for leadership.



In South Africa there are a number of different types of contexts that we need to bear in mind. One is the systemic context, in which different sites of practice at different levels frame the exercise of leadership in different ways.

Each of these levels requires reciprocal accountability, though there is a tendency in the system to 'blame downwards'.

Probably the most important school context to consider is the socio-economic environment in which a school and its learners exist; research (for example, Draper and Spaul 2015) has shown that those in a low socio economic environment are frequently serviced by low quality educational provision, which in turn entrenches difficulties in the language of instruction and poor learning outcomes. Van den Berg's (2015) research also notes that '... in South Africa, uneven functioning of the school system widens learning gaps. By Grade 4, patterns across quintiles of on-track performance

approximate matric exemption patterns.’ Unevenness in the system reinforces the notion that one cannot talk about instructional leadership as if it is the same for all schools.

From **Schools that Work Ministerial Report** (Christie, Potterton and Butler 2007)

What makes a difference?

- Committed, competent teachers make a difference
- Organised teaching and learning – time on task
- Leadership in different forms
- Acknowledgement, rewards, motivation, recognition

Other factors that cannot be ignored are the school culture and ethos, and of course teacher knowledge, capacity and attitudes. Leadership needs to be exerted in a context in which there is a willingness to learn and improve, and in which all the players have a sense of purpose and an ability to keep focused on the central task of good teaching and learning.

Professor Christie also referenced leadership as a Bryk’s work (2010), which has been used in school improvement interventions in the Eastern Cape. Bryk identifies a framework of five essential supports for school improvement, which need to be present ‘... as an organised system of elements in dynamic interaction with one another’.

Five Essential Supports for School Improvement
(Bryk 2010)

1. Coherent instructional guidance system
2. Professional capacity
3. Strong parent-community-school ties
4. Student-centred learning climate
5. Leadership drives change

“In South Africa, given the structural inequalities and differences between schools, there can never be a single answer to complex challenges of leading learning. We need to learn from each other in real contexts.”

Click here <http://bit.ly/2bZAHuj> for Professor Christie’s presentation

Input from the Panellists



The two panellists represent two different schooling contexts. Mrs Venessa Moodley is the principal of Actonville Primary School which serves learners from an impoverished community with a range of socio-economic problems. Mr Colin Northmore is principal of Sacred Heart College, an independent school serving a more privileged community.

Both principals were given three questions to talk to as the basis for discussion by participants.

How do I define instructional leadership or leading for learning in my school – and what are the three most important things that I focus on when exercising instructional leadership?

Venessa Moodley explained that the nature of Actonville Primary school when she first went there determined her approach to leadership. Because of the poor conditions, she had to begin with a very practical approach in order to create a physical environment that was conducive to learning, and in order to address barriers to learning such as hunger amongst her learners – as Venessa pointed out, learning won't take place if a child does not feel safe or comfortable at school. She also inherited a demotivated and demoralised staff. Her initial focus had to be on management, administration, and organisational issues. As these aspects improved, however, her focus shifted to the curriculum, the school ethos, and relationship-building with the community. The school ethos in particular was a major focus, in that children (and their teachers) need to feel loved and valued at school. Three important focus areas for leadership would be building character with staff and learners, building partnerships with parents and the community, and managing organisational change.

Colin Northmore saw his leadership influence as residing in his capacity to provide opportunities for teachers to exercise their craft and improve their competence through immersive learning in the classroom. His role is to create the time and space in the school for professional development and innovation, through options such as professional learning communities which enable teachers to share practice and use resources effectively. He uses the 'instructional rounds' model which draws on classroom observation and feedback, and sees the job of leaders as making sure that this happens.

What are the some of the school-based and external challenges in exercising instructional leadership in my school?

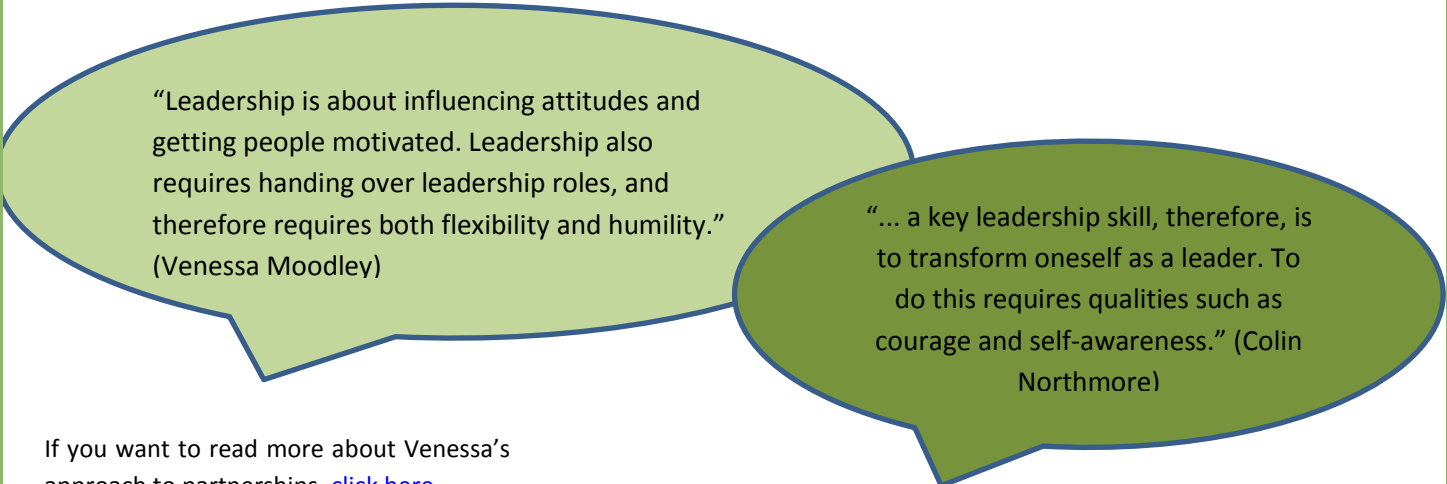
One of Venessa's Moodley's main challenges initially was the high learner-teacher ratio (44 to 1) and how this affected teaching and learning. Teaching numeracy was done in an abstract way because of the lack of concrete resources, and children were battling with both literacy and numeracy. The school subsequently established two more subsidised sites so that class numbers could be decreased, and sourced concrete resources for teaching numeracy. Getting children to read has also been a priority, supported by creating a culture in which reading is encouraged and valued by both teachers and children.

Colin Northmore cited the CAPS curriculum as one of the biggest challenges to good instructional leadership. In his view CAPS is an overloaded curriculum focusing on knowledge at the expense of skills and critical thinking, while the matric exam has limited value – '... it simply measures whether learners can succeed in the matric exam or not'. He noted also that getting teachers to use new technologies and strategies in the classroom is sometimes challenging: teachers also need to be learners, and instructional leadership must focus on this aspect of teacher development as well. Instructional leadership involves helping teachers see the relevance to themselves of new forms of learning (as in the 'self-system' level of Marzano's learning taxonomy).

What kinds of leadership skills are required to lead for learning in my school?

For Venessa Moodley, leadership involves a continuum of skills, ranging from concrete and mundane skills for 'getting things done' to higher order skills linked to the ability to empower others. In her context she has focused on team building, and helping teachers understand that they themselves need to be leaders in their classrooms. Concepts such as 'authenticity, responsibility, accountability and integrity' need to become part of a teacher's character. Her goal is to get teachers to internalise the school mantra for the next five years: **A C T** – teachers and schools as 'Architects, Creators, and Transformers'. Leadership is about influencing attitudes and getting people motivated. Leadership also requires handing over leadership roles, and therefore requires both flexibility and humility.

Colin Northmore also focused on the flexibility required by school leaders: principals are appointed in relation to the needs of the school at the time, in the expectation that they will change and improve the school as an organisation. If a principal is successful, the principal's leadership focus also needs to change. A principal needs '... to learn when to get out of the way'; a key leadership skill, therefore, is to transform oneself as a leader. To do this requires qualities such as courage and self-awareness. Other skills are the ability to listen, to facilitate teacher development and to build teams. He also pointed to fundraising as a necessary skill that will enable leaders to implement new ideas.



"Leadership is about influencing attitudes and getting people motivated. Leadership also requires handing over leadership roles, and therefore requires both flexibility and humility."
(Venessa Moodley)

"... a key leadership skill, therefore, is to transform oneself as a leader. To do this requires qualities such as courage and self-awareness." (Colin Northmore)

If you want to read more about Venessa's approach to partnerships, [click here](#).

Discussion: participants and presenters

- Context comes through clearly as a central theme. Venessa's first task as a principal was not the same as Colin's first task. Their journey as principals has required some different skills and some common skills. But there is no single ideal, and there is no typical 'good school.' We also need to bear in mind that in the public sector the principal does not have the power to recruit, hire and fire in the same way as the private school principal can. These types of boundaries also affect the nature of leadership.
- Bryk's five essential supports cut across different aspects of the school. In some contexts (such as Actonville Primary School), however, leadership has to be prioritised as the umbrella factor for the other supports.

- In relation to any 'disciplinary' aspects of leadership, we need to note that the leader's job is to 'protect the teaching, not the teachers'. Leadership involves ensuring that teachers also commit to a code of ethics.
- We need to remember the 'mediated effects' of leadership: that is, the results are achieved through the teachers but they can be guided by the leader.
- Are leadership skills teachable, and can they be replicated? The recently gazetted Standard for School Principals, as well as the nine focus areas of the DBE's Whole School Evaluation Framework, deals with many of the areas in which leadership skills are exercised. These are tools to uplift schools, and can be used to structure staff meetings and the business of the school, and illustrate leadership strategies that are teachable.



CIE @CathEducation · Aug 18

Leadership not vested only in principal and school management team. #principalsupfront



3



1



Ongie_BRIDGE @Ongie_BRIDGE · Aug 18

Colin Northmore sees instructional leadership as his ability to influence leading and learning in the classroom. #PrincipalsUpfront



3



Anne McLennan from the Wits School of Governance summed up the seminar, reminding us that leadership is about catalysing action that fits the context. This involves creating conditions for learning, enabling partnerships, motivating people and providing a sense of purpose. Leadership also requires listening to others, and having the courage to learn and change.



Mduduzi Qwabe from the Catholic Institute of Education thanked all participants and the partners involved in the Principals Upfront seminar series.

For more information on the **Principals Upfront Dialogue Series**, contact Ongeziwe Nxokwana at ongie@bridge.org.za



Catholic
Institute of
Education



sasol
inzalo
foundation